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SCHREYER HONORS COLLEGE

DEPARTMENT OF JOURNALISM

JOURNALISM AND TRAUMA: HOW NEWS COVERAGE ON THE FRONT LINES CAN
IMPACT MENTAL HEALTH

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SPRING 2022

A thesis
submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements
for baccalaureate degrees
in Journalism and Spanish
with honors in Journalism

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ABSTRACT

The following thesis will examine and analyze the experiences of seven journalists from a variety of news organizations and networks: ABC, NBC, The Washington Post, The New York Times, Roll Call, and Bloomberg Industry Group. The common thread that ties those seven individuals together is that they've all been exposed to at least one (but in many cases, multiple) dangerous and/or life-threatening situation on the job. For example, some of the journalists I interviewed were in the Capitol during the insurrection on Jan. 6, 2021. Others were covering protests at the height of the Black Lives Matter movement. Others have been overseas to cover wars, international conflicts, and natural disasters. Most, if not all, have continued reporting throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

Thus, this thesis will provide insight into what it's like to be a journalist on the frontlines. But more importantly, I've dedicated a significant portion of each interview to a discussion on trauma and mental health. I've asked each journalist to identify and explain how their various experiences have impacted them on a personal level, and whether exposure to trauma has affected the trajectory of their careers or their overall perspective on the journalism profession.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to thank my thesis supervisor, Russell Eshleman, for his guidance and support. Thank you for reading over every case study and paragraph, for all the valuable feedback, for being willing to meet with me, and for challenging me throughout this entire process. But more than anything, thank you for making this experience an enjoyable one. It was a privilege to be able to work with you -- someone I've looked up to since the first time I sat in your class -- and learn from you as I wrote this thesis. I know I am a better writer, journalist, and person because of it.

Thank you to my family, especially my parents, for their love and support. I appreciate all the phone calls asking for "thesis updates" that made me realize I needed to get back to work. Thank you for listening (even from the very beginning when I was formulating the idea for this project in my mind) and for encouraging me when I felt overwhelmed, tired, and stressed.

Thank you to my sister, Maggie Rose, who helped pave the way. I remember watching you write your thesis two years ago when I was a sophomore at Penn State. You showed me what it meant to work hard, remain organized, and complete a project of this magnitude. You also showed me how to maintain a balance between working on the thesis and still enjoying every second of senior year, and that's something I've remembered and implemented to this day.

Thank you to Walter Middlebrook, one of the most influential and memorable professors during my time at Penn State. Thank you for the brutally honest feedback about my writing,

which has only helped me improve over the course of my college career, and for the guidance when it comes to in-depth reporting, “crickets,” and life in general. The things I’ve learned from you and Russ shine through in every section of this thesis. I hope I’ve made you proud.

Thank you to my honors advisor, Russell Frank, for editing this thesis and providing valuable feedback that only made it better. You, too, taught me so much about writing, editing, and storytelling, and made me a more confident journalist.

Thank you to my peers who went through this process with me and provided plenty of support, encouragement, and laughs along the way.

And finally, thank you to every journalist who was willing to speak with me as I worked on this project. Thank you for responding to an email from a college student in the middle of Central Pennsylvania, and for taking the time out of your busy schedules to sit down for an interview, which often lasted longer than an hour. Thank you for being so open, honest, and vulnerable when we talked, and for trusting me with your stories. I hope this thesis is something you’re proud of just as much as me, and I hope that together, we can contribute significantly to an important conversation about mental health, trauma, and journalism -- a conversation that has been ignored and downplayed for far too long.

Chapter 1

Introduction to the Problem: Trauma and Journalism

Much like police officers, firefighters, and soldiers, journalists work in a field in which they frequently find themselves on the front lines. Whether it's covering a war overseas or a mass shooting on U.S. soil, documenting the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic or witnessing protests during a national reckoning with race, hiding in lockdown inside the Capitol or advancing into the heart of a natural disaster, crime scene, automobile accident, or fire, covering the news can be risky and relentless.

Journalists operate around the clock, and often amid unique and unpredictable circumstances, so they can provide citizens with critical information about their surroundings. In doing so, however, journalists sometimes dive headfirst into situations that are dangerous and life threatening, and are frequently called upon to investigate and report experiences that entail varying degrees of human pain and suffering.

Additionally, every single reporting experience can be accompanied by a lasting memory. Journalists must reconcile with that memory, and ultimately process the things they've seen (some of which are gruesome and horrific), long after the reporting stops. Doing so inevitably has a psychological effect; it can impact one's mental health. For instance, according to a 2019 study published by the Newspaper Research Journal, "covering trauma can generate another kind of trauma" (Miret, para. 5).

What's more, journalists sometimes become targets of violence, harassment, and intimidation themselves, which creates equally painful experiences and memories for the victim, his or her colleagues, and the entire journalism community. As recently as March 15, 2022, 55-year-old Fox News cameraman, Pierre Zakrzewsk, and his Ukrainian colleague Oleksandra Kuvshynova, were killed while reporting in an attack near Kyiv (Barr, para. 1). They put themselves in harm's way to fulfill the duties of their job and paid the ultimate price.

Although not all situations escalate to this level, one thing is certain: The journalism profession regularly involves confrontation with an unspecified level of danger and trauma. This level depends on the specialization of each journalist and the resulting assignments he or she is given. Journalists can also be *indirectly* exposed to trauma through their conversations with colleagues who have a wide array of experiences of their own.

The Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma is a resource center and global network for journalists born out of a project at Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism. In addition to advocating for and providing resources to journalists and clinicians, the Dart Center also pioneers research in the field related to the psychological impact of reporting traumatic events. Among other findings, the Dart Center research suggests "between 80 and 100% of journalists have been exposed to a work-related traumatic event," and many of those individuals experience repeated exposure. In fact, 92 percent of journalists report experiencing at least four traumatic situations at work and the "average number of work-related traumatic events ranges from 4-81," depending on the population being studied (*Covering Trauma*, para. 3).

Dr. Kevin Becker, a clinical psychologist who has specialized in trauma and crisis for more than 30 years, has also studied trends related to trauma and journalism. According to his research, which was published by the Poynter Institute for Media Studies (a non-profit media institute that focuses on training journalists) in 2021, journalists are exposed to traumatic events at a "higher rate than many soldiers" (Storm, para. 5).

Meanwhile, Jane Elizabeth from the American Press Institute -- a nonprofit educational organization that focuses on media issues -- conducted a study of journalists who covered devastating hurricanes in 2019. She said that one in five of those individuals "met the threshold for depression" and 93 percent showed "at least some symptoms of depression" in the aftermath of covering this story (Elizabeth, para. 10). After analyzing these statistics, among other results, Elizabeth concluded that "unrelenting crisis coverage can have serious health problems" (Elizabeth, para. 10).

In recent years, this connection between journalism and trauma has emerged more regularly in conversation, as research by institutions such as the Dart Center and Poynter Institute gains momentum and becomes more readily available. Similarly, a surge in citizen journalism and a new wave of technology has made the trials journalists endure more visible to the rest of the world. Nowadays, live footage from the scene of an event can surface on the internet in seconds. People have access to the circumstances and working conditions journalists are subjected to at their fingertips. They can also see graphic videos and photographs of journalists being injured, tormented, and/or harassed on the job.

The impact of this goes without saying: Citizens no longer have the option to turn a blind eye to the dangers of reporting. They can't pretend that a problem doesn't exist related to journalism and trauma. Thus, in addition to researching this problem, many organizations are now playing an active role in finding a solution to it. They've made several efforts to provide resources and support to journalists over the past decade.

Dr. Emily Sachs, for example, is a clinical psychologist based in Oakland, California, and the Program Director for the Journalists' Trauma Support Network at the Dart Center. She co-designed the curriculum for a pilot program, which was founded about a year ago, that aims to educate and prepare qualified psychologists tasked with treating journalists on the front lines.

Twenty-two clinicians participated in this program. They were trained to understand and identify working conditions, stressors, and types of trauma exposures journalists face in modern reporting. Later, they were referred clients by the Committee to Protect Journalists, an independent, non-profit organization that promotes press freedom world-wide. With funding from the Dart Center, those psychologists provided time-limited, free therapy (20 sessions over six months) to more than 37 journalists, most of whom are now completing their counseling sessions ("Sachs Interview," 2022).

As the results of this pilot program start to emerge, Sachs said that the "use and usability" data tends to support the conclusion that trauma is a major concern in the field. She said that the answer to the

question of whether people want this type of treatment, and whether they will actually use it, is a “resounding yes.” In terms of satisfaction, she said there has been “excellent feedback.”

Sachs noted, however, that although journalists have found the program “incredibly useful,” a common theme in the research is that most wish they could have more time in therapy to adequately deal with the trauma they’ve witnessed.

Sachs also mentioned her observations from her private practice experience, as she’s worked individually with journalists since 2014.

“I see a lot of burnout, I see people considering leaving the field, I see people wrestling with [the question], ‘How do I do the work that I love?’” (“Sachs Interview,” 2022).

“Journalists by and large are unusually resilient and resourceful and smart,” Sachs added. “They wouldn’t be where they are -- they wouldn’t be professional journalists -- if they didn’t have a certain passion for going where other people sometimes don’t go.

“I think it’s harder for them to be superheroes with trauma, facing work the way they have been,” Sachs continued. “We feel competent, but we can’t do it when our lives are falling apart. Journalists need support” (“Sachs Interview,” 2022).

Hannah Storm, a media consultant and author from the Poynter Institute, who specializes in journalism safety and mental health, added that the pandemic has only exacerbated the struggles and impact of trauma on journalists.

“COVID-19 has taken a tremendous emotional toll on our journalism community,” said Storm in an article published on the institute’s website. “I’ve worked in media safety for a decade, and mental health is more firmly on the agenda in newsrooms than any other time I have known” (Storm, para. 1-2).

Research is just beginning; the conversation is just starting; and the statistics tell only part of the story. But the fact is that journalists – unlike in their day-to-day work as objective observers and sideline reporters -- are now the subjects and primary sources of a story themselves.

That's what this thesis is: the story about journalists facing trauma, as told by those in the field. I'll let you, the reader, be transported to the front lines -- for some of the most important and crucial stories during recent times -- alongside them. And I'll let these stories and interviews serve as eyewitness testimonies of what it's like to be a journalist in the modern world.

Chapter 2

Case Study #1: Kate Woodsome of the Washington Post

When 41-year-old Kate Woodsome of the Washington Post was approached by a stranger and asked who she worked for outside of the Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021, she didn't think twice before responding.

"I just said the Washington Post because it's not our nature to hide who we work for," Woodsome said.

What unraveled from this response, however, was not at all what Woodsome expected. She said it "switched something" and "enraged" the man who approached her. He screamed in her face, pointed at her, and called her names.

"I don't remember everything he said but once he started yelling other people came like flies to honey," Woodsome said. "I was surrounded by mostly men – one or two women – but mostly men screaming, raging, swearing, threatening, and saying that we [journalists] should be wiped out." These individuals Woodsome was referring to were part of a larger crowd of rioters at the Capitol that day, who wrongly believed incumbent President Donald Trump had the 2020 presidential election stolen from him.

Woodsome said this incident – which lasted about five minutes and was captured on video – was terrifying. The scariest part, from her perspective, was that the people who swarmed her believed the words they spoke. "This wasn't rhetoric," she said. "It was rage and delusion because they were so committed to what they were saying that it was their belief. Their reality was different from mine, and they were certain their reality was real."

Even though Woodsome appeared surprisingly calm in the videos that surfaced in the aftermath of the incident, she said the reality of what she felt was much different and she froze internally. "I was shitting my pants basically," Woodsome said. Meanwhile, her calm disposition served more as a survival tactic than anything else.

“I didn’t want to give them any reason to hurt me physically,” Woodsome said. “I was afraid that if I looked weak, they would take that energy and use it against me. I was afraid that if I fought back or tried to break out, they would use that against me and then also -- and this is so ridiculous when I think about it -- I felt responsible, like I had to represent all of the media and show them that I wasn’t an enemy, and I wasn’t the traitor, but that I’m just a woman and I was listening to them.”

Woodsome, who described her usual approach to working with people as one of curiosity and civility, said she listened, nodded, and asked questions in the middle of the mob. Later, however, she realized that she disassociated from the incident as it was taking place, even if her actions said otherwise. She didn’t have any concept of how long the incident lasted in the moment and said she was frightened and in a “trance.”

To some, this may seem like an atypical reaction from a journalist who was accustomed to covering Trump rallies and events. But over the course of the former president’s administration, Woodsome said she witnessed a profound shift at these events, which ultimately created situations and circumstances that were unprecedented (not to mention more dangerous) on the job. The insurrection at the Capitol was one of those situations.

“Leading up to January 6, I saw the nature of Trump events change,” Woodsome said. “I noticed an increasingly hostile energy and attitude from the people we were covering. People were angrier [and] more brazen.”

At the same time, Woodsome said she educated herself and spoke with experts about militia and right-wing supremacist movements. Those conversations led her to a revelation: Different groups across the country had been “wanting a revolution for a long time” and they all “coalesced under the Trump banner.” Woodsome added that a common mentality among these groups, according to the experts she talked to, was that while they would not necessarily fire the first shot, they would certainly fire back once the first shot erupted. “So, there was this almost craving for an opportunity to fight, an opportunity to have the inciting incident for a revolution,” Woodsome said.

Because of this knowledge, Woodsome didn't arrive on the Capitol grounds expecting peace and calm on the day politicians inside would vote to certify the results of the 2020 presidential election. She said she knew the day "wasn't going to be quite normal" and that the Washington Post did, too. In fact, the news organization issued flak jackets and helmets to journalists and incorporated more security than normal for domestic incidents.

What she and her colleagues ultimately endured, however, wasn't just "not quite normal," but rather, *extremely abnormal*. Among other things, Woodsome described the day as destabilizing and disorienting, with energy "like that of a circus." She said there were people of all ages wearing Mardi-Gras-esque costumes, holding bats and pitchforks, and disguising themselves in facemasks not for COVID. "It would go from joy and glee, to rage," Woodsome said.

At one point, Woodsome overheard a "deafening" boom – which she later discovered was a flash grenade set off by police to disperse the crowd. However, initially, Woodsome and her colleague didn't know who or what was the source of the boom (whether it was gunshots, a bomb, or something else) and if it was a good or bad thing for their safety. At another point, Woodsome overheard a man pointing to a nearby construction site and talking about the "pipes" and "concrete" that could be used as "weapons" later that day.

Woodsome also remembered a moment when she dropped her water bottle on the ground, and someone picked it up and handed it back to her. She said that while this interaction was friendly and routine, it was also disorienting for her as a journalist and contributed to her confusion outside the Capitol that day.

"It was this totally benign, neighborly exchange," Woodsome said. "And then somebody else just like him would scream 'vermin, communist, traitor' at me. It was really frightening. It was really trippy. I didn't know who to trust, and I couldn't really trust anybody."

Woodsome said she also didn't trust law enforcement, so she took it upon herself to anticipate and prepare for danger. She and her colleague, for example, made an "exit plan" in their minds in case

there was a stampede of rioters in their path. They also tried to remain calm no matter what, or who, came their way. That's why when Woodsome was being surrounded by a mob of rioters, she was able to mask her fear by keeping her exterior seemingly unfazed.

“When you're in a distressing situation as a journalist, at least for me, I can stay really calm, because you normalize to a certain degree what's happening,” Woodsome said. “It's our job and our responsibility to make order out of chaos, to collect all of the information and be calm enough to convey what's happening to somebody else. To do our jobs, we to some degree normalize the abnormal just enough to articulate it.”

Woodsome recognized, however, that this isn't necessarily a healthy solution or response to stress and danger on the job.

“In normalizing the abnormal, we can desensitize ourselves to the level of threat. What would be intolerable to somebody else is tolerable to me because I'm more used to it. That adjustment of what's normal, you're constantly recalibrating it.”

Woodsome said one of the reasons she struggled to break out of the mob on Jan. 6, is because she was once again “normalizing the abnormal.” But at the same time, she was also aware of the stakes of the situation at hand. She knew that a woman inside the Capitol (who was later identified as 35-year-old Ashli Babbitt) had already died, and that this situation was life-threatening and would continue to escalate -- particularly once that news circulated among the crowd.

“I knew that people were waiting for the first shot so that they could start their war, and I worried that if these people knew a woman was down that they would be seeking revenge or the next step,” Woodsome said. “I just thought ‘this is so unsafe. This is so unsafe.’”

Woodsome said she finally broke out from the group by turning one of the rioter's comments about her age into a joke, pointing to her gray hair and making people laugh. This distracted the mob just enough so Woodsome could create some space between the rioters and herself.

“I was able to reconnect with a part of me, and it both broke my trance, and it broke the group trance, and I was able to move out of the mob.”

Later that day, Woodsome was asked to report live on camera for the Washington Post so she could describe her version of how the insurrection unfolded. She said she did this “brief news hit” right outside the Capitol.

One of the things that stood out to Woodsome about this journalistic moment, though, is how she felt once it was complete. She said that her mind was filled with doubts, and she repeatedly asked her colleague about whether she “sounded scared” on camera. Eventually, however -- and at the time of my interview with her in November 2021 -- Woodsome gave herself some grace.

“Afterwards I was like, ‘Jesus Christ, Kate, that was terrifying. It’s OK to be scared, and it’s OK that people hear you scared, and probably good that the public can see that,’” Woodsome said. “It’s this whole conflict of ‘We’re not the story,’ but in this situation we are to some degree.”

And for Woodsome, that story was a long time coming. Earlier in her career, she worked overseas in places like Cambodia, Hong Kong, and Cuba. While she was there, she said that being a white, American journalist carried a certain level of protection.

“It made me confident that I wouldn’t be arrested or shot while my Cambodian colleagues could’ve been,” Woodsome said. “So, I stood in front in certain situations knowing that just my identity in itself was a protection.”

On Jan. 6, Woodsome said that her identity as that same journalist was no longer a protection, but a weakness.

“My identity was a target on my back,” Woodsome said. “It was the fact that I was a journalist that made them want to hurt me, and that has been incredibly destabilizing. The fallout has been really bad.”

In the days directly after Jan. 6, Woodsome said her cortisol levels were so high her stomach was “a total wreck.” She was scared to leave the house. She couldn’t go to the local market alone. She paid for

a service to erase her address and other private information from the internet. She struggled to sleep at night. Meanwhile, Woodsome said she compensated for all of this by working at an extremely high level – something that was not without an additional cost.

“[It was] just a huge moment in our history,” Woodsome said. “I felt I was there and people [needed] to know what happened. Like, it wasn’t a hoax. Professionally, [I was] just so strong. Physically, emotionally -- very fragile. I got burnt out and I collapsed basically.”

This collapse manifested in different phases over the ensuing months. When Woodsome ventured back to the Capitol for the Inauguration on Jan. 20, she said she felt extremely scared and was “looking for danger everywhere.” She described herself as “very vigilant,” and wondered whether there would be a suicide bomber. “It’s a reasonable response to what happened but also it’s a clear sign of PTSD – surveilling everything,” Woodsome said.

“I wish that I had not gone because I knew that my body was falling apart,” Woodsome added. “I could feel it, so what I wish is that I had listened to my brain and my body and stopped when it was telling me to stop. I was pretty distressed.”

In April, Woodsome said she was working inside a house in Ashville, North Carolina when her family friend of 35 years encouraged her to stop working and playfully tried to persuade her to go to a winery with him. While Woodsome said this was a “normal” thing “an older brother would do” she added that her brain wasn’t able to register this in the moment. Rather, it transported her back to Jan. 6.

“I no longer was in the house,” Woodsome said. “I was at the Capitol, and he was not my friend John. He was one of the guys that had been screaming at me at the Capitol.”

Woodsome, who was rattled and terrified in this moment, described her physical response to her friend as “the way her body wanted to respond” to the mob outside the Capitol in January. Afterwards, she said she went into a catatonic state for a couple of days, and this led her to reach out to her therapist for help. When Woodsome returned home from Ashville, she decided -- along with the guidance of her therapist -- to go to a week-long, live-in trauma program. There, she participated in a wide array of

services including group therapy, psychodrama (in which they would act out scenarios like feeling trapped), and workshops.

“I did that for a week, and it was really, really helpful...like the greatest gift. That was an amazing place,” Woodsome said. She added that the trauma program provided an environment where she felt safe and protected and was able to focus solely on working through her PTSD and anxiety.

Although helpful, however, this program didn’t magically solve all Woodsome’s problems. As the days and months passed by, things started to improve. But when Woodsome returned to the real world, she continued to face constant reminders of January 6. Simply put, this major historic event was unavoidable, and each reminder tested her in different ways.

In Sept. 2021, for instance, Woodsome tried hiking by herself – one of her favorite hobbies -- for the first time since the insurrection occurred. “Since the Capitol, my sense of safety has completely been taken away,” Woodsome said. “So, I was like, ‘You know what, let’s start to rewrite this story.’”

Woodsome said she chose a trail that wasn’t too difficult in Shenandoah National Park – a place she describes as “where rural Virginia Trump country essentially meets city.” For the most part, that hike went completely normal. But it did take an unexpected turn that ultimately caused some painful memories to resurface.

Woodsome heard a whistle on the trail toward the end of her hike, and then watched as an older man rounded the bend. She proceeded to have a brief conversation with that man and commented on how beautiful his whistle sounded. Then, out of nowhere, the man leaned into Woodsome’s face and asked whether she supported Trump or Democrat Joe Biden. He repeated this question as he got increasingly aggressive and closer to both Woodsome and her face. Meanwhile, Woodsome said she stared at the man, told him she “just loved his whistle,” and then went on her way without ever providing a response to his question. Once she got to the bend, however, she ran to her car in fear.

This short interaction had a profound impact on Woodsome. She said it sent her body and nervous system back into a state of panic and terror, and that it was locked in this state for several days afterward. And initially, she didn't do anything to try and reverse that intense panic.

"I didn't disrupt the cycle," Woodsome said. "I just hunkered down and then I was just scared, seeing danger everywhere. I started to have thoughts like, 'It's never going to be safe because Trump-ism is never going away.' Just really bad thoughts. I called my sister, and I was like, 'I think I'm in crisis.'"

Woodsome, who experienced frequent nightmares following this incident, also called her therapist and began experimenting with new treatment methods to combat her anxiety and PTSD. One of those methods was medication. The other was Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR), a psychotherapy treatment that aims to reduce psychological arousal, reformulate negative beliefs, and ultimately alleviate the distress associated with traumatic memories (*"What is EMDR?"* para. 1-5). It does this by desensitizing maladaptive information and reprocessing it in one's brain. If successful, the memory remains, but in diminished intensity, thus allowing the individual some space to process and overcome the trauma.

Woodsome said both treatments helped her symptoms and struggles to some degree, but ultimately, they haven't been the most crucial and important part of her ongoing recovery process. Rather, it's the people around her, and the clarity she's gained to understand and remain open about the problems she is experiencing, that keep her pushing through.

"The saving grace of this is that I have a support network, and I have the knowledge and language to say, 'I know this is happening,'" Woodsome said.

Woodsome also received some peace of mind at work, where she met with a Human Resources representative about the insurrection at the Capitol and the ensuing fallout and trauma she experienced. After an hour-long interview, Woodsome said the representative concluded that she was "injured on the job," that she had a "disability" from her coverage, and that her PTSD is equivalent to that experienced by

veterans. As a result, the representative decided to open a worker's compensation complaint for Woodsome.

"That was very validating in some ways because sometimes you think, 'Maybe it's not that bad' or 'I'm making this up,'" Woodsome said. "No, this is real. Other people experience it. It's classic PTSD and it's interesting because if more journalists knew that this was considered a disability, we would be having a completely different conversation.

"We have all kinds of journalists who are running around on broken legs mentally and people are just like, 'Stick a Band-Aid on it and keep going.'"

Woodsome is confident in her belief that other journalists are just as traumatized as she is from their work, but that many numb their emotions and internalize their experiences instead of seeking help. She said that the reasons underlying this type of response may circle back to the traditional culture inside both the newsroom and society.

"Just like mental health in any area, there is still a narrative from society, or a narrative from ourselves that 'there's something wrong with me,'" Woodsome said. 'There must be a flaw in me. There's a fear that somethings broken inside me and that's why I'm having this trauma.'

"I have colleagues that don't want to talk about PTSD because they don't want assignments to go to men," Woodsome added. "They don't want to be branded incapable, or weak, or sensitive, or traumatized. It's heartbreaking."

Woodsome said the conversations that do take place about mental health among journalists are often "very quiet" and behind closed doors. She mentioned that there is a "just get through it" mentality in the field, and that although more people are starting to speak more openly about mental health struggles, news organizations are still lagging in the effort to combat them. She's seen this firsthand.

"I think just institutionally, I work for a place that's got the resources," Woodsome said. "They were ready to send us out. They had flak jackets. They had helmets. They bought walkie-talkies. But the plan for when people come back into the newsroom is like nonexistent."

Woodsome acknowledged that news organizations are in the early stages of recognizing trauma and providing services to reduce the stresses that journalists endure. There is more talk about self-care, avoiding burnout, and utilizing employee assistance programs and therapy. But all of this is just a beginning. Much more work remains.

“They’re starting to use the vocabulary of trauma, but they’re not fluent in it,” Woodsome said. “I don’t think they truly understand that doing our job can lead to disability. If journalism organizations are going to send people out into situations that are increasingly threatening, they need to be ready to understand the fallout of that.”

Now, more than a year after the insurrection at the Capitol, Woodsome said she no longer covers Trump or the conservative right. She also stopped watching and listening to the news as frequently, and only absorbs the bare minimum levels of media for what is needed to do her job each day. Despite these changes, though, she continues to struggle.

In many ways, the Capitol forced Woodsome to not only confront recent trauma, but the trauma that has compiled over the course of her career and entire life. The Washington Post journalist said she grew up in a “pretty intense home” and has also witnessed people being killed (among other scary situations) during her time overseas.

“Whenever you have new trauma, old trauma comes up. I think one of the reasons why, for me, the Capitol was so bad is because it had remnants of old trauma overseas and from my childhood. What makes me good at my job is all of the life experiences. It also makes me vulnerable to getting hurt in this way.”

Woodsome said that these different traumas have compounded in a way that makes recovering from Jan. 6 a much lengthier, difficult, and more painful process.

“This is a new level of panic for me,” Woodsome said about the post-Jan. 6 era. “The tunnel vision I have is like, ‘Everything is dangerous, everything is scary. What is safe?’ That’s new for me and I fucking hate it.”

Woodsome added that she's never experienced as much difficulty in her career as she is right now, following the insurrection. Yet although her life and mental health have been impacted in a lot of negative ways, she still chooses to find the silver lining in all of it.

"I'm privileged I have resources and I can do the work now that probably is addressing 20 years of [trauma], 20 years of stuff from the industry," Woodsome said. "I'm going to use this opportunity to be stronger and better."

("Woodsome Interview." Personal Interview. Nov. 29, 2021.)

Chapter 3

Case Study #2: Ed Ou of NBC News

Canadian Ed Ou entered the journalism profession as a teenager, at the age of 18. Since then, he's accumulated a wide array of experiences on the front lines and emerged as an award-winning documentary filmmaker and visual journalist for NBC News. Most recently, Ou was nominated for an Emmy award in Outstanding Video Journalism for his coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Initially, however, Ou's experiences transported him to places like the Middle East, Central Asia, and Africa where he photographed various conflicts while working for Reuters and the Associated Press. In 2006, he covered the war between Israel and Hezbollah in Southern Lebanon, and then the fall of the Islamic courts in Mogadishu, Somalia. In 2011, he documented the Arab Spring uprisings as a photojournalist for The New York Times.

When his work as a foreign correspondent became "much too dangerous" and "oppressive," Ou said he moved to the United States, but was welcomed by circumstances just as turbulent as those overseas.

"For better or for worse, the entire world started paying attention to internal American politics because of Trump," Ou recalled. As a result, he said a lot of his coverage involved that newfound interest and participation in American government, and he undertook a new mission of reporting the rise of extremism in the United States.

Among other things, Ou said he covered the aftermath of Charlottesville, mass shootings, policing and the use of force, race relations, and protests in various states since moving to New York roughly five years ago.

"It was an extension of a lot of the work I was already doing," Ou said. "I had done it before, but I had mostly done it from a Middle East, non-American context."

It didn't take long, however, before Ou learned that the transition to America was tougher than expected. He thought that this new environment would offer protection for his press freedoms and also

ensure he would no longer be actively targeted on the front lines (as he was overseas), but he was quickly proven wrong.

“When things started going down, we saw a really quick erosion in the ability for the press to work unhindered,” Ou said. “[People – including the police --] basically targeted us [and] arrested us. They didn’t see our independence as journalists as anything that protected us. In fact, it seemed to have made us targets in a way that was quite shocking.”

Perhaps the defining moment for Ou was one that was captured on camera during protests in Minneapolis on May 30, 2020, following the police killing of George Floyd. Ou was tear-gassed and shot in the face by a projectile concussion grenade. The extent of his injury is pictured below.



Figure 1: Photograph of Ed Ou after being shot by a projectile concussion grenade during protests in Minneapolis May 30, 2020. Chandan Khanna/AFP/Getty Images

“It happened very quickly, and then the state troopers came, and they pepper-sprayed me in the face and beat me with batons,” Ou said. “It was pretty scary. If I wasn’t recording it [or being recorded], I probably would have gaslit myself by now to be like ‘Oh that didn’t happen.’”

“You don’t really register what it means at the moment,” added Ou, who made it clear that being exposed to a certain level of risk is part of the job he signed up for.

“You don’t really think about the implications of it. You really are [scared, but] you kind of compartmentalize it in a specific way because you’re busy. I look back at my footage and I’m like, ‘Wow, that’s what happened.’”

Ou compared what was going on in his mind when he was attacked by police as the equivalent to getting a flat tire or locking his keys in the car. In other words, he said being shot felt like a routine inconvenience in the moment.

“When it initially happened, I was so fixated on the fact that I still had to file a story and do my job,” Ou said. “Journalists are on autopilot when these things happen. I think it has a lot to do with [the fact that] as journalists, we try really hard not to become the story.”

Meanwhile, it wasn’t until photographs and videos of the incident started circulating online -- and people started to project their concerns and shock from the outside -- that Ou said he began to confront what happened to him.

And when he finally did reflect on this incident, Ou said that Minneapolis felt far different from any of the violence and danger he previously experienced at work because of how “overt” it was, and the scale of how many of his colleagues were targeted, arrested, tear-gassed, and/or shot alongside him -- whether in Minneapolis, or at protests elsewhere across the country.

According to an article published by the Washington Post, “at least a dozen journalists” were injured that same weekend as Ou, including freelance photographer Linda Tirado, who was permanently blinded in her left eye after being shot by a projectile.

“Not since the 1960s, when the nation was racked by civil rights demonstrations, antiwar protests and urban riots, has the press been embroiled in so much violence on American shores,” wrote Paul Farhi and Elahe Izadi in the aftermath of these protests (para. 3). This explains the level of threat modern-day journalists like Ou are up against.

“The reality of it is even worse than my memory of it, and that memory of it is something I’ve been trying to deal with and just figure out,” Ou said. He struggles to reconcile all of this in his mind, however, because of feelings of guilt.

“It’s hard to feel bad for yourself, or like you get any right to feel anything [as a journalist] because you’re entering into a situation where the stakes are much beyond you,” Ou said. “You’re in this racial justice protest, and that should be the number one story because that’s why you’re there.

“I don’t want to trespass on someone else’s grief or suffering when we are privileged enough to parachute into places and see these things. I always feel guilty about that, and that’s what makes it difficult to then reconcile for yourself, like ‘Wait hold on, you’re allowed to feel this,’ because I never feel like I have that right [to feel these emotions].

Another reason Ou struggles to reconcile these painful memories and their impact is because of the culture of journalism and what he calls a longtime “stigma” in the field. Like many others, Ou said he was initially afraid to talk about mental health and how he was affected by covering certain events, because he feared backlash in the newsroom. He said there was always a worry that being vulnerable would transform someone into a “liability,” and that the consequence of this would mean being passed over for the next assignment.

“Instead of healthily dealing with [the trauma], you were taught to internalize it amongst yourself,” Ou said. “Then the result of that is all of these things compound and you’re like ‘I don’t know what to do with this.’”

For Ou, things compounded quite fast, in a way that negatively impacted his mental health. He said his journey with trauma and journalism has been a long one, and it continues every single day.

“I don’t even know how to unpack what happened in Minneapolis without unpacking a decade in the Middle East,” Ou said. “Trauma is a real thing, and PTSD is a very, very, very real thing that I’ve kind of been dealing with long before Minneapolis happened.”

The most recent PTSD Ou experienced has infiltrated his daily experiences in numerous ways since he moved to New York. He said he constantly deals with paranoia and is “really hypervigilant.” When he hears certain noises, for instance, like a plane flying above him, he thinks about bombs. He’s stressed out in large crowds and while riding the subway. He wakes up in the middle of the night terrified that he’s going to be killed because of the constant influx of death threats and other disturbing messages from Neo-Nazis and members of the far right in the United States he’s received throughout his journalism career.

“There’s just a lot of really specific triggers,” Ou said. “I look at the color orange and then I think about my colleagues who had their heads cut off by ISIS – James Foley and Steven Sotloff -- who I knew personally,” Ou said. “I can’t believe the Middle East and ISIS have ruined the color orange for me.”

Additionally, Ou said he had an “identity crisis” because of how uncomfortable he felt with his surroundings.

“I’m like, ‘OK so now I’m back in a normal western context but why is it that I feel just so fucking freaked out all the time?’ Why is it that I’m in a crowd and I’m just like ‘Someone’s gonna blow themselves up’ and I’m in New York?” Ou said.

“Objectively I knew what that was, but it took a long time for me to be like, ‘No you have PTSD, and this is OK, this is a neurological condition.’ To this day I still don’t think I have [gotten over it].”

Ou added that the paranoia he developed in response to his experiences is why he now sees everyone as a “possible threat,” including me when we first began our interview. Before we met via Zoom, for example, Ou conducted preliminary research on me and the university I attend. He quizzed me about the color of certain buildings on my campus, my professors, and the details of my project, before he was willing to officially start the interview and answer questions.

That same paranoia is also why Ou said he’s uncomfortable with his back to the door in a restaurant, and why he struggles to sleep at night. These problems have only increased in frequency and

intensity as the days go by, and ultimately, they've compounded in such a way that has led Ou to seek professional help.

Ou said he's experimented with "multiple avenues for dealing with PTSD," from anxiety medication, to therapy, to Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR), which he utilized to try and reverse certain behaviors and thoughts. Some of those methods, like EMDR, were helpful, while others, particularly the anxiety medication, were not.

Ou said it wasn't until he saw a therapist who specifically works with journalists, that he began to work through some of his struggles. He was also prescribed medicinal marijuana so that he could sleep without having "really bad nightmares and flashbacks," and found this to be incredibly helpful.

"That really kind of changed things for me and allowed me to have some agency over my anxiety," Ou said.

Despite these improvements, Ou's fractured relationship with his surroundings continues. "It sucks," Ou said when asked about the impact of his career on his mental health.

"When nothing bad has happened to you yet, you don't know how bad things can get. [Then, when] bad things happen, a trust in the world is broken, and I think for journalists, seeing that trust be broken over and over and over again, all over the world...you start to lose faith in yourself and your ability to manage risk."

Following the events in Minneapolis, Ou said he initially blamed himself for what happened. It was his natural instinct as a journalist, since he's accustomed to interrogating his own actions and learning from his mistakes. However, he said that when he took the time to analyze the events on May 30, 2020 and finally gained some space from the incident, there's nothing he did that warranted being targeted and attacked.

"I've played in my head over and over again where we were sitting, where we were standing, how we were presenting ourselves, all of these things," Ou said. "In this context, I don't know what mistake I made other than exist as a journalist," Ou said.

Existing as a journalist is something Ou has done for nearly 17 years. In this time span, he said he's witnessed both the best and worst in humanity, but that this did not come without a cost. Above all else, he said it warped his overall sense of the world.

"You end up realizing how fragile everything is," Ou said. "You're just inundated with tragedy after tragedy both personal and grand, big and small."

Meanwhile, the more time Ou spent in the field, his exposure to trauma piled up. Thus, at the same time he was gaining more perspective as a journalist, he was experiencing a more intense emotional toll as a human being. Because of this, Ou said that it is often hard to tell when more experience paralyzes him versus helps his work, and it's a thought he grapples with quite a bit.

"Am I better off knowing the things that I've seen because I'm now more experienced as a journalist, or the flip side, am I now really jaded?" Ou said.

He added that this makes him nostalgic for the days when he was a young photojournalist who hadn't experienced any of the trauma just yet.

"When I can't sleep in the middle of the night, I wish I could go back to myself as a 20-year-old when everything was so exciting and I was just so happy to be doing what I was doing," Ou said.

While that 20-year-old Ou was eager to enter the field to bring awareness to the things going on in the world and inspire changes and new policies, the 35-year-old Ou has doubts about his decision.

"Sometimes when it comes to this profession, I think to myself, 'What is the point of all of this?' What was the point of all this trauma? Is it worth the things that I've seen and cannot ever unsee? I don't know. I really don't know. It's hard and it really depends on when you talk to me."

"I'd like to believe that a lot of the trauma we put ourselves through is so we can make the world a better place and really inform people. When it feels like something you did had an effect, then all the things that you see were then somehow worth it, because you're like 'Well, at least I was able to take something horrible that I witnessed and do something good with it.'"

However, Ou also said that to continue pushing himself to do stories like this, means that he is continuing to push himself to be exposed to “even more trauma” that needs to be unpacked. In many ways, it’s a vicious, never-ending cycle.

“It’s really hard to reconcile growth in your career or in your job or as a human being with then the trauma that comes with it, and I think that’s especially amplified in our time when we’re all being attacked as journalists.

“It’s been a source of a lot of really specific emotional weight that I carry, or that we [as journalists] carry, regardless of whether we want to or not,” Ou said. “It just feels like this weight every single day, especially at night. It sucks. It really sucks.”

(“Ou Interview.” Personal Interview. Oct. 12, 2021.)

Chapter 4

Case Study #3: Frank Thorp of NBC News

Journalist Frank Thorp is no stranger to Washington, D.C. Since 2011, he's worked primarily inside the Capitol as a producer and off-air reporter for NBC News. Initially, this meant he was assigned to cover the United States House of Representatives, but Thorp later transitioned to the Senate side of Congress – a position he's held for the past seven years.

On Jan. 6, 2021, Thorp went to work inside the Capitol, -- and more specifically in the tiny, soundproof booth where he conducts all his reporting, -- just like any other day. However, *unlike any other day*, Thorp said that he and his colleagues were anticipating some degree of abnormality, although they weren't entirely sure what that entailed.

“We had been preparing for coverage of the certification of the electoral votes for weeks and knew that there was a possibility of some kind of shenanigans,” Thorp said. “We knew that there were going to be protests. We knew that some people had mentioned that they were worried about that day. Some aides, specifically, had been like, ‘Hey, we’re kind of worried about going in [the Capitol]’ and ‘This feels like a little bit of a dicey situation.’”

Although Thorp acknowledged these concerns, he said there was a sense of comfort and security in the back of his mind. Thorp attributed those feelings to his experience working in the Capitol for so long, and also to the overall symbolism of the building and the power it holds within the United States government.

“To be perfectly honest, we’ve encountered countless protests at the Capitol, and it’s just always been handled,” Thorp said. “You just consider the Capitol to be one of the safest places that you’ll ever be in because it is what it is, and particularly on a day when you know that so many important people are going to be there. It felt very secure.”

For those reasons, Thorp said that what later happened “didn’t seem real at all.” He was forced to come to terms with the fact that the building where he spent the past decade of his career wasn’t invincible, or nearly as secure as he once thought. Here’s how the day unfolded from his perspective:

As the rioters moved toward the Capitol and eventually breached the doors and windows, Thorp and his colleagues were told to shelter in place and stay away from exits, which they did for about an hour or so. Then, Thorp said he and the people around him started to get antsy and tense, mainly because they had no idea what was happening on the other side of the door of the windowless booth.

“We had no visibility,” Thorp said. “What’s nice about [the booth] is that it’s actually kind of secluded and hard to find. But at the same time, if there was a fire or something happened, or there was a shootout, we wouldn’t necessarily be totally aware -- and Capitol police were not super communicative with us. We were kind of in the dark and watching a lot of the coverage on Twitter or live [television].

“I was getting worried,” Thorp added. “I was like, ‘I don’t know what’s happening around me.’ Not having the situational awareness was really freaking me out, so I went down and opened the door to the hallway and looked out.”

That’s when Thorp saw one of the rioters walking by holding a flag, with a Capitol police officer “nonchalantly following after him.” He paused for a second, then decided to pull out his phone, walk to the gallery above the Senate chamber, and start recording. When he looked down, he saw several rioters dispersed across the Senate floor.

“It was just the most surreal, bizarre, unexpected thing that maybe I have ever seen,” Thorp said. “I cannot stress how few people get to go on the Senate floor. There is a literal motion that they give on the floor to allow people to have access. No one just gets to go on the floor, and to see it desecrated in that way was just such a shocking thing.”

While Thorp was shooting a video of the scene, he encountered a guy sitting in the front row of the gallery – someone he assumed was just another journalist. However, he soon found out this was not

the case; that man was one of the rioters. He started asking Thorp “who he was with,” and then repeated this question while getting louder and more aggressive each time.

“You could see him craning his neck because he was trying to see my name on my credential and see what news organization I’m from,” Thorp said. “He got heated. We have training for tense situations and things like that, and it was one of those things where I was like, ‘OK, I’m not going to engage here.’”

As Thorp began backing away, one of his colleagues – a photographer from Getty – interrupted the conversation and started talking to the insurrectionist. This distracted him just enough so that Thorp could walk quickly out of the gallery and back to safety behind closed doors.

Although nothing more happened, and the interaction with the man in the gallery didn’t escalate any further, Thorp said he struggled with the what-if scenarios that infiltrated his head afterwards.

“Like, what if, again in that scenario, I had turned and talked to that guy. It could have been fine. It could have been an amazing journalistic moment. Or he could have grabbed me and thrown me off the side of the gallery and it could have been violent. Who knows? You think about that day, and you think about what-ifs the entire time.”

Eventually, Thorp said he and the other journalists were evacuated from the building and moved elsewhere for a couple hours, before they returned to the Capitol to cover the rest of the Senate proceedings that night. But returning to the Capitol was only the beginning of coming to terms with what happened that day. Thorp said that while he may not have been completely conscious of it in the moment, the things he saw and witnessed inside the Capitol had a significant impact on his mental health.

“I think one of the hardest things to have wrapped our heads around in terms of how scared we were, or how scared we weren’t that day, was that every subsequent day that feeling of fear got worse, which is crazy because it’s one more day removed from the event,” Thorp said.

Among other things, Thorp said he had trouble sleeping. He lost his appetite for at least two weeks and felt sad, angry, and “just constantly nervous.” He also said his sense of safety, and the trust he once had in his surroundings, was seriously altered.

“When a place like [the Capitol] gets breached in that way, it makes you question the security of all places -- your house, your car, everything, wherever you are. You realize how much you take for granted all this security in your life, and once that is broken down, it makes it hard to process not only that event, but everything in general.”

Thorp soon grew accustomed to living with the anxiety and paranoia that something like Jan. 6 could happen again. When he covered the inauguration 14 days after the insurrection, for example, he said he battled a feeling of “intense fear” that things would go awry, despite all the safety measures and precautions taken by government officials to prevent just that.

Later, while covering President Trump’s impeachment trial, – which Thorp describes as “one of the hardest days” in the aftermath of Jan. 6 -- a video of the insurrection was played, which only heightened his fear. The video documented how the insurrection unfolded and forced the painful memory to resurface in Thorp’s mind.

“To see it in that way and play it in that way and realize how bad it was and have that level of awareness you didn’t [before] necessarily, was really intense,” Thorp said. “It was a lot harder than I thought it was going to be to process. There’s just no real way to avoid the story when you’re sitting in the same place where you were when it happened and you see video of it. It brings you back pretty quick.”

Thorp said that moments and reminders like this are what perpetuate new waves of emotions and struggles, which for the most part, come in fleeting moments and at unpredictable times. It’s also what makes dealing with the trauma of Jan. 6 feel like a difficult, never-ending cycle, and why Thorp expects to be dealing with it well into the future.

“I think that it will always be a thing that I’m processing, journalistically, but even as an American who’s interested in the health of our nation and our politics,” Thorp said. “It’s just going to be something that I process for the rest of my life.”

In the meantime, Thorp has been able to find comfort in the people around him. He said his colleagues and fellow journalists have leaned on each other for support in a positive way.

“Having other people having collectively experienced it was beneficial in that you were able to go to other people and hug them, and know they were experiencing the same thing,” Thorp said. “You weren’t experiencing this alone, and I think that was helpful. The vast majority of people, at least at that time, appreciated how traumatic that experience was, so you were able to pretty openly talk about how much you were struggling.”

For those who were more reluctant to speak about their struggles, Thorp made it a personal mission to help them find the strength to do so. Perhaps the reason for this is that 38-year-old Thorp has been through things like this before. He has faced his fair share of trauma in the past and speaks from a place of experience and wisdom.

In 2010, for instance, Thorp found two people he knew personally trapped under rubble in Haiti following the catastrophic 7.0-magnitude earthquake. He had to move bricks, wood, and metal away from the pile for at least an hour before he was able to pull them out of the wreckage (Celizic, para. 3-7).

He’s also seen people dying of cholera in the streets and witnessed violent gun battles and riots. He said that while healing from these incredibly difficult and traumatic experiences hasn’t been easy, going through each of them has taught him the importance of reaching out and seeking mental health resources. It’s what motivated him to seek help from a therapist (and utilize various other services) in the aftermath of Jan. 6. It’s also what motivated him to encourage his co-workers to do the same.

“In the days after the 6th happened, anybody who I encountered in the Capitol, we talked about if they were struggling,” Thorp said. “I would give them an elevator pitch about how important it was to try and find somebody that they could talk with to try and process it. As a journalist, you’re still a person and you’re still trying to get through your day.”

“I think that mental health in general, or the need to get help for mental health is stigmatized and that’s just something that needs to be broken in society as a whole,” Thorp added. “In journalism, I think

there's a sense that it's your job to cover these things. It's not necessarily discussed how people might be struggling because I think a lot of people don't want to show a sense of weakness. They don't want to get pulled from a story and so it takes a lot of strength in your moment of weakness to admit that you need help."

Thorp said that organizations need to do their part to eradicate these stigmas and change this damaging narrative. He said that one of the ways this can be achieved is by hiring qualified staff who can guide those struggling through the process of asking and receiving help as quickly and smoothly as possible.

"It's one thing to decide that you need help," Thorp said. "But matching that desire to the person that will get you that help is a journey that is really hard to go through. The longer that journey is, the less likely somebody is going to get the help that they need.

"It can't wait. Those feelings of anger and frustration and fear and nervousness, they might die down, but they become other things, so it's important to work out those things early," Thorp added.

Thorp acknowledged, however, that confronting trauma and seeking help has been more difficult following Jan. 6 because of the way the day is politicized compared to other traumatic events he's witnessed. When it came to the earthquake in Haiti, for example, Thorp said there was no debate, and no "other side" denying how horrible the earthquake was. But as far as Jan. 6 goes, this wasn't necessarily the case.

"In this situation it's just like this weird dynamic where people experienced this trauma but then there's this side that's like 'Well it wasn't actually so bad.' I think that's the hardest part about it," Thorp said.

Thorp, however, knows that Jan. 6 was "as intense as he experienced it," regardless of what others might say. For one thing, he has constant reminders of the violence that took place when he sets foot in the Capitol for work each day.

“The building is kind of forever tainted in a weird way,” Thorp said. “There’s one spot where there’s blood that stains the marble and that will always be there. We walk through different places and just see those moments, which is sad because it’s such an important and special building.”

When asked about how this trauma impacted his feelings about the journalism profession, Thorp said that it’s something he has trouble wrapping his head around. Why? It was his inherent drive to be on the front lines and witness these historical events first-hand that propelled him into the field in the first place.

“In an event like this, there’s this weird drive that journalists have to be there to experience it,” Thorp said. “I think that most people that were there as journalists who experienced January 6 would say that they never want to experience that again, but if given the choice to have not experienced it, they would probably still do it. If it’s a moment in history, [you want] to be there to do your job as a journalist.

That drive doesn’t necessarily outweigh the negative impact on mental health for Thorp. In fact, he said that he’s questioned his choice of career path, and it’s something he will be thinking about a lot going forward. But finding an answer will take some time.

“In terms of questioning whether or not I want to be a journalist, or whether or not I want to cover the Capitol, that’s something that I need to more internally process before I figure it out.”

For now, as Thorp continues to process this trauma and these questions, he said he’ll use this experience to move forward and educate his reporting in a unique way, and from a perspective that only those on the front lines share.

(“Thorp Interview.” Personal Interview. Nov. 12, 2021.)

Chapter 5

Case Study #4: Emily Cochrane of The New York Times

On Jan. 6, 2021, Emily Cochrane, -- a congressional correspondent for The New York Times, -- sent an “I love you” text to her mother and boyfriend. She did so after a loud bang erupted near the House chamber and an anonymous voice yelled for everyone to get down.

Prior to this moment, Cochrane said she and her colleagues were fumbling to put on gas masks, gathering their belongings, and “throwing themselves” over bannisters and chairs in an attempt to evacuate the chamber while rioters moved closer to breaking through the doors. Cochrane, herself, was also helping a woman in front of her who had fallen when the situation escalated due to the bang.

“You just sort of dropped to the ground and everyone was just laying there,” Cochrane said. “There were rioters pounding on the doors. I was thinking someone’s going to come in and probably start shooting.”

From where she was hiding, -- half behind an auditorium chair and without much cover -- Cochrane said she could see guards with their guns drawn, pointing to somebody on the other side of a door with shattered glass windows.

“I thought there was a pretty good chance that it wouldn’t end well,” Cochrane added. “I had never seen guns drawn in the House chamber. You don’t do that unless there’s a serious threat outside.” That threat is what provoked Cochrane to text her loved ones. She also live-tweeted a couple updates, all the while not knowing what the outcome would be.

Then, after about 10 minutes of lying still, Cochrane said everyone “somehow” started to move again. They scrambled off the floor and over more banisters, before making their way to an exit and down several flights of stairs. Once safely inside another building, Cochrane said she and the other journalists took shelter in the office of a member of Congress.

“It was a while before I got my bearings again and figured out where we were,” Cochrane said. “The rest is sort of a blur.”

Part of the reason for this “blur” is that Cochrane tried to cope with the situation by throwing herself into her work. She said she told her editor things like, ‘Just tell me what to do,’ ‘I need to work,’ and ‘I need to be doing something’ as she held off acknowledging any personal feelings or emotions until she got through the workday. Meanwhile, this strategy delayed Cochrane in processing what happened. That delay didn’t last long, however, because Cochrane still had to report to the Capitol the next day, and every day after, for work.

When she did, and particularly in the initial days following the insurrection, she found members of the National Guard sleeping on the floors and plywood lining broken windows. All of this was a reminder of the things she witnessed from her front-row seat as a journalist on Jan. 6, and it forever tainted the Capitol in her mind. It also made confronting what she witnessed unavoidable.

“I can’t speak for others, but when you’ve had certain unpleasant experiences, it’s very easy to distract yourself,” Cochrane said. [But] when you’re back in the same spaces, it’s hard not to go back to that moment and remember...you’re right back there again.”

She added that the severity of the situation, and the fact that it was a “cataclysmic news event,” made it even harder to avoid. She had no other choice but to confront it.

“This was the subject of a historic impeachment trial,” Cochrane said. “I saw myself in some of the videos scurrying out of the chamber. People dissected what happened that day. It’s [all over] the news coverage. That bang I heard in the chamber, that was someone dying. Once those memories came back, it’s very difficult to bottle them back in. It layers upon one another.”

For Cochrane, those layers accumulated and caused several problems. First, she no longer felt safe going to the Capitol. She also had trouble sleeping and struggled with loud noises -- particularly in public spaces. When Cochrane went to see a musical in the months after the insurrection, for example, she said she was startled by a “flash bang” on stage.

“I jumped and I could feel my eyes start to water a little bit,” Cochrane said. “I’m no medical professional, but it wouldn’t have bothered me quite that way before this.”

In other words, this experience challenged the boundary between the personal and the professional for Cochrane. PTSD crept into her life at unexpected times and in fleeting moments. Because of this, and at the time of our interview in October 2021, Cochrane said she wasn't sure if she wanted to continue journalism for the long term.

“I think I'm still figuring out that. It's pretty much been nonstop since [Jan. 6] so I suspect that's something I'm still sort of reflecting on and working through. It's hard to immediately disassociate.

“In one sense, I'm very lucky that this was probably the first and most serious traumatic thing that I've been through, Cochrane added. “We all have bumps in the road and whatnot, but I had never experienced anything quite like this. It rattles you. I think in part it's because of where it happened.”

In the four years since Cochrane began covering Congress for The New York Times, the Capitol became a source of comfort for her. She said that some weeks, she spent more time there than she did in her own home. Thus, knowing that this “second home” could be attacked and breached in the way it was on Jan. 6 uprooted the 26-year-old's sense of safety and stability and made her question her career trajectory for the first time.

Something that might prevent Cochrane from going in another direction professionally, however, is the innate drive she has as a journalist to persevere.

“It's so ingrained in the environment to sort of push through,” Cochrane said. “You push through the long nights; you push through missing time with family. You push through tough interactions with sources. You push through a global pandemic and the challenges of leaving your house and doing your job. You push through and sort of deal with the news, and you deal with what's in front of you in the moment.”

For now, as Cochrane continues her work in Washington, and also continues dealing with the aftermath of January 6 and all of the uncharted territory and emotions that came along with it, she'll reflect on whether she wants to “push through” or prioritize her mental health and safety.

(“Cochrane Interview.” Personal Interview. Oct. 11, 2021.)

Chapter 6

Case Study #5: Tom Williams of Roll Call

Tom Williams, a 47-year-old Penn State alum, has worked as a staff photographer for Roll Call since interning with the organization in 2000. Over the course of his career, he's spent significant time covering politics on Capitol Hill, but his work has also earned him a seat at various other tables, in a variety of different settings.

Among other things, Williams has documented court cases, hearings and briefings (including the Women's Gymnastics sexual abuse trial against team doctor, Larry Nassar), national party conventions, races for House and Senate seats, and disasters such as the Gulf Coast oil spill.

On Jan. 6, 2021, Williams was inside the Capitol, and more specifically, in the House chamber. His responsibilities that day involved capturing photographs of Congress members as they announced their votes to certify, or not certify, the results of the 2020 presidential election. After taking photographs for a bit, he went down to the second floor of the building to transmit some of those images from the camera to computer files, which is when he first noticed that a massive crowd was gathering outside.

"I'm sitting on the floor filing, and I could see out the window all these Trump supporters with their flags lining up on the east front of the Capitol," Williams said. "There was a couple hundred at that point and I figured [the others] were at that rally, and they would come after, so I figured [there would be] thousands of people."

Williams said he was told by a police officer that this was an "all hands-on deck" situation, but that in his mind, the math wasn't adding up regarding how many police officers and security guards were on the premises compared to the size of the crowd. This skepticism was confirmed when rioters started pushing through the barricades and ultimately broke into the Capitol. Then, Williams said he started running around the building to find different vantage points and document this moment in history.

Initially, Williams said he thought the Trump supporters would just wave their flags, take some selfies, and peacefully occupy the grounds, but he quickly realized it was much more serious than that.

Not only did a police officer grab him and try to shelter him somewhere in the House chamber, but Williams also observed the chaos firsthand. He said he saw cops running all over the place and some even putting water in their eyes, presumably to wash away chemicals that rioters had sprayed.

Eventually, Williams and a few other photographers were sheltered inside the upper gallery of the House chamber, where they were told to put on gas masks.

“I was fiddling around with that for a while, looking all around being like ‘I really need to take pictures right now not mess around with this gas mask,’ but the police were tense and I was trying to obey what they were saying,” Williams said. “I knew this was an historic thing [and I needed] to take pictures.”

Williams said there were benches pressed up against the doors in the chamber, security guards with their guns drawn, and startling sounds of a gunshot and shattered glass. Meanwhile, police were telling Williams and the other journalists to stay down. But Williams said he was less concerned with his own safety and more concerned about the photographs. Documenting the scenes inside the Capitol for the world to see was his main priority that day.

“I figured if these protesters break [in], the cops are going to shoot them, so I can’t be hiding behind a chair,” Williams said. “I [needed] to be in some kind of shooting position.”

Thus, he remained in a “halfway position” in which he was somewhat obeying the police and trying to shelter, but also trying to get a picture of the House chamber.

“If I was sheltering too much and not getting any pictures, that would have been [frustrating] and I would have been kicking myself for a while,” Williams said. “I wasn’t going to stop until I was physically stopped, which never happened.”

Eventually, Williams and his colleagues were evacuated from the Capitol and moved to another building, where they watched the day’s events unfold on a television screen and became fully aware of the scale of the insurrection and the danger it entailed.

Interestingly, however, Williams said he was unfazed by this danger. Although he said he wasn’t completely fearless, he made it clear that his main concern was fulfilling the duties of his job. He focused

on his camera, the pictures, and the lighting and exposure of each image. He even said that if he wasn't on the Capitol grounds on Jan. 6, he would have gone there anyway once the riots started, because of how strongly he feels about documenting these moments in history. This perspective contrasts starkly with some of Williams's colleagues, he said.

"Their direct fear was the rioters," Williams said. "My direct fear was the camera and pictures. So, I wasn't not scared, but I had something to concentrate on. I had a buffer.

"[Photography] is a game of inches and seconds," added Williams, who said that when he thinks about Jan. 6, the overwhelming emotion he feels is discontent. He remembers certain scenes and moments that he didn't capture and regrets the missed opportunities.

"I don't have any PTSD," Williams said about this experience. "The only recurring unpleasant thought is that I missed a handful of pictures. For instance, when we got back into the Capitol after being evacuated, I didn't go searching for cleanup photos because I was filing too long. They were done by the time I got to the areas that were vandalized. I should have gone earlier."

With that said, Williams does have some concern in the back of his mind as he prepares to venture out in public for coverage of the midterm elections. He is aware that there is a growing population that "generally doesn't like the media" and that things can escalate in seconds, as they did at the Capitol on Jan. 6.

"Even though you may just be at a campaign event and the vast majority of people are fine and there should be no danger, it only takes one crazy person to do something," Williams said.

Fortunately, however, Williams said he doesn't deal with the same mental health struggles as other journalists I've interviewed. He's also never been in a position where he considered leaving the field. He said that if he ever did want to stop being a journalist, he would have no other skills or options to fall back on and would need to keep pushing through.

("Williams Interview." Personal Interview. Sept. 17, 2021.)

Chapter 7

Case Study #6: John Quiñones of ABC News

For the past 40 years, John Quiñones has served on the frontlines as an award-winning journalist for ABC News. Over the course of those four decades, he's held various positions within the organization, from correspondent, to anchor of the primetime program "20/20," to creator and host of the hit television show "What Would You Do?" Quiñones has been transported to places all over the world and given a front-row seat to human pain and suffering, violence, war, politics, and corruption.

That journey with ABC started in 1982, when Quiñones left his position as a local reporter in Chicago to fill a vacancy left behind by ABC News correspondent Bill Stewart. Stewart was shot and killed on camera in 1979 (one of the first times there was video evidence of a journalist being assassinated) by Nicaraguan soldiers, at a time when Central America was plagued by violent civil wars.

"It was obviously a huge story, and so traumatic to the press corps in Central America," Quiñones said. "I'm a Mexican American [who speaks] Spanish. They were looking for someone who could go down there and perhaps communicate better with the soldiers and rebels and with the people of Latin America, and maybe someone who looked like me who could go into places and not immediately be spotted as an American journalist."

Quiñones acknowledged that he was scared to fill in for someone who had been assassinated three years earlier. And his concerns were valid. When he arrived in Central America, Quiñones was just barely 30 years old with limited experience on the frontlines. It didn't take long before he was thrown into the thick of it and asked to cover some dangerous and life-threatening situations himself.

"When you're at that age, you think you're invincible," Quiñones said. "I didn't have a family, I didn't have kids, so, you know, you think you can get it done without too much fear. But there were moments when we were pinned under gunfire, fighting between the leftist rebels and the government soldiers, and it was scary. You could hear the bullets flying. We were ducked under cars."

Quiñones did, however, find strength and comfort in numbers. He said that he was usually accompanied by a camera crew of three other people, and anytime there was a possibility of entering a dangerous situation, he would ask the others if they felt uncomfortable. If even one person answered yes, no one would proceed. Quiñones also stressed that ABC was vocal about making sure its journalists didn't endanger their lives. Although these things were reassuring, Quiñones said that most of the time, his crew ran toward danger instead of retreating from it, because of the pace and culture associated with the job they signed up for.

“When you're in the middle of it, you need to make split-second decisions,” Quiñones said. “Do we go there, or do we not go there? What if NBC is going there? Or CBS? Or CNN? It was very competitive. They're going in and getting the story. Am I going to look bad for not having tried to do the same?”

“Sometimes, we would hear about a fire fight in the mountains, and we'd be rushing out there to go film what was going on,” Quiñones added. “NBC was in a van next to us, and CBS was in a van next to us. We'd literally [be] racing each other with our drivers to get there first,” Quiñones added.

Similarly, Quiñones said he and his colleagues felt like they had a duty to the American people to pursue and report the truth at all costs. This duty often outweighed fear and hesitancy on the job.

“You want to do the story because you realize that by exposing something -- by covering the story -- millions of people would watch it on the news, and maybe some good would come out of that,” Quiñones said. “There's always that altruistic goal of ‘We have an important job to do here’ and ‘If we don't go and film this, then who will?’ I think the American taxpayer has the right to know what's going on [overseas]. If the government wouldn't tell you, then it was our job to cover it. That kept us going.”

Meanwhile, a natural consequence of fulfilling this responsibility was that Quiñones and his crew often found themselves in dangerous situations. One such situation was on the ground in Panama in 1989, when the United States invaded the country and tried to overthrow its dictator, Manuel Noriega.

Although American journalists weren't allowed in Panama, Quiñones said he and his producer "talked their way in" without credentials, and immediately began reporting on what was going on. Soon thereafter, Noriega's forces swarmed the Marriott Hotel where Quiñones, his producer Robert Campos, and several other American journalists were staying. That night, they took roughly 40 people hostage.

"I was hiding in my room and my producer Robert was with me, and we sort of escaped that first wave of kidnappings," Quiñones said. "But the next day when we started reporting, government soldiers came back to the hotel because they knew we were all staying there. They took several more hostages, including Robert."

Quiñones said the ensuing 24 hours -- in which Campos was held in a "basement dungeon somewhere" by the Panamanian military -- were extremely scary. This panic escalated when ABC reported about the hostage situation on air and Campos's wife began calling Quiñones in search of answers. Although the producer was released after just one day, Quiñones said this experience disrupted his friend's life in a significant way.

"He was really hit hard and traumatized by it," Quiñones said. "Well, both of us were. But he specifically because they were threatening to shoot and kill him. For months, he was jogging on the beach at midnight, you know, he couldn't sleep. His mind was just scrambled by what happened to him. He eventually wound up going back and covering stories, but I could tell he was seriously affected."

On another occasion, Quiñones said his team was following a caravan of Nicaraguan soldiers through the mountains. Those soldiers, who were only a few minutes ahead of the journalists, were attacked by contra rebels, shot, and killed. Quiñones said that even from a distance, he could hear the gunfire.

"Fortunately, by the time we got there, the rebels had run," Quiñones said. "But we came upon a massacre of Nicaraguan soldiers. That obviously stays with you and shakes you to the core."

Upon returning from this trip, Quiñones said ABC sent him and his colleagues to neighboring, peaceful Costa Rica, where they spent a week trying to relax and decompress before returning to work.

“The networks cared how we were handling things and if we ever felt that this was troubling us to a point where we were getting mentally sick or exhausted, we would come out and someone else would [step] in,” Quiñones said.

For the most part, though, Quiñones said he and the others wanted to be there, in the middle of all the action and danger. He also said that unlike some of his colleagues, he’s been lucky; he’s found a way to scrape by and do his job without “much of an impact” on his mental health or any PTSD.

One impact he could relate to, however, was something he described as an “addiction” to adrenaline, or an emotional high stemming from the intensity of the journalism profession.

“When we would come back from Central America – by then we all got married and started having children – it was rather boring,” Quiñones said. “Buying groceries and mowing the lawn just didn’t compare. You almost wanted to get back into the action.

“A lot of marriages fell a part because of that, because either we had nightmares of what we had seen and the danger we were in, or because we just wanted to get back there and start reporting again on some very exciting stories,” Quiñones added.

He spoke about arguing with his spouse over things like “walking into the danger zone” or hypothetical concerns about how their children would be affected if something happened to Quiñones at work.

But as far as dealing with the trauma he witnessed internally, Quiñones described himself as “pretty strong emotionally.” He relied on various techniques to maintain a sense of stability in this sector of his life.

“I had a habit of being able to put it in compartments and justifying what I had witnessed as a consequence of war,” Quiñones said. “But there were times when we were in tears and shaken by the things we had just witnessed. What kept me going was the ability to say ‘Look, this is what is happening,’ ‘Washington, you should be paying attention to this.’ We felt a real responsibility to do that. That kept me sane.

“Yes, this is tough to handle on a personal level. It’s tough to see this. It’s tough to interview grieving widows, and mothers who have lost their loved ones to war. But if I get the story out, my camera man films it, and we’re able to broadcast it to the U.S., then we’re doing a real good here. I concentrated more on getting that story out.”

Quiñones acknowledged that in putting work above personal feelings and emotions, there’s no denying journalists can become “rather desensitized” to the things they witness. But in his mind, this was a necessary part of the job.

“How else could you cover the story?” Quiñones said. “If you fall apart every time this happened, then you wouldn’t be able to get out there and shoot the stories. We were committed to doing good journalism and this was the price we had to pay. It was crazy, but again, you’re young, you’re energetic, and sometimes you put your own emotions in the background. Does it affect you later? Yeah.”

Quiñones said that this impact surfaced differently among his colleagues. He was able to “get around most of it” unscathed. But frequently, he witnessed the trauma catch up to his friends and fellow journalists after hours, in the form of heavy drinking and alcohol dependency.

“There was a lot of alcoholism among journalists because at night, when we were done filming and the story had been fed by satellite to New York, we would go out [to] dinner and there would be a lot of drinking,” Quiñones said. “There was some real alcoholism among camera people and journalists.”

Although Quiñones managed to escape this problem, as well as any other significant personal issues associated with his job and trauma, he hasn’t been completely unaffected, either. Take the Challenger explosion in 1986 as an example. Quiñones was covering the space shuttle launch as a general assignment reporter based in Miami. He was accompanied by a cameraman, whom he had instructed to focus on passenger Christa McAuliffe’s parents. According to Quiñones, his cameraman produced images that still surface on the news to this day, whenever the Challenger explosion is mentioned.

But Quiñones doesn’t need to see a picture to remember this experience, because it’s been deeply ingrained in his mind ever since. He said he remembers seeing the happiness and excitement on the

parents' faces turn to confusion and shock when the shuttle exploded. Quiñones, who was a father himself at this point in his career, said this hit him extremely hard.

“To see the trauma in their faces...we were shaken,” Quiñones said. “I couldn’t even go on the air. I was choked up and in tears because of what I just witnessed. Every anniversary of the explosion takes me back there and my heart aches because it was so tragic.”

With that said, 69-year-old Quiñones has also been able to find some positive effects of covering difficult stories on the frontlines. When he looks at his many experiences from a different -- and slightly more optimistic -- perspective, he said that his work has “sensitized him” in a way that pushes him to fulfill his duties to the public and continue conducting meaningful projects.

“Covering these stories might have desensitized me to the actual trauma of that event, but it made me more sensitive to stories where death and destruction is involved,” Quiñones said. “I think it’s only strengthened my commitment to go to places like that and expose those things because they are horrific. When journalists expose some of this, the world might be a better place.”

(“Quiñones Interview.” Personal Interview. Feb. 9, 2022.)

Chapter 8

Case Study #7: Paul Albergo of Bloomberg Industry Group

As the executive editor of the Bloomberg Industry Group, 61-year-old Paul Albergo oversees the day-to-day operations of the newsroom, as well as the staff of writers and editors who bring that news to fruition.

Interestingly, Albergo also lives just six blocks from the Capitol, which makes him the closest editor and manager in his company to the heart of the federal government. For that reason, Albergo said his house has generally been listed as a “safe place” for reporters whenever there is something happening in the D.C. area. That held true on Jan. 6, 2021.

Albergo said his company’s parent organization, Bloomberg News, had two reporters at the Capitol that day, and both knew that if they needed to evacuate the building and trek toward safety, they could come to him. He spent most of the morning on high alert, tracking down his staff and making sure everyone was accounted for. Meanwhile, he had a front-row seat to the chaos from inside his home.

“I’m living in a place where I could hear the shouting,” Albergo said. “I could hear the helicopters [and the sirens] and [I could] see the massive presence of police in my neighborhood.”

Albergo said he kept in touch with other editors throughout the day, and because of that, he knew the two journalists from his parent organization were afraid. One of the two wanted to evacuate the Capitol, while the other didn’t feel like he was in imminent danger.

Because he was working from home this day (most Bloomberg employees worked virtually at this time because of the pandemic), however, the bulk of Albergo’s contact with reporters came in the days and weeks following the insurrection. Albergo said there were several journalists who weren’t at the Capitol on Jan. 6 but were expected to be there for various obligations later that month.

“You could see people start to get nervous from that first day, not knowing what it would mean to go back up [to the Capitol] afterwards,” Albergo said.

When journalists did venture back to the Capitol, they were greeted by several changes, including tighter security measures. Among other things, Albergo said officials introduced a military checkpoint at the entrance, which served as an extension of the normal metal detector screening process journalists were accustomed to. There was also a significant military presence outside the building, in every direction, and even surrounding the Library of Congress.

Albergo said he had “never experienced anything like that” over the course of his 35-year career. However, according to him, it was the younger journalists who were overwhelmingly affected by this change. Why? This demographic of individuals (people at the beginning of their journalism career) often spent more time in the Capitol than in their actual offices, and sometimes, their own homes. On top of that, Jan. 6 felt like uncharted territory because most of the younger workers in the Capitol had never experienced any fear going to work.

“[For] a lot of reporters, especially those earlier in their career, [this] was a really scary thing,” Albergo said. “That [traditional] process of getting screened before you got into the Capitol normally made you feel as if you were in a very safe place. Suddenly, you realized that [it] wasn’t as safe as you thought.

“For someone who’s been there a while, you understand that this building is penetrable. It’s not a fortress. It’s at risk like any other building,” added Albergo, who remembers working at the Capitol in the aftermath of the shooting of two Capitol police officers in 1998, Sept. 11, and the anthrax scare in October 2001.

“But for our younger staff, this was shocking,” Albergo continued. “So, you ended up [with] a number of people who we really needed to spend a lot of time talking to [so that we could] help them understand and at least allow them to process what happened.”

Those struggles were only heightened for journalists when combined with isolation, and according to Albergo, several of the “earlier-career people” had yet to start their own families. Thus, without a support system to go home to, many found themselves in an even more vulnerable state.

Albergo made it clear, however, that Jan. 6 wasn't the only driving force behind these problems in the newsroom. Nor was it the *initial* driving force. In fact, he described the insurrection as a "particular event" and a "moment" that journalists dealt with. Meanwhile, he emphasized that the pandemic had a more significant and drawn-out impact on those in the profession, and this impact was introduced long before Jan. 6.

"We already had the stress of working through the pandemic," Albergo said. "Most people were feeling really pushed and pulled and stressed because of [it]. [For] some people, [both] their work and personal lives [were affected and] you could just see they had reached the end of their rope. Something had to give.

"Since [they] couldn't escape the pandemic in [their] personal lives, we helped move them off the beat so that at least they were focused on topics other than the pandemic and they weren't eating, breathing, thinking [about it] 24 hours a day," Albergo added.

In addition to reassigning coverage areas, Albergo said his company expanded its mental health benefits to offer short-term counseling for those in need. Now this is a permanent part of the mental health package Bloomberg Industry Group offers its employees.

Meanwhile, Albergo and his colleagues have worked with the Employee Assistance Program to develop new strategies for journalists dealing with stress. They've also opened their offices for anyone who wants to get out of his or her apartment and safely interact with others during the COVID-19 era, when it's easy for many to feel lonely and frustrated.

Albergo mentioned that the national reckoning with race has also taken a toll on journalists. But more than anything, he said it's the nature of the profession itself, not necessarily the story, that contributes to an increase in exhaustion, stress, and anxiety among journalists.

"[For some,] it wasn't so much the topic as the pace," Albergo said. "It was less [related to] talking about the constant trauma and more that they had been in the hot seat for so long work-wise. It was unrelenting. It still hasn't let up for a lot of them.

“The news cycle is constant and just that -- just the constant pressure of news -- that can be [a trap] for people. It doesn’t just contribute to burnout, it burns you out.”

To alleviate this issue, which Albergo defines as “burnout in a profession that doesn’t have an off-switch,” Bloomberg is learning to respect and honor the boundaries of its employees. Among other things, Albergo said he and his colleagues have made an active effort to no longer send emails in the middle of the night.

“As a manager, I have to be mindful,” Albergo said. “I’ll write an email [at night] and put it in drafts, or schedule it [for the next day]. It’s a minor, but important thing.”

Additionally, the company has started to encourage journalists to take more time off. If employees refuse to do so, Albergo said they are sometimes *forced* to take a vacation. The intention behind this is helping journalists find an equilibrium between what they’re doing at work and the rest of their lives.

Regardless, a couple days off doesn’t change the fact that journalists must eventually return to the “hot seat,” which may involve varying degrees of trauma and danger. This is something Albergo said he struggles with as an editor and manager.

“It’s hard to be responsible for people who are on the frontline,” Albergo said. “If you’re asking people to go cover something live and you know that there’s a possibility they [can] be harmed, you need to be aware that you’re asking people to put themselves at risk to some extent or another. That does weigh on you.”

Albergo is especially aware that sending his reporters out to cover the news is more dangerous now than ever before, because as he puts it, there is a “significant minority” of people who view journalists “not just unfavorable, but as the enemy.”

“I think the last couple of years have been a good eye opener for all of us,” Albergo said. “Any time you enter a government building with a press pass you’re a target. You’re a target just by being a journalist.”

“Journalists were targeted on January 6, and not the kind of journalists who would normally find themselves targeted,” Albergo added. “It’s one thing to be in Syria or Afghanistan and [to] know you’re going into a hostile territory and you’re at risk. But you don’t expect to feel like you’re in a hostile territory when you’re in the Capitol, yet there are people [who now feel] that way.”

Consequently, Albergo said his company now warns its reporters to take off their press passes and credentials whenever they leave a building. Albergo refrains from walking around in public with branded apparel, something he used to do proudly years ago.

(“Albergo Interview.” Personal Interview. Feb. 14, 2022.)

Chapter 9

Analysis of Interviews

As I conducted interviews for this thesis, the journalists and experts I talked to brought up many points related to newsroom culture and other aspects of the profession that contribute, and sometimes perpetuate, the mental health struggles of those on the frontlines.

Later, when I analyzed the interviews and compared them with one another, I discovered several common themes. The journalists highlighted in this project shared similar concerns, fears, frustrations, and challenges, which may help to explain why trauma in the field has often been overlooked, downplayed, and ignored. Here are the major themes I found, as well as some of the most interesting points introduced by the individuals I spoke with:

1. **PTSD.** Of the journalists I interviewed for this thesis, all but two said they had Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Their symptoms included but are not limited to (nor are they unanimous among all the journalists) difficulty sleeping, nightmares, loss of appetite, stomach problems, panic attacks, anxiety, depression, and paranoia (particularly in large public spaces). The term “hypervigilant” surfaced frequently in the interviews, as multiple journalists said they became wary of their surroundings in the aftermath of witnessing a traumatic event. Ed Ou, for example, said he’s afraid riding the subway, when he has his back to the door in a restaurant, and when he hears a plane flying above him. Frank Thorp said he’s questioned the security of all places, including his own house and car. Kate Woodsome confused a family friend for one of the insurrectionists, months after Jan. 6, 2021, when he was teasing her and playfully trying to encourage her to go out for drinks. Similarly, Emily Cochrane had a flashback of hearing a gunshot at the Capitol while attending a musical in the aftermath of the insurrection. These are a few of several examples provided in this thesis of PTSD. The bottom line is that journalists are *not unaffected* by the things they witness.

Rather, it's more common for these experiences to resurface in the form of PTSD, and infiltrate various aspects of journalists' lives.

- 2. After experiencing trauma, many journalists are not sure they want to continue this kind of work.** I concluded each interview with the same questions: Does having experienced this traumatic event and its impact on your mental health change your feelings about journalism? Do you want to continue this work, knowing the things you now know/after seeing the things you have seen? Do you regret becoming a journalist in the first place? Overwhelmingly, the journalists I interviewed responded with "I don't know," or "That's something I'm still figuring out." Thus, while there is not enough information to answer this research question, I can conclude that experiencing trauma has created uncertainty, doubts, and confusion for some of the journalists I talked to, whenever they think about the trajectory of their careers. Some individuals, such as Kate Woodsome, completely changed their focus in journalism; Woodsome no longer covers right-wing, conservative politics. Other journalists I spoke with talked about their colleagues who dropped out of the field altogether. But mostly, the people in this study are still coming to terms with the trauma they've experienced and sorting through their emotions regarding whether they want to stay in journalism or quit.
- 3. One thing that keeps journalists in the field is that for many, reporting has become such an integral part of their identity.** Ed Ou, for instance, said he wouldn't know what to do with himself in the absence journalism. He, like many others in the field, began his career as a teenager. Thus, journalism is the only thing he's ever known or experienced. Although Ou said he has entertained the idea of changing career paths numerous times, realizing that change only ever takes him in a loop. At the end of the day, he always opts to remain a journalist because he knows he would lose "every sense of his identity" without that title and responsibility.

- 4. Other driving forces that keep journalists in the field include remembering why they got involved with this work in the first place, and their overall passion for shedding light on stories that would otherwise go untold.** Several journalists, particularly John Quiñones and Ed Ou, mentioned the “good” that can come out of journalism. They talked about utilizing journalism as a tool to enact meaningful change. Others, like Frank Thorp, spoke about the innate “drive” journalists have to be in the middle of the action and experience these things (even though they are sometimes traumatic). Thus, the answer to the question, “Do I want to continue this work?” involves weighing one’s passion and dedication to the cause of seeking and reporting the truth against one’s negative experiences and struggles with mental health because of it.
- 5. It’s ingrained in the environment of the newsroom and the culture of journalism to “push through.”** As Cochrane mentioned, journalists are conditioned to keep working regardless of the circumstances that face them. They put aside whatever is going on in their personal lives, so work is their main focus. They push through long nights with no sleep, difficult interactions with sources, and the overwhelming stress of strict deadlines. Similarly, journalists sweep any fears, concerns, or emotions under the rug while reporting so that they can fulfill the responsibilities of their job.
- 6. Normalizing the abnormal is common among journalists.** As Woodsome mentioned, journalists have a responsibility to “make order out of chaos” and to collect information while remaining “calm enough to convey what’s happening to someone else.” She said to do this job effectively, journalists normalize the abnormal to some degree, just enough to articulate it.

Ed Ou talked about this concept as well, when he mentioned how he “compartmentalizes” the things he witnesses in his mind while they happen to him. For example, when he was shot by

a projectile concussion grenade, he said his brain reacted no differently than if he had locked his keys in the car or got a flat tire. His main concern was finishing the story, and he treated being shot like a routine inconvenience.

Although normalizing the abnormal helps journalists fulfill the duties of their job during distressing situations, there is a downfall. Doing this can desensitize journalists to the violence and trauma they witness, as Woodsome pointed out. Something that may seem shocking and traumatic to a regular citizen/the reader, may not have the same effect on a journalist who has grown accustomed to witnessing varying degrees of danger and trauma.

7. **Journalists have often refrained from talking about the mental health impact of covering certain events because they want to avoid making themselves “part of the story.”** Journalists are trained to be objective listeners and reporters. They’re taught to remove any opinions and emotions from their work. It’s one of the biggest rules of journalism ethics. As a result, many journalists try to distance themselves from the stories they write and the work they produce, as much as possible. Thus, it’s no surprise that several of the journalists I interviewed said they had an “internal conflict,” and were hesitant to share how covering certain events impacted their mental health. They think that being vulnerable in this way will mean that they’re no longer “sideline reporters,” but part of the story.

They operate under a misguided assumption that journalists, unlike the people they interview and report about, cannot be the subjects of the news themselves; that the personal experiences of journalists are not as worthy or deserving of being talked about.

Another reason journalists try to avoid becoming part of the story (and thus refrain from speaking about mental health) is guilt. Ou, for example, said he feels bad “trespassing on other people’s grief and suffering.” He talked about how he didn’t feel like he had a right to

feel any emotions since the stakes of what he was covering – a protest amid a national reckoning with race – were so much higher than himself. Woodsome, too, had to remind herself that it was “OK” to feel certain emotions and be part of the story.

8. Several journalists are afraid to talk about mental health because they equate it to

“showing signs of weakness,” and fear that doing this will result in being passed over for the next assignment or some other punishment. Ou described his fear of becoming a “liability” in the newsroom as a result of being vulnerable and honest about his struggles. Woodsome mentioned that some of her female colleagues won’t talk about PTSD because they “don’t want their assignments to go to men, nor do they want to be branded as weak or incapable. Thorp said he knows of colleagues who don’t want to show a “sense of weakness” and “get pulled” from stories. Similarly, Sachs mentioned that a prevalent worry in the minds of reporters is the following: “If I speak up, what will be the consequences? What is going to come back at me?”

9. Journalists do not have the unanimous support, or respect, of the public. To some,

journalists are the “enemy.” In recent years/decades, this has made their job increasingly difficult. Williams mentioned that there is a “growing population that generally doesn’t like the media.” Similarly, Albergo described a “significant minority” of people who view journalists “not just as unfavorable, but as the enemy.” They aren’t the only two people who share this opinion. At the height of the Trump administration, journalists and the media were under attack like never before. “Fake news” became a popular rallying cry that united millions of people and threatened to damage the reputation of the journalism profession. A mistrust and disgust of the media continues to this day, and a surge in social media/technology has made that harder to ignore. People find strength in anonymity and hiding behind a screen; they spew hatred and threats at journalists online. People frequently

engage in this type of behavior, highlighting the extent of opposition journalists face in the modern world.

10. Modern-day journalists have a target on their back, simply because they are journalists.

Several of the people I interviewed in this study talked about the backlash they received upon revealing that they were a journalist/associated with a news organization. Woodsome, for example, was swarmed by a mob of Trump supporters after she told them she worked for the Washington Post. Thorp nearly got into an altercation with a rioter at the Capitol because he wouldn't answer the question, "Who are you with?" Ou said that when he thinks back to the day he was shot by a projectile concussion grenade while covering Black Lives Matter protests, he can't think of anything he did wrong "other than exist as a journalist."

Likewise, Albergo mentioned he no longer wears branded clothing from his news organization, because he doesn't want to attract attention to himself. He also said that the journalists who work for him are instructed to take off their press passes as soon as the workday is over, or whenever they are out in public, as a precaution.

The fact is that being a journalist has certain implications in the modern world. While working for a news organization used to be accompanied by certain privileges and protections, that's not necessarily the case today. Identifying oneself as a journalist can be dangerous; it can put a target on one's back. It can be met with hostility, anger, and violence. This was particularly true for those journalists inside the Capitol on Jan. 6, and for journalists like Ou, who believe they were intentionally targeted by police.

11. Mental health struggles are only heightened for journalists when combined with isolation, and for this reason, younger journalists are the most vulnerable demographic.

As Albergo mentioned, a lot of journalists at the beginning of their careers have yet to start their own families. Many live alone, and/or have moved away from their families to find a job in a competitive market. Because of this, younger journalists tend to be more isolated than older, more experienced journalists. They have a smaller support system and network in their direct radius, which can cause feelings of loneliness to surface more frequently and make it harder to overcome mental health struggles.

- 12. Burnout is common in this profession because there is no “off switch.”** As mentioned before, journalists operate around the clock and the news is relentless. It’s hard for those in the field to separate themselves from their work because they constantly have access to the news on their phones, tablets, and computers. They are also easily accessible at all times in the eyes/minds of employers. That’s why, as Albergo said, it’s become increasingly important for news organizations to both learn and practice respecting the boundaries of their employees.
- 13. Albergo also mentioned, that as an editor, it is difficult to be responsible for people on the frontlines.** He knows that when he sends journalists out on an assignment, he is sometimes asking them to take a risk and put themselves in harm’s way. This weighs on an editor, just like being exposed to trauma weighs on the journalist.
- 14. Jan. 6, 2021 was more difficult than other traumatic events for some journalists to process, because of the way it’s been politicized.** Thorp talked about how many people struggled to overcome the trauma from Jan. 6, because there is an entire “side” or group of individuals downplaying what happened. (There are also individuals who support what happened, and to this day believe that the rioters are on the right side of history.) In comparison, whenever Thorp’s covered other major events – like the earthquake in Haiti – there was no “other side” denying that what happened was horrific and traumatic.

That's what made Jan. 6 and its aftermath even more isolating for journalists (and the politicians, Capitol staff members, etc.). Instead of having everybody rally in support of them, they had people saying that what they witnessed "wasn't that bad." This type of gaslighting only adds layers to the trauma and elongates the time it takes to process it.

Chapter 10

Recommendations

My interviews with traumatized journalists lead me to offer several recommendations for news organizations and individuals with administrative positions in the field, as well as the general public.

The first recommendation is to continue the conversation about journalism and trauma. This problem is not new. It has existed equally as long as the journalism profession. However, it wasn't until recently that journalists started to overcome stigmas about mental health in the field and talk about their struggles with trauma. Now, it's up to news organizations and networks to listen to what journalists have to say and participate in the dialogue alongside them.

This conversation is especially urgent because of the ongoing global pandemic, which has only exacerbated the problems many journalists face. As such, mental health and trauma need to be at the forefront of every discussion that takes place in the newsroom, and this can't wait another second.

My second recommendation is that news organizations should start to offer more resources to journalists, so that they can learn to navigate the aftermath of witnessing and reporting traumatic experiences. Ideally, newsrooms should hire their own staff of therapists and psychologists (including those trained in EMDR) to provide on-site counseling to journalists any day of the week, at no cost to the employee. If that is not feasible, newsroom managers should call in therapists to counsel newswriters when they return from the field after a harrowing experience.

At the very least, employers should regularly schedule meetings with journalists upon completion of their assignments. The purpose of these meetings would be to check in on the

journalist and ask how he or she is doing. It's at these meetings that journalists can mention any struggles they may have. Then, once the employer is made aware of a problem, a plan can be created to help solve it. This plan may involve therapy (either on-site or elsewhere in a private practice), time off from work, altering assignments/changing someone's focus as far as coverage goes, or connecting journalists with a colleague who has been through something similar and can provide comfort and guidance (like a peer-mentorship program).

Another thing employers should keep in mind is that journalists need space and separation from their work when they go home each day. Thus, as Albergo mentioned, it's important for news organizations to respect that boundary. Employers should refrain from sending emails or making phone calls to journalists late at night – unless something happens that demands immediate news coverage. They should also refrain from assigning too much work to journalists. These things are important in a profession that doesn't have an off switch, to help avoid burnout.

My final recommendation is for the public. Citizens should remember that journalists are human beings. The work they do is necessary to uphold democracy and hold powerful people, figures, and institutions accountable. Their work also unveils and sheds light on information citizens need to make important decisions about their lives and communities. What's more, when journalists cover stories, they frequently put themselves in risky and dangerous situations so they can fulfill this duty to the public, and to the people. Journalists are not the enemy, and they shouldn't be treated as such. Nor should they be targeted simply because of their job title.

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ONWARD STATE STUDENT JOURNALIST, State College Pa. 2/2019-Present

News Editor, Associate Editor, Social Media Team Member, Staff Writer

Generated articles to inform Penn State students about campus news and events. Served as the beat writer for student government, a local “small business spotlight” series, and Penn State women’s basketball and soccer. Trained incoming staff members, edited articles nightly. Operated Twitter account and created tweets for the site’s 156.8K followers.

WEGMANS FOOD MARKETS, Johnson City, NY 12/2015-6/2021

- Started as a cashier at the age of fifteen. Interacted with hundreds of customers during high traffic hours and developed strong interpersonal and conversational skills through these constant interactions.
- Transferred to the Meat/Ready to Cook Department in 2018 and was one of only a few women working in this part of the store. Prepared “ready-to-go” meals and acquired culinary skills and knowledge.
- Also worked in the Bakery’s “Create-a-Cake” Department from March 2020-2021. Prepared and decorated specialty cakes and deserts.
- Provided quality customer and maintained high sales for each department.
- Recipient of the Wegman’s Scholarship

W.C. CLARKE’S COFFEE ROASTERS & CHEESE SHOPPE, State College, PA 5/2021-Present

- Prepared specialty coffee drinks and orders for shipping. Provided quality customer service.
- Operated Instagram account and uploaded new stories and photographs daily to increase business.

EMPLOYEE/SOCIAL MEDIA MANAGER -- SCOOPY DOOBY ICE CREAM, Binghamton, NY

- Worked as summer employee. Optimized social media accounts to increase business. Designed advertisements and graphics for events, including a drive-in movie series.

Waitress - American Ale House Restaurant, State College, Pa. 5/2021-Present

Penn State Food Services –Dining Commons, University Park, Pa. 2/2020-1/2021

Greater Binghamton Development Intern, Binghamton, NY Summer/School Breaks 2018-2020