

JO 544 A1
Trauma Journalism
Fall 2020

Tuesdays 6:30-9:15pm

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**“Here is the world. Terrible and beautiful things will happen. Don’t be afraid.”
Frederick Buechner**

About the course:

Trauma is at the heart of news. A journalist will most assuredly report on some type of traumatic event at some point in their career, whether covering a national tragedy or one family’s personal nightmare. This course will explore the best practices for ethically and empathically covering traumatic stories. A second important goal of this course will explore how journalists themselves can emotionally process what they have seen and heard on the job.

Goals:

Upon completion of this course, you will understand how to recognize signs of trauma and grief, including how grief, traumatic stress, and post-traumatic stress are experienced by trauma survivors. You will learn how to formulate sensitive questions that are not re-traumatizing to those you interview, as well as how to report in a way that is not stressful to your sources or the community. You will learn how to check in with yourself, decompress, and process your feelings about a difficult story.

Absences:

Students are expected to attend all class meetings. Any unexcused absence will result in **5 points** off the final grade.

Students are permitted to miss a meeting without penalty for any of the following reasons, all of which are considered excused absences: significant illness, family emergencies, and COM-sponsored reporting trips.

Students may also utilize one “mental health day” excused absence if we will be talking about a topic in class that is especially sensitive for you, you have determined that this class is potentially triggering for you, and/or you believe that your mental health and well-being will be negatively affected by spending time in discussion about that topic.

Simply send an email to rkess@bu.edu at least six hours in advance of the class meeting time letting me know you are taking a mental health day.

Please be mindful of using a mental health day appropriately.

Deadlines:

Deadlines are sacrosanct. Deadlines remain in place even if you are absent on an assignment due date. Please turn in any required work at the time it is due..

Students in Trauma Journalism are permitted **one** 24-hour “Life Happens” deadline extension. In order to use your extension, you must email me asking to use it at least 6 hours before an assignment is due. **You may not use this retroactively** after a missed deadline. Remember that this extension can only be used once, and the assignment will be due 24 hours after the original due date. This extension may be used on any assignment except the posting of your reading discussion questions.

Required Texts:

It's What I Do by Lynsey Addario

All other required readings are posted to Blackboard.

Assignments:

You may earn up to 100 points total for the semester. Assignment guidelines and grading rubrics can be found on Blackboard.

1. You will complete **reading (or viewing/listening) assignments** for every class.

Required readings, videos, and/or podcast episodes for each class can be found on Blackboard under the “Content” tab. Within this tab, you will see a folder for each of our class meeting dates. Required materials are housed within the appropriate folder (i.e. select the September 15 folder to access readings that are due on September 15).

For each class, some materials are labeled “discussion” while some are labeled “additional required reading.”

Discussion materials are materials that we will discuss as a group. More information on this is below.

Additional required reading may or may not be formally discussed, but it’s still important that you read these materials, as they will contribute to a fuller understanding of the topic at hand.

Very often in class, I will ask for your feedback on a reading, and we may refer back to some of the discussions happening on Blackboard.

Posting Discussion Questions:

You must select one of the 18 required readings/videos/podcasts that are specifically earmarked for discussion. Please make your selection via Blackboard no later than Friday, September 11.

You will serve as the Blackboard discussion leader for your selected content.

As discussion leader, you are required to post **three** questions related to your reading, video, or podcast in the specified board under “Discussion” tab on Blackboard. These questions should be grounded in the text and should be discussion generators (i.e. not ‘yes or no’ questions).

Post your discussion questions no later than **6pm on the Friday before the reading is due**. For example, if the reading you have selected is assigned for our September 28 class, post your questions to Blackboard by Friday, September 25 at 6pm.

Posting your discussion questions is worth 10 points. Failure to post your questions by deadline will result in 5 points off your grade for this assignment.

Responding to Discussion Questions:

Please be sure to post in the Blackboard discussion boards for each class. In some of our classes, there may be two discussion readings—please be sure to respond to questions for both.

In each discussion board, please respond to one of three questions that are posted. You may respond directly to one of the questions posed by the discussion leader, or you may reply to/build upon a response made by one of your classmates. Aim for short, thoughtful 1-2 paragraph responses with 5 sentences minimum. I’m not grading these responses for

grammar, so don't labor over these the way you would a formal essay. Your responses can and should feel like a genuine conversation, so try to write how you would speak.

In total, you will post 17 responses---one response for every discussion reading excluding the reading for which you are discussion leader.

Please post your responses by **6pm** on the day the reading, video, or podcast is due.

Responding to one discussion question for every reading is worth 15 points. Failure to post a response by Tuesday at 6pm will result in 1 point off your grade for this assignment.

2. You will complete five short quizzes.

You will be assigned to study five "tip sheets" from the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma, each focusing on a different topic that we cover in class. These tip sheets can be found in Blackboard along with the required readings.

In-class Blackboard quizzes on information found in these tip sheets will be given on September 22, September 29, November 3, November 10, and November 17.

Each quiz is worth 2 points for a total of 10 points.

3. You must submit a well-being journal

DUE: TUESDAY, OCTOBER 13 BY 6:30PM

You are required to personally explore either a known trauma recovery method or a habit that is known to be beneficial for mental health. Established trauma recovery methods can include yoga, meditation, and creating art or music, among others; healthy habits can include exercise, drinking enough water, getting the recommended amount of sleep, abstaining from alcohol, etc.

Pick one habit and commit to incorporating it into your life for one month. This can become a daily habit, but it need not be—at a minimum, you must practice your method of self-care at least ten times during the month (i.e. doing yoga before bed three nights per week; meditating Monday-Friday).

During this time period, keep a log of how your practice makes you feel. Is this practice helpful? If not, what is missing for you? Are you rejuvenated or exhausted by the end of the week? Check in with yourself and record those observations.

You must submit to me via email **five journal entries and a one-page overall reflection** on your well-being experiment by Tuesday, October 13 at 6:30pm. Note that we do not meet this day.

This assignment is worth 10 points.

4. You will complete a **video analysis**

DUE: TUESDAY, OCTOBER 27 BY 6:30 PM

Watch four separate videos (provided by the instructor and found on Blackboard) of television journalists interviewing students at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in the wake of the shooting there in February 2018.

Analyze each interview for what the interviewer did right and what could have been done better, based on what you have learned in this class. This does not need to be in paragraph form. You may submit your analysis as a bullet-pointed list. However, you must cite class lectures, class readings, and Dart Center resources to justify your analysis.

This assignment is worth 20 points.

5. You will complete an **interview**

DUE TUESDAY, DECEMBER 1 BY 6:30PM

Interview a friend or family member about a difficulty they have had to overcome or a challenging experience they have had. **This is likely the only time in a journalism class you will be given permission to interview someone this close to you. Remember that this is not standard practice, and is only appropriate for this particular assignment.**

This is an exercise in moving past discomfort and learning to talk about sensitive subject matter with empathy and professionalism.

I encourage you to walk before you run with this assignment. This is meant to serve as practice for honing your empathy, listening skills, and ability to ask questions with sensitivity—all of this can be done without talking to someone about a “big T” trauma. You can talk to someone about a job loss, a breakup, a personal or professional setback, loss of a friendship, etc.

You are permitted to talk to someone about the loss of a significant person in their life or traumatic event they have experienced, but only if:

- You are certain they have no misgivings or hesitation about speaking on this topic
- They have some degree of distance from the event and are not presently experiencing major negative effects associated this event
- They are aware that your professor will be privy to their responses.

Your interview subject can elect to withhold their last name if desired.

You must submit to me either a transcript of the interview or a recording of the interview (ONLY if the person you interview consents to the submitting of a recording).

In addition, you must submit a one-page reflection on your experience of this interview, and you must ask the person you interviewed for feedback. Their feedback will not be included as part of your grade. It is meant to be a helpful tool for you to see what your interviewing strengths are, and what areas could use improvement.

This assignment is worth 15 points

6. You will complete a **journalist profile**

PRESENTATION DUE TUESDAY, DECEMBER 8 AT 6:30PM
FINAL PROFILE DUE FRIDAY, DECEMBER 11 AT 12:00PM

For your final project, you must profile a journalist who has covered several traumatic events.

This 5-7 page double-spaced profile should include an overview of their career, including the specific times in their career that they have covered some type of trauma. The profile should include a short analysis of 1-2 pieces of the journalist's work. Finally, the profile should include insight on the journalist's approach to trauma reporting. If available, include a section on how the journalist coped with the subject matter and did or did not take steps to manage their emotional health and well-being.

You'll receive two extra credit points on this assignment if you interview either the journalist you're profiling or someone (an editor, colleague, journalism professor/expert) who is very familiar with the journalist's work.

On the last day of class, you will deliver a 3-5 minute presentation on what you learned about this journalist and identify key takeaways for the class.

This assignment is worth 20 points.

Grade Scale for the College of Communication:

93-100: A
90-92.99: A-
87-89.99: B+
83-86.99: B
80-82.99: B-
77-79.99: C+
73-76.99: C
70-72.99: C-

Academic Code of Conduct:

BU students are expected to adhere to the highest standards of academic honesty.

Academic misconduct is any intentional act or omission by a student which misrepresents his or her academic achievements, or any attempts to misrepresent his or her achievements. The following acts constitute academic misconduct:

- Cheating on examinations.
- Plagiarism.
- Submitting the same work in more than one course without the consent of all the instructors
- Misrepresentation or falsification of data
- Allowing another student to represent your work as his or her own
- Violating the rules of an examination or assignment

The full academic misconduct policy is available at: <https://www.bu.edu/academics/policies/academic-conduct-code/>

Equal Opportunity

BU has strict guidelines on classroom behavior and practices when it comes to treatment of students and guests on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, age, mental or physical disability, genetic information, military service, national origin, or due to marital, parental, or veteran status. Discrimination for any of these reasons is prohibited. Please refer to the [Equal Opportunity/Affirmative Action Policy](#) for more details.

Disability Services

If you are a student with a disability or believe you might have a disability that requires accommodations, please contact the [Office for Disability Services](#) (ODS) at 617-353-3658 to coordinate any reasonable accommodation requests. ODS is located at [19 Deerfield Street](#), up on the second floor.

While we will plan to stick closely to the syllabus, all class plans are subject to change. The availability of a guest speaker or an important breaking news story may cause us to shift plans. I will notify you at least 24 hours in advance if there is a change to the syllabus.

Please make note of the following resources available to you on campus:

Behavioral Medicine (24/7 mental health support):
617-353-3569
881 Commonwealth Avenue

Sexual Assault Response & Prevention Center (SARP):
617-353-SARP (7277)
930 Commonwealth Avenue

Center for Psychiatric Rehabilitation:
617-353-3549
940 Commonwealth Avenue

University Chaplains:
617-353-3560
735 Commonwealth Avenue

And these resources available to you off-campus:

National Suicide Prevention Helpline: 1-800-273-TALK (1-800-273-8255)

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender National Helpline: 1-888-THE-GLNH (1-888-843-4564)

Self-injury support: 1-800-DONT-CUT (1-800-366-8288)

Panic disorder information and support: 1-800-64-PANIC (1-800-647-2642)

In the event of a fire, the class meeting spot is in front of Warren Towers.

An important note about psychological triggers:

Psychologists broadly define a “trigger” as something that elicits a symptomatic response in someone with a history of trauma. Examples of symptomatic responses includes flashbacks, panic attacks, and disassociation.

A “trigger warning” is simply a heads up about content that could elicit a post-traumatic response in someone with a history of trauma.

There is a difference between being triggered and being made uncomfortable. Hearing about an upsetting topic or way of thinking can be uncomfortable. But a person is triggered when confronted with a topic that reminds them of a personal trauma, resulting in a symptomatic mental health response.

In our class this semester, we will discuss a number of sensitive topics. Sometimes it may feel difficult to talk about these topics. I ask that you come to class with a willingness to sit with this discomfort. As the writer Glennon Doyle says, “We can do hard things.”

Please take a close look at the topics we will be covering this semester and make note if any of them correspond to a personal experience you have had. Let this syllabus serve as your trigger warning. Please take time to mentally prepare for any topic that is potentially triggering for you. If you haven't already done so, working with a therapist can be helpful in this regard.

Avoiding triggers entirely is not often recommended long-term, but sometimes those in early stages of recovery are better off avoiding triggers until they're better equipped to mentally handle them. If this is the case for you, please know that you are welcome to use a mental health day for this purpose.

I care about your experience in this class, and I care about your well-being outside of this class. Please always feel free to come talk to me or to send me an email if something is on your mind or if you want to talk about something.

Course Outline:

Week 1--September 8: An Introduction to Trauma Journalism

An overview of what we mean when we talk about trauma journalism, including the history of journalism's relationship to trauma/tragedy and the documented ways in which journalists have historically responded to traumatic stress on the job. We'll also go over the syllabus and expectations for the class.

Week 2—September 15: Traumatic Stress, Post-Traumatic Stress, and Grief

We'll take a look at the ways people typically behave in a crisis and how the brain works under extreme stress. We'll discuss the effects of traumatic stress and post-traumatic stress, and we'll learn about and discuss grief—an emotion journalists are likely to encounter in their reporting.

Discussion content for this class:

Excerpt from *The Evil Hours* by David J. Morris

“A History of Self-Care” by Aisha Harris

Additional required content:

“Why Rape and Trauma Survivors Have Fragmented and Incomplete Memories” by James Hopper and David Lisak

Week 3—September 22: Act I: Trauma as Breaking News

Quiz on Dart Center Tip Sheet

We'll discuss how journalists can best navigate the initial stages of a breaking news situation, including reporting at a scene and conducting initial interviews in a trauma-informed way.
Guest speaker: Jaclyn Reiss.

Discussion content for this class:

“Facing the Fear” by Chris Williams, from *At Ground Zero*

“No shit, Sherlock. Let’s get on with it” (reading) and “I knew the press was coming” (podcast), *Columbia Journalism Review* (both pieces will be discussed together)

Additional required reading:

“Reporting Trauma” excerpt from Dart Center handbook

Week 4—September 29: Act II: Access and Interviewing

Quiz on Dart Center Tip Sheet

We'll learn about trauma-informed interviewing techniques and what can cause re-traumatization in an interview. We'll talk about access to sources and how to create an environment of safety for vulnerable subjects.

Discussion content for this class:

“Lizzie Johnson” Longform podcast

Required content for this class:

“The Heat Reporter” by Lauren Markham, CJR

The Interview from *Covering Violence* by Cote and Simpson

Week 5—October 6: Interviewing Cont. and Covering Children and Teens

We'll continue to discuss best interviewing practices. We'll also discuss how to ethically and empathetically interview and report on child and teenage survivors of trauma and how different age groups respond to and process trauma.

Discussion content for the class:

“Trauma-Informed Interviewing: Techniques from a Clinician’s Toolkit” Dart Center video

The Hardest Story Eli Saslow Ever Told (podcast)

Required content for this class:

“After Newtown Shooting, Mourning Parents Enter into the Lonely Quiet” by Eli Saslow

October 13: No class-Monday schedule

Week 6—October 20: Act III: Community Trauma, Long-Term Effects, and Going Beyond Traditional Coverage

We'll talk about how tragedies can affect an entire community and may result in collective trauma, which is often exacerbated by "parachute journalism." We'll discuss the impact of media presence in communities that have experienced mass tragedy and discuss ways journalists can minimize harm. We'll also discuss the idea of Act III journalism.

Discussion content for this class:

"Covering Columbine" documentary

Required content for this class:

"America does not know what a mass shooting looks like" CJR podcast

Week 7---October 27: How We Cover Death

We'll discuss how journalists presently and historically have reported on death, especially when it is widespread such as with COVID-19.

Discussion content for this class:

Self-Care and Peer Support, Dart Center video

Required reading for this class:

"Writing about death is one of the hardest, most valuable things journalists do — here's how to do it correctly," Poynter

Guidelines for Covering Funerals, RTDNA

Week 8—November 3: Election Day

Dart Center Quiz

Many of you will be reporting on election day, so we won't meet.

If you are not reporting, use our class time to do something for your mental or physical health and well-being. Workout, do some meditation, make yourself dinner, etc.

Even though we are not meeting, there will still be a quiz given today. Please complete this quiz on Blackboard anytime between 12-6:30pm.

Week 9—November 10: Reporting on Sexual Violence

Dart Center Quiz

We'll discuss how to ethically and humanely interview and report on survivors of rape, sexual assault and harassment. Guest speakers from the Boston Area Rape Crisis Center will also discuss rape culture, including what it is, what it looks like, and how the media can be complicit in promoting it.

Discussion content for this class:

“The Pornography Trap” by Jina Moore

Exposing Male Abuse of Power TimesTalk (video)

Required reading:

“Reporting on Rape Trauma” from *Covering Violence*

Week 10---November 17: Reporting Conflict, at Home and Abroad

Quiz on Dart Center Tip Sheet

We'll discuss best practices for photographing and taking video of traumatic events, victims, and survivors, including how to ensure that photo and video are not invasive. We'll also discuss the threats that journalists can face both at home and abroad, including reporting from conflict zones, protests, and political rallies.

Discussion content for this class:

It's What I Do by Lynsey Addario

Week 11: November 24: Reporting Conflict Cont.

We'll continue to discuss the risks of conflict reporting and reporting abroad, using the example of journalist James Foley.

Discussion content for this class:

Diary of Bad Year by Kelly McEvers, Transom podcast

Week 12—December 1: When It's Personal

We'll discuss the specific risks sometimes faced by reporters who identify as female, including sexual harassment in the workplace. We'll discuss the need for diverse newsrooms and the particular stress and burnout that can occur for journalists of color. We'll also cover the difference between journalism and advocacy—is it ever appropriate for the two to meet? Guest speaker: Andrea Asuaje.

Discussion content for this class:

“How Black Reporters Report Black Death” by Gene Demby, NPR

“Where Does Journalism End and Activism Begin?” by Michael Blanding, Nieman Reports

Week 13—December 8: Final Presentations and Wrap-Up

In the first half of class, you will give short presentations on your journalist profiles. In our second half, we’ll recap what we learned this semester and will discuss how we can best positively shift newsrooms and the journalism profession toward a greater emphasis on mental health and wellbeing.

Required content for this class:

“Anticipating the Daily Traumas of Local Reporting” by Tiffany Stevens