

TRAUMA LITERACY INCLUSION IN JOURNALISM CURRICULUM: A PERCEPTION ANALYSIS OF EDUCATORS IN RIVERS STATE

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ABSTRACT

In the past few years, there has been a growing call for the inclusion of trauma literacy course(s) in the curriculum of journalism training institutions in Nigeria. The proponents of this call hold the view that many journalists leave the university or other training institutions with almost no knowledge of how to approach the coverage of events that have trauma scenes and extreme danger. This study therefore sought to find out the opinions of journalism educators in Rivers State-based universities and polytechnics concerning the call to include trauma-based contents in the curriculum of journalism studies. The study adopted by qualitative and quantitative methods by using questionnaire and interviews to elicit responses. The total enumeration sampling technique was used to determine the sample size while the simple percentage count template and the Miles and Huberman's method were used for analysis. The study found that trauma literacy is not distinctly taught in journalism schools, and that students leave school without being equipped with the skills to cover trauma-laden incidents. The study recommended that trauma literacy courses should be designed and included in journalism curriculum.

Keywords: Curriculum, Journalism, Literacy, Trauma

INTRODUCTION

Journalists are first-line responders to crises and other trauma-laden incidents such as accidents, arson, inter-gang clashes, oil pipe explosion, armed robbery, murder among others that occur in human society from time to time. As a way of equipping training journalists for the tasks ahead, some stakeholders are calling for the inclusion of trauma literacy in journalism education curriculum. The argument is that not being taught trauma reporting skills while on training has the likelihood of making journalists to lack adequate skills to cover such incidents and the strategies to cope with the resultant emotional stress. According to Barnes (2015) training journalists are supposed to be equipped with the relevant knowledge and trauma management skills to approach their jobs in order to handle the mental health impacts of reporting traumatic events.

Even as journalism schools are increasingly recognizing this need, lack of willingness, fund and inability of relevant authorities to heed the call have plagued the effective inclusion of trauma literacy in the curriculum of universities and other journalism training institutions. This has left many journalists to learn on the job, instead of leaving the school industry-ready. Also they naturally develop stress coping strategies as they grow in the field of news coverage. This situation has also left many journalists without the requisite skills to

approach trauma scenes, interview sources such as survivors or their relatives, and to objectively report the story without emotional attachments.

Chermak (1995) writes that many reporters have left the profession after being assigned to cover accidents, fire incidents, murder and other trauma occurrences due to lack of requisite skills and inability to withstand the emotional torture associated with such task. In Rivers State, all public tertiary institutions such as the Rivers State University, University of Port Harcourt, Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Rivers State Polytechnic and Captain Elechi Amadi Polytechnic all offer degrees and Diplomas in journalism related courses but do not teach courses that expose students to trauma reporting. This does not sit well with the reasoning of Simpson, Cote and Kay (2002) who hold that journalists must be equipped in order to stay sane and able to correctly relate what they observed in the field to the public, and that not being equipped to face the mental or emotional stress of covering trauma incidents remains a major challenge to the profession.

Statement of Problem

Just like medicine, emergency service departments and social works, journalists are first-line responders to incidents that portray extreme danger and distress. In their study, Buchanan and Keats (2011) reported that the coverage of trauma incidents is facing severe disinterest because many reporters ventured into it untrained and unprepared. According to them, trauma news reporting will witness dearth of manpower in the near future if concerted efforts are not made to train upcoming reporters on reportorial skills and stress coping strategies in handling trauma occurrences.

In his study on stress coping techniques by reporters covering cult-related killings in the South-South Region of Nigeria, Okeh (2024) reported that all the journalists that responded to the study did not learn about trauma literacy or trauma reporting while in school, Okeh further reported that the respondents had no knowledge of how to cope with the emotional stress of covering incidents that portray extreme danger.

Also, the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma (2020) highlighted that trauma literacy enhances reporting ethics, accuracy, and journalist resilience in covering horror and extreme danger. Within the Nigerian context, Ekeanyanwu and Obot (2019) argue that journalism education must evolve to reflect societal challenges, including mental health and trauma exposure.

From the studies above, it is obvious that there is paucity of knowledge about trauma Journalism, so journalism studies will be incomplete if the person in the field is not adequately equipped with the skills to face trauma situations, this is because an unequipped reporter is likely to collapse into Post-traumatic Stress Disorder while on duty, or re-traumatise the victim while trying to undertake their duties. This is a problem that requires attention in order to retain journalism's stamp of quality.

Aim and Objectives

The study generally sought to find out the views of journalism educators concerning the inclusion of trauma literacy in journalism curriculum. Specifically, the study sought to:

1. Determine if journalism educators in Rivers State believe in the inclusion of trauma literacy in journalism education curriculum

2. Find out the views of journalism educators on the efficacy trauma literacy courses in equipping training journalists with the skills to cover trauma occurrences
3. Ascertain the challenges faced by journalism educators in including trauma literacy in training curriculum.

Research Questions

Accordingly, the study asked the following questions.

1. Do Journalism educators in Rivers State believe that trauma literacy courses should be included in journalism curriculum?
2. In what ways can trauma literacy courses equip student journalists with the skills to cover trauma occurrences and to cope with the associated emotional stress?
3. What are the challenges being faced by educators in including trauma literacy in Journalism curriculum?

Literature Review

The Journalist, Trauma Literacy and Stress Coping Strategies

Covering assignments that have traumatic incidents is hugely central to the job of a journalist. This is because violent crimes, natural disasters, and tragic personal struggles are newsworthy events that have remained a part of human society from time immemorial. In his study, *Trauma Literacy and Stress Coping Strategies by Journalists in South-South Nigeria*, Okeh (2024) associated trauma coverage with higher rates of posttraumatic stress disorder, burnout, and other traumatic stress symptoms that reporters face.

In the study that surveyed the opinions of selected field reporters in the region, Okeh reported that all the journalists that participated in the study did not know about trauma literacy while in the university, polytechnic or other journalism training institutions, but were confronted with the coverage of trauma events when they began their careers in journalism. Schmickle (2007) says that higher journalism education programmes should endeavour to prepare reporters for covering trauma. Journalists need to be equipped with the awareness of the potential effects of trauma and adaptive coping mechanisms.

A journalist who got some training in covering trauma events at college will approach the field prepared, and will perform better when confronted with a fatal accident story where they may need to follow the remains of the victims until they are confirmed dead by a medical doctor or put in the morgue(p192).

Browne, Evangeli and Greenberg (2012) stated that because many journalists took up trauma events reportage without being technically equipped, they naturally devised ways of coping after exposure to trauma scenes. They listed journalists' reactions to trauma event to include not being able to consume meat after seeing a battered accident victim, unable to sleep after covering a bloody community clash, feeling of anxiety after exposure to cult related clash among others.

Browne et.al further stated that to cope with the stress associated with exposure to trauma events, some journalists visit psychiatrists or counselors, take sleeping pills to overcome the resultant anxiety, while some naturally process it out and move on with their jobs.

Journalists covering traumatic events can practice self-care, engage in cathartic activities, and seek professional help when necessary. They can also maintain routine exercise, and

discuss their experience with colleagues or trusted individuals to ensure emotional balance and stability.

Buchanan and Keats (2011) listed self-care measures such as sleep prioritisation, physical activities, hiatus from work and proper relaxation as strategies that journalists can adopt to cope with the stress of being exposed to trauma scenes while carrying out their duties.

Journalists who are exposed to trauma scenes should prioritise sleep and nutrition by ensuring adequate sleep and healthy eating habits to support their physical and mental well-being. Engaging in physical activities such as walking or stretching, can help release endorphins and reduce stress (p.126).

According to Dufresne (2004), after covering trauma scenes and events with sights of bloodshed and extreme danger, the Journalist should find time for relaxation. They can also indulge in deep meditation or listen to music to help calm their mind and body. Taking a few days off the work environment and routine, and focusing on newer events through deep breathing and meditation can also be of great help in reducing anxiety and increasing self-awareness.

Trauma Literacy and Journalism Education

Journalism students require adequate exposure and skills in traumatic events reportage during their training and even when they begin their careers.

Incorporating trauma literacy into the curriculum of universities and other training institutions has become critical to turning out industry-ready professionals that are equipped enough for trauma reportage.

Dworznik and Grubb (2007) hold the opinion that such inclusion would enable journalists to imbibe the skills to report sensitively, and in line with journalism ethics. According to them, with such inclusion, journalists will understand the psychological impact of trauma on victims, sources, the medium and the reporter.

Drummond (2004) states that the inclusion of trauma literacy has faced some barriers such as lack of resources, inadequate manpower, accreditation challenge, guidelines for journalism educators, and lack of understanding of how to address potential student distress.

Beam and Sprat (2009) also state that several factors challenge the including trauma literacy in journalism curriculum.

They listed perceived lack of specialised knowledge and resources among educators, concerns about time constraints and the complexity of the topic, lack of student interest, knowledge and resources as some of such factors.

Hopper and Huxford (2017) assert that emotion instruction inclusion in journalism courses had suffered setback because even journalism educators themselves have shown obvious lack of the specialised knowledge and resources to effectively teach trauma-related content. This has hugely impacted on their ability to prepare students for the risks of trauma exposure when they finally get into the field.

Hopper and Huxford listed time constraints and curriculum overload as barriers to the inclusion of trauma literacy in journalism curriculum, saying that integrating trauma literacy into an already crowded curriculum can be difficult due to time constraints and the need to cover other critical topics.

Also, some educators view trauma and its relatedness with journalism practice as a complex and potentially difficult topic to teach, especially at the introductory level. Some educators have also expressed concerns over student's lack of interest in trauma-related reportage or even pursuing their careers in trauma journalism. Many educators may also lack training in teaching trauma-related topics, making it challenging for them to handle potential consequences and ensure responsible instruction (Figley, 1995).

Trauma Literacy and Industry Realities

The non-inclusion of trauma literacy in the journalism curriculum of many universities and other training institutions have left the industry with reporters that are not equipped to face the professional and emotional realities of covering trauma events. The implication of this to the career, health of the reporter, content delivery and adherence to professional ethics are many. Some experts agree that a good understanding of someone who has experienced trauma will enhance the quality of reporting. They also agree that trauma awareness will not only facilitate healthier interactions between reporters and interviewees, but also allow newsmakers to tell more complex and impactful stories.

Aldwin and Revenson (1987) said that many journalists who did not acquire the basic skills to cover and report trauma, are bereft of ideas on the ethical requirements to properly deliver publishable reports to their editors.

Covering and reporting trauma can raise ethical questions about sensitivity to survivors, respect to their privacy, and re-traumatisation, which may require additional training and resources. Both media experts and scholars have opined that lack of trauma literacy in journalism can lead to several negative consequences and impacts on not only the journalists, but their sources too. This lack of preparedness can make the Journalist to feel empty and ill-equipped to handle the challenges of covering trauma because they lack the necessary skills to interview survivors, provide support, and manage the emotional toll.

Barns (2015) says that the situation can lead to inappropriate questioning. A situation where reporters may ask questions that are too intrusive without considering the survivor's well-being.

Backholm and Björkqvist (2012) said that not equipping journalists with trauma literacy has the tendency to result in ill-informed and insensitive reporting, re-traumatisation of survivors and emotional distress on the journalist.

It can also lead to increased burnout and mental health challenges for the reporters because they are left to navigate the complexities of reporting on traumatic events without adequate support or training. Journalists that lack trauma literacy may ask insensitive or inappropriate questions, and end up re-traumatising the victim or exacerbate existing trauma in survivors. It can lead to reduced trust as survivors may feel disrespected or unheard, leading to decreased trust in journalists and potentially reluctance to participate in future reporting (p.178).

Theoretical Thrust Emotional Processing Theory

This study is anchored on the Emotional Processing Theory (ETP) as espoused by Fao and Kozak (1996). The theory is defined as the modification of memory structures that underlie emotions. Fao and Kozak hold the view that EPT is used as an organisational framework to manage responses to trauma. The theory highlights the activating and changing

pathological trauma-related responses and increasing adaptive responses across cognitive emotional, behavioral and psychological domains.

In discussing the emotional processing theory, Gaines (2018) holds that emotional processing happens when people experience an emotionally distressing event, and they are able to cope with such experience over time, especially to the extent that newer experiences can occur whether stressing or not. Gaines further asserts that basically every human has encountered fear, extreme distress, sadness, anxiety and depression in one way or the other, but that such experiences are temporary for a large number of people because they certainly 'process themselves out with time'(p.67).

Gaines also asserts that it is not the lack of emotional processing abilities that keeps people wallowing in anxiety or fear following their exposure to horror or extreme danger, but that there is a cognitive part to emotional processing that enables humans to think about the experience or event over time. The import of Gaines assertion is that the inability to process emotion and cope with the resultant stress only comes from an individual's inability to successfully complete the thought process about a traumatic event which is crucial towards resolving the distress associated with exposure to trauma.

Empirical Review

Simpson and Bruggs (1999) undertook a study on trauma and the journalist's mental health, in the survey, they found out that stress is a critical part of trauma reportage which the journalist must face on the line of duty. The researchers recommended that journalists should endeavour not to suppress or ignore their emotions but to allow themselves to feel and pass through the experience. In the study which surveyed the opinion of 400 journalists, they further held that emotional processing through sharing of experiences and feelings with trusted colleagues, friends, or family members, writing down experiences, and self-expression through creative outlets can help release pent-up emotions.

In 2005, Feinstein and Nicolson took a look at the challenges of trauma reportage inclusion in journalism curriculum, the study identified accreditation requirements as another challenge to the inculcation of trauma literacy in journalism courses. According to the study, courses can only be included when they have been certified necessary by the regulating bodies. So it may not be the sole responsibility of the institution to decide. The study recommended that authorities that handle accreditation should consider trauma literacy courses as critical necessities to certify an institution worthy of training journalists.

Also, Ammend, Kay and Reilly in 2012), in their study on the dangers of trauma literacy non-inclusion in journalism curriculum, reported that ill-informed or insensitive reporting can increase anxiety, fear, and other emotional distress in survivors. They hold that even the journalist can collapse into secondary trauma, because covering traumatic events can affect the journalist's mental and emotional well-being. The researchers recommended that journalists should have a good knowledge of trauma reporting skills and stress coping strategies before being deployed to cover trauma incidents.

Method

The study adopted Survey design using both quantitative and qualitative approaches such as questionnaire and interviews to obtain data. A sample size of 159 respondents was arrived at using Census otherwise referred to as Total Enumeration Sampling, the implication is that every communication teacher in the five public higher institutions in Rivers State was

part of the study. Also five participants who were either deans of faculties or Heads of Department were chosen purposively for interviews. The sample size is as shown below.

Sample Table

| S/N | Institution | No of Educators | Heads of Dept/Deans |
|-----|--------------|-----------------|---------------------|
| 1. | IAUE | 58 | 1 |
| 2. | RSU | 44 | 1 |
| 3. | UNIPOINT | 15 | 1 |
| 4. | CEAP | 15 | 1 |
| 5. | RIVPOLY | 10 | 1 |
| | Total | 159 | 5 |

The data that emerged from the streams of population came in the form of texts and figures. Figures were analysed using the Simple Percentage Count while textual data were analysed using the Glasser and Strauss thematic template which enabled the researchers to indulge in data familiarisation through iterative readings, identify initial codes, group codes into themes in order to gain in-depth insights into the study.

Data Presentation

Respondents' opinion on trauma literacy inclusion in journalism curriculum

| S/N | Responses | No. of Respondents' | Percentage |
|-----|---|---------------------|------------|
| 1. | Trauma literacy should be included | 150 | 95 |
| 2. | trauma literacy should not be included | 0 | 0 |
| 3. | Trauma literacy does not require inclusion in curriculum to be taught | 9 | 5 |
| | Total | 159 | 100 |

Source: Field Survey, 2025

The table shows that majorly of the respondents believe that trauma literacy should be included in journalism curriculum.

Participants' opinion on trauma literacy inclusion in journalism curriculum

| S/N | Participants | Responses | Analysis |
|-----|---------------|---|--|
| 1. | Participant 1 | It is important to include trauma literacy in journalism curriculum | The participants are of the opinion that trauma literacy courses should be included in journalism education curriculum in Nigeria. |
| 2. | Participant 2 | Trauma literacy needs to be made part of journalism curriculum. | |
| 3. | Participant 3 | Add trauma literacy to journalism curriculum | |
| 4. | Participant 4 | Trauma literacy should be included in journalism curriculum. | |

| | | | |
|----|---------------|---|--|
| 5. | Participant 5 | There is need to add trauma literacy the journalism studies courses | |
|----|---------------|---|--|

Source: Interview, December, 2025

Respondents' opinions on the efficacy of trauma literacy to equip training journalists with coverage and stress coping skills.

Respondents' opinion on the efficacy of trauma literacy to equip training journalists with coverage and stress coping skills

| S/N | Responses | No. of Respondents' | Percentage |
|-----|--|---------------------|------------|
| 1. | Will be very effective for coverage skills | 80 | 51 |
| 2. | Will not be effective for coverage skills | 0 | 0 |
| 3. | Will provide stress coping skills | 79 | 49 |
| 4. | Will not provide stress coping skills | 0 | 0 |
| | Total | 159 | 100 |

Source: Field Survey, 2025

According the table, a large portion of the respondents believe that trauma literacy inclusion in journalism curriculum will equip the training journalist with the skills to cover trauma incidents, and cope with the resultant emotional stress.

Participants views on the efficacy of using trauma literacy to equip training journalists with coverage and stress coping skills

| S/N | Participants | Responses | Analysis |
|-----|---------------|---|--|
| 1. | Participant 1 | Trauma literacy will equip training journalists with the skills to report and cope with the resultant stress. | The participants all agree that trauma literacy inclusion in journalism curriculum will make the training journalist to be industry ready, and equipped with both coverage and stress coping skills. |
| 2. | Participant 2 | Learning how to cover trauma while in training is critical to how the reporter will handle trauma stories after graduation. | |
| 3. | Participant 3 | Making trauma literacy a part of journalism curriculum will provide stress coping skills for the reporter | |
| 4. | Participant 4 | It is an effective step towards equipping the reporters for the tasks ahead. | |

| | | | |
|----|---------------|---|--|
| 5. | Participant 5 | Trauma literacy will make the training reporter to come out industry ready. | |
|----|---------------|---|--|

Source: Interview, December, 2025

Respondents' view on the challenges of trauma literacy inclusion in journalism curriculum

| S/N | Responses | No. of Respondents' | Percentage |
|-----|---|---------------------|------------|
| 1. | Unwillingness of curriculum certifiers | 120 | 76 |
| 2. | Lack of proactive-ness by training institutions | 30 | 19 |
| 3. | Lack of time and resources | 9 | 5 |
| | Total | 159 | 100 |

Source: Field Survey, 2025

From the table above, a large number of the respondents are of the view that unwillingness by curriculum certifying authorities, lack of proactive-ness by educators, and lack of time and resources are the major barriers to trauma literacy inclusion in journalism curriculum.

Participants' view on challenges of trauma literacy inclusion in journalism curriculum

| S/N | Participants | Responses | Analysis |
|-----|---------------|---|---|
| 1. | Participant 1 | Curriculum handlers are the major barriers | The participants are of the view that a set of factors such as curriculum handlers, certifiers, educators, lack of proactive-ness and lack of focus, time and resources are the major barriers to trauma literacy inclusion in journalism curriculum. |
| 2. | Participant 2 | The bodies that certify curriculum are unwilling to act | |
| 3. | Participant 3 | Journalism educators are not very proactive about the move to include trauma literacy in the curriculum | |
| 4. | Participant 4 | Lack of time and resources. | |
| 5. | Participant 5 | Lack of focus and commitment to strengthen journalism training. | |

Source: Interview: December, 2025

Findings and Results

The data that emerged from the field showed that the clamour for trauma literacy inclusion in journalism curriculum in Nigeria is gaining momentum. The study found that a majority of the journalism educators that participated in the study hold the opinion that trauma literacy courses should be thought in journalism schools, and that doing so would equip the student journalists with requisite skills to cover trauma incidents and muster the strategies to cope with resultant emotional stress. This finding is in alliance with the position of Simpson and Bruggs (1999). According to them, equipping the journalist with the skills to reports trauma and cope with the attendant stress should be the duty of the training institutions. In the view of Simpson and Bruggs, skills and stress coping strategies are critical parts of trauma reportage which the journalist must be equipped with before accepting to hit the news beat.

The study further found that not being equipped with the skills to cover trauma-laden incidents can lead a journalist to either misinform the public, get traumatised or re-traumatise the victim. Ammend, Kay and Reilly (2012) had a similar view in their study where they reported that ill-informed or insensitive reporting can increase anxiety, fear, and other emotional distress in survivors, members of the public or the reporter.

The study saw, time, overload, unwillingness by curriculum certifiers, lack of proactive-ness by educators and dearth of resources as the major challenges facing trauma literacy inclusion in journalism curriculum. These findings had earlier found expression by Hopper and Huxford (2017). In their opinion, time constraints and curriculum overload are barriers to the inclusion of trauma literacy in journalism curriculum, this is because integrating trauma literacy into an already crowded curriculum can be difficult due to time constraints and the need to cover other critical topics.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Just like other professionals, journalists are humans, they do not have immunity over the emotional effects of their job. As frontline responders to traumatic news events such as plane crashes, massacre, terrorist attacks, natural disasters and bombings, the society depends on them for credible reports about trauma incidents.

However, the tendency to misrepresent facts, experience anxiety, emotional imbalance and other job and stress related conditions are possible if the journalist did not go into the job industry-ready.

From the findings of the study, a correlation exists between trauma literacy, reporting and post-traumatic stress disorders. Traumatic events to which practising journalists are subjected to, are not only limited to kidnappings, armed robberies, killings, assassinations, but are equally made to experience traumatic events such as beating and harassment by security operatives, maiming, enforced disappearance and imprisonment.

More than other news genres, trauma news events attract media attention and reportage because of their importance to policy makers and the general public. So the training of experts to handle this genre of journalism should be treated with the importance it deserves.

Journalists as first arrivals to scenes of crises and disasters, need to recognise the psychological implications of trauma literacy to their job and overall wellbeing. This is because no amount of detachment from the report or what is reported upon, can make the journalist immune to emotional stress.

Some of the symptoms that journalists feel after exposure to trauma events such as guilt, compassion fatigue, burnout, avoidance, helplessness, mental health breakdowns, depression, flashbacks, intrusive feeling, increased arousal, desensitization or numbing, pose negative impacts on their job and health.

Based on the foregoing, the study recommends as follows:

1. More concerted efforts should be made to inculcate trauma literacy in the curriculum of journalism education in Nigeria.
2. Journalism education curriculum designers should create trauma-focused courses to provide future journalists with training in trauma reporting, and how to interact with victims to aid in-victim healing.
3. Training journalists should be equipped with the necessary skills to undertake sensitive and ethics-driven reportage of extreme danger events.
4. Journalism educators should redefine the objectivity norm to ensure that trauma reportage focuses on the incident with complete emotional detachment of the reporter.
5. The curriculum of journalism institutions should offer courses that will equip the training journalists with stress coping strategies in covering traumatic events.
6. Media companies should provide workplace support to journalists assigned to beats that generate trauma stories.

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