# ‘Churn and burn’: a snapshot of the risk and impact of traumatic assignments on journalists in Australia

**by**

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A thesis submitted for the degree of

**Doctor of Philosophy**

UniSA Creative



University of
South Australia

November 2022

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## Glossary

**death knock:** A particularly challenging type of interview which requires a journalist to seek permission and interview those who are recently bereaved, especially in sudden, unexpected or violent circumstances.

**impact:** The influence of a phenomenon; in the case of this research, the influence or impression created on the journalist of trauma in journalism, as opposed to its effect, or the consequence of that influence. One of several news values describing the result or consequences of an event; also known as the news value of Consequence, Significance or Magnitude.

**main survey question:** The specific question posed in the quantitative component of this research to determine respondents' experiences of trauma on the road, in other words survey Question B01: "Have you covered or witnessed a traumatic event as part of your job? (That is, an event that you found traumatic, as opposed to whether someone else would have found it traumatic or whether it was considered traumatic generally)".

**newsroom leadership:** An umbrella term for management or non-reporting roles requiring supervision of reporters in Australian newsrooms. This can include job titles such as chief-of-staff, duty editor, day editor, shift editor and newsroom manager, as well as other senior editorial or managerial roles.

**RQ** (Research Question): A specific issue this research intends to investigate (Campitelli 2018).

**Story Category:** The classification of news stories employed in the Story Category Matrix to help determine the impact covering certain stories has on a journalist. There are four story categories, from Story Category 1 through to Story Category 4.

**Story Category Matrix:** A system of classifying the types of stories a journalist might cover over the course of a career comprising four story categories coded by their prevalence in terms of exposure, news values and scale. The impact these stories have on journalists is part of the subject of this research. See Appendix B for example.

**trauma:** events or experiences that are shocking and overwhelming, typically involving major threat to the physical, emotional, or psychological safety and well-being of the individual victim(s) and loved ones and friends (as well as to others) (APA 2017).

## Content warnings

This thesis contains content of a highly sensitive nature, including graphic references to topics such as sexual abuse, self-harm and violence.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are advised this work also contains references to, and the names of, Indigenous persons who are deceased.

## Abstract

Working in contemporary journalism, reporters often need to interview and sometimes file their stories for an assignment from different locations. In undertaking this work, they are considered to be “on the road”. While reporting on the road often includes exposure to traumatic events such as accidents, natural disasters and crimes, not much is known about the types of stories likely to cause trauma for journalists. The personal impact of a journalist’s work, especially if that work involves a traumatic or stressful assignment, remains under-researched in this country. While the issue of workplace-related trauma has become more widely acknowledged and managed in industries such as emergency services in recent years, few researchers have examined journalists’ responses to trauma on the road in Australia.

In the United States and Europe, a body of knowledge has developed over the past two decades to indicate that traumatic assignments can, and do, have a substantial effect on reporters. The accumulation of this knowledge has accelerated with a greater understanding of the application of emotional labour in journalism. Yet, despite the concerns of Australian researchers as far back as the 1990s, the trauma experienced by journalists from covering certain assignments remains under-researched in this country.

This research investigates the risk posed by, and traumatic impact on Australian journalists of, certain stories resulting from their assignments when they are on the road. The impact of the assignment on the journalist is examined, regardless of the type of assignment, while also investigating the risk of exposure to an experience of trauma. Using a mixed methods approach, the study employs data from an online survey and semi-structured interviews on the types of stories journalists find traumatic and their estimation of their exposure to such stories during their careers. Using a classification matrix, the data is coded into four levels of story significance, using the news values of Consequence, Conflict and Currency. No known study has connected news values with qualitative and quantitative data on the risk of exposure and impact of journalism trauma. The data derived from the qualitative component of the research provides rich insights into the experiences of journalists working on the road, which are considered and analysed using the framework of practice theory in journalism. This concept allows examination of journalism as a unique, specialised practice through its distinct ideology, culture and identity.

In providing detailed data about the types and characteristics of assignments that might pose greater risk of developing trauma symptoms, the study informs the practice of journalism. Significantly, identification of these stories may provide greater understanding of the

conditions preceding Australian journalists' experience of trauma and the extent to which this happens. This understanding, in turn, will allow journalism educators and the industry to better prepare journalists for traumatic assignments and assist them to receive adequate and timely support. Additionally, greater support for affected journalists is likely to facilitate greater community benefit through more nuanced, sensitive reporting. It will also provide direction for further research.

## Declaration

This thesis presents work carried out by myself and does not incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; to the best of my knowledge it does not contain any materials previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text; and all substantive contributions by others to the work presented, including jointly authored publications, are clearly acknowledged.



Sharon Smith 4 November 2022

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## Acknowledgements

The period of my PhD candidature has been among the most tumultuous of my life—marked by fire, flood, plague, death, marriage, potentially fatal illness, moving interstate and moving house (twice). I couldn't have done it without my husband, Brad, whose idea it was that the time was right for this PhD. Your belief in me has sustained me when I didn't believe in myself, and you put up with me hiding in the Mountains in trackpants and Ugg boots to write it way longer than I expected.

Thanks also to my supervisors, Kerry Green and Collette Snowden. You are such an extraordinary pair and your confidence in me has also sustained me through more than a little self-doubt. Your complementary skillset and personalities were just what I needed. Thank you for going above and beyond the call of duty for me, and for your patience. I will always be grateful. Thanks also to Cait McMahon, whose support and advice were also invaluable.

Thanks to my "Esther girls", who have stood by me though all the calamities listed above.

Honour and gratitude also go to my late parents, Tom and June Smith. I am the daughter of a university maintenance man who would sneak into air-conditioned lecture theatres on a hot day for a nap, and a woman who never got to go to high school. This makes me what's known as "first in family" in university terms. My parents gave me a love for words, a love for justice and an inquiring mind that have prepared and sustained me for this work.

Thanks and admiration go to all of the people who took part in this research, for your bravery and your candour. This work is for every journo who has suffered in silence, paid too high a price for the job they love or given up because it's all too much, and for every student journo who needs to know what the job can be like and how to arm themselves so they can do it healthily for the long haul. It really is worth it.

Finally, this work is dedicated to the memory of the late Murray Nicoll. I was a terrified teenager that day on Ash Wednesday, whose job was to monitor the radio to see which direction the fire would come from. When I heard Murray broadcasting from another part of the fire front, I knew someone else was facing the same terror, heat and flames I was, and it somehow made me feel better. That I got to know and work with Murray years later was a true honour. There are other Murrays in many newsrooms around the country, whose work in the face of incredible hardship deserves acknowledgement. This is for you too.




**ABC photographer Matt Roberts sees his sister's house after it has been destroyed by a bushfire in Quaama, New South Wales on 1 January 2020. Image by Sean Davey/EPA-EFE/Shutterstock.**

# 1 Introduction

> Sometimes they get old and die, sometimes they get shot, sometimes they get out young. Most just get maligned. (A third-year Queensland University of Technology student asked, "What is a journalist?" quoted in Tapsall & Varley 2001, p. 3)

It was a windy 43-degree day, after a 10-month drought. A fire the size of 4000 square kilometres, or the size of Rhode Island in the United States, was burning across two states of Australia. Scores of people died trying to defend their homes and livelihoods. Countless others lost everything. This wasn't the Black Summer of 2020; it was Ash Wednesday, 1983. Radio journalist Murray Nicoll went to report from the place he knew would be the "worst place in the Adelaide Hills" (n/a 2002). It was also a place that was agonisingly close to his own home. Dressed in his volunteer firefighter's uniform, he reported live from the scene:

> We are crouching down behind—behind a farmhouse. There are children. (Gasps) The sky is red and then white. It's going crazy. The fire's jumped 100 feet high, 150 feet high, straight over the top of Greenhill Road. There are a dozen people here with me. We can hardly breathe. The air is white with heat. There's smoke and it's red and there are women crying and there are children here and we are in trouble. (n/a 2002)

About 10 minutes later, the flames around the farmhouse were doused enough for Nicoll to run down the road, in time to see his own home engulfed in flames:

> At the moment, I'm watching my house burn down. I'm sitting out on the road in front of my own house where I've lived for 13 or 14 years and it's going down in front of me. And the flames are in the roof and—oh, God damn it. It's just beyond belief—my own house. And everything around it is black. There are fires burning all around me. All around me.

> And the front section of my house is blazing. The roof has fallen in. My water tanks are useless. There is absolutely nothing I can do about it. (n/a 2002)

The risk was dire and the fear palpable; about 100 metres away four[1] people had died (Professional Historians Australia (SA) n/a). Nicoll and his family rebuilt their home, but that day remains etched in Australia's journalism history. He was awarded Australian journalism's highest honour, a Walkley Award, for his work, and carried the memory of that day until his death from cancer in 2010. While his extraordinary journalistic feat is remarkable, Nicoll's experience in reporting a story that also affected him is not unique. And it has been happening to others ever since.

In July 2022, an "award-winning reporter who 'excelled' academically and professionally, was unshaven, overweight and nearly unrecognisable" (Timms 2022a) as he appeared in court, sentenced to jail for a drink-driving crash that killed his friend. The court was told Trent Evans had previously "succumbed to the pressures of his job" (Timms 2022a), which carried "incredibly high levels of stress" (Timms 2022b) and precipitated a diagnosis of PTSD in a mental health crisis so grave that it literally rendered him speechless. Evans' life "never got back on track" (Timms 2022b).

I have been inspired to research journalists' experience of trauma after more than 25 years' experience in the industry, including my own experience of traumatic stories and witnessing that of others'. It began the same day as Nicoll's Ash Wednesday feat, and included natural and man-made disasters over the years which wreaked havoc on the lives of those in the newsroom, as well as in the community. Australian journalists are humans with emotions, who can be thrown repeatedly and willingly in harm's way while they do their jobs, sometimes for extended periods of time. But the scars they carry are not always visible. They recover but may not forget; they can have ongoing mental health issues (sometimes in the form of PTSD); they can become burnt out or may leave the industry. They are doing this in an increasingly

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[1] The actual number of deaths is disputed; others believed it was actually five

n/a 2002, *New Dimensions in Time*, ABC, 18/11/2002. n/a 2014, 'CFS battling scrub fire on Yarrabee Rd at Greenhill, where five died in 1983 Ash Wednesday bushfires', 27/2/2104, viewed 22/3/2022, <https://www.adelaidenow.com.au/news/south-australia/cfs-battling-scrub-fire-on-yarrabee-rd-at-greenhill-where-five-died-in-1983-ash-wednesday-bushfires/news-story/1d8f19eff2549d3bd640d2b9f9785783>.

challenging time in media history, with convergence and job cuts placing greater pressure on fewer people. There is a growing demand worldwide for more sensitive and trauma-informed reporting, but until recently not enough was known about the trauma suffered by journalists themselves. Nor was enough known about which kinds of stories can cause trauma for Australian journalists, how many are affected, how often it happens to them and how often they are reporting on stories that also affect them personally. It is also not known how many young and emerging journalists are introduced to the concept of trauma during their tertiary education. In providing some answers to those issues, this research will demonstrate the need for Australian journalists to receive more support in relation to what happens to them once they have filed these stories: from their employers, educators and each other. Healthy journalism needs mentally healthy journalists.

## 1.1 Research issues

When reporters need to leave the newsroom to interview and sometimes to file their stories for an assignment, in Australian journalism they are what is known colloquially as "on the road". Other countries or professions refer to this status as being "in the field" or "on assignment". In the example above, the reporter Murray Nicoll was literally standing on the side of the road while he was performing his work. But as he was executing his assignment of reporting on the bushfire, he was also *metaphorically* "on the road", even though he was just metres away from his own home. The journalist's office is often mobile and can be found on the bonnet of a car or, if they are lucky, the passenger seat of a car (sometimes while it is moving). It can also be a corridor in Parliament House, a footpath outside a murder scene or the passenger seat of a helicopter. In post-COVID times it can also be the reporter's own loungeroom or kitchen table. All these places, regardless of their literal location, are considered to be "on the road" for an Australian journalist and therefore have some influence on the impact they have on the reporter. In Australian journalism, when a journalist is required to undertake the tasks of newsgathering, researching, writing or filing their stories somewhere other than the newsroom, they are on the road.

This research aims to investigate the risk and traumatic impact of certain stories on Australian journalists resulting from their assignments—in other words, when they are on the road. The impact examined in this research is that of the assignment upon the journalist, rather than whether the assignment was considered traumatic or serious by others. The risk in this instance is of exposure to trauma, which will be described in terms of its effect on a journalist.

While significant research into journalism trauma has been conducted around the world for many years, it has been the concern of Australian researchers since the late 1990s through the work of researchers such as Place (1992), Suiter (2001), Green (Green, McLellan & McMahon 2005; Green & Sykes 2005) and McMahon (2001, 2010, 2016, 2019; McMahon & McLellan 2008). Momentum in this area has also increased since research undertaken by Dart Asia Pacific, which has focused attention on similar situations in journalism in this region. Much of the focus of such research was on newsgathering in situations such as international natural disasters and conflict. More recent research indicates that traumatic situations can occur in more mundane reporting, or in domestic situations. Further, it is becoming more widely acknowledged in Australia that the repetition of certain types of assignments is more likely to cause journalists trauma (Green & Sykes 2005; McMahon 2016; Smith 2016). The parent organisation of Dart Asia Pacific, the Dart Center (US), states that between 80 and 100 per cent of journalists have been "exposed to a work-related traumatic event" (Smith, Newman & Drevo 2015). As journalists regularly cover the same types of events as emergency service workers while on the road, journalists are also considered first responders (Dworznik-Hoak 2020a; Hanusch 2010; Herbert 2005; Newman & Drevo 2015; Simpson, Coté & Scherer 2006; Weidmann, Fehm & Fydrich 2008). It is therefore reasonable to compare Australian journalists' experience with that of their American and European counterparts.

Research into journalism trauma around the world has shown that journalists can experience Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and vicarious trauma in the course of their work. In recent years, these disorders have been recognised as affecting journalists in the most recent iteration of the primary psychiatric diagnostic manual, the American Psychiatric Association (APA) *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, or DSM-5. Psychiatrists and psychologists also consider PTSD to be among a group of trauma and stressor-related disorders characterised by clusters of symptoms (APA 2013, p. 8), ranging in severity from mild to debilitating (APA 2017, p. ES3). However, responses to the same event may also be experienced differently (Creamer et al. 2001; Marais & Stuart 2005; Monteiro, Marques Pinto & Roberto 2016) for two reasons: first, not all stressful situations will precipitate post-traumatic responses (Monteiro, Marques Pinto & Roberto 2016, p. 764); and second, journalists' perceptions of trauma can differ from person to person (Marais & Stuart 2005, p. 89). Therefore, several types of psychological distress affecting journalists will also be examined: PTSD, vicarious trauma, burnout, anxiety and stress, and moral injury and institutional betrayal.

The traumatic impact of newsgathering on journalists is a nascent field of research in Australia (McMahon 2001, 2016; McMahon & McLellan 2008), although research does exist on burnout

among journalists and their intentions to leave the industry (MacDonald et al. 2016; Reinardy 2011; Seely 2017). Other Australian research estimates that around 5000 journalists have left journalism due to forced redundancy in the past decade (Dobbie 2021). Although it has been established that journalists have also developed coping mechanisms in response to a traumatic assignment (Buchanan & Keats 2011; McMahon 2016; Monteiro, Marques Pinto & Roberto 2016; Smith 2016), it is not known how many journalists have left the industry as a consequence of the trauma they have experienced due to an assignment.

Also of concern to Australian and US researchers is the finding that the experience of trauma among journalists can be cumulative (Dworznik-Hoak 2020a, p. 15), through repeated exposure to traumatic events (Backholm & Björkqvist 2010; Browne, Evangeli & Greenberg 2012; Dadouch & Lilly 2021; Herbert 2005; Marais & Stuart 2005; McFarlane & Bryant 2007; Pyevich, Newman & Daleiden 2003). As it is not possible to determine what such exposure might be over the course of an Australian journalist's career, this research asked journalists to estimate how many times they had covered certain types of stories, including those they found traumatic.

Previous research for a Masters thesis on journalism trauma (Smith, S 2016) detailed the experiences of trauma of journalists covering a deadly bushfire in Port Lincoln, South Australia. This research developed a set of criteria classifying the stories Australian journalists might expect to cover over the course of a career. These were developed into a matrix (see Appendix B) using a brief description, the size or scale of an event, and estimated exposure over a career. However, two elements of this matrix remained under-researched: the impact of covering these stories on the journalist, and, in particular, the effect of repeated and sustained exposure to traumatic assignments.

By examining the exposure journalists might have to traumatic assignments over the course of a career, it is possible to consider certain risk factors. Rather than view these in psychological terms—for example, in the form of a diagnosis—it is intended that these risk factors will be considered in terms of the news values used by journalists to determine the framing of their stories. While news values influence a journalist's decision-making in terms of assessing the newsworthiness of a story, such assessment does not extend to the intrinsic merit of the event being covered, or ethical considerations. The use of news values within journalism theory is appropriate for use in this research due to its use in contemporary Australian journalism education (Burns and Matthews, 2002) and current Australian journalism practice, and therefore its compatibility with a practice theory model. Further, the relationship of news

values and trauma is under-researched in Australia, thus providing an opportunity to contribute to this body of knowledge.

This thesis will view these issues through the theoretical lenses provided by sociological perspectives from practice theory (Couldry 2004), which provides an analysis of the practices and discourse of journalism. It will also consider the notions of culture and ideology distinctly expressed in journalism (Deuze 2019; Hanitzsch 2007). This lens also creates the opportunity to consider the wider context of journalism trauma from the perspective of those performing the work of journalism, rather than by its readers or the industry as a whole. Issues such as vocation and the Fourth Estate, ethics and objectivity will therefore be considered through this lens. This leads to consideration of the concept of emotional labour, while moral injury and institutional betrayal are also fundamental to an understanding of journalism trauma.

## 1.2 Structure of the research

This research identifies critical factors in managing traumatic assignments by first gauging the extent to which Australian journalists are required to cover a story they find traumatic, then to examine the effect of doing so on them. Once the theoretical foundation for this research and review of the relevant literature have been established in Chapter 2, the methodological approach for this thesis is outlined in Chapter 3. Chapter 4 will set out the framework for analysis of the risk and impact of traumatic assignments on journalists in Australia through a unique Story Category Matrix, before outlining these findings through both quantitative and qualitative means. Chapter 5 will contain detailed consideration of the research findings through three emerging themes: impact on journalists; industry attitudes and responses; and newsroom leadership. A further analysis of the findings will also connect journalism theory to experiences of trauma and identify journalists' own explanation for this in their own words. Chapter 6 employs the same three themes of impact; attitudes and responses; and leadership, and extends these to propose solutions and outline the contribution made to this field of research.

# 2 Literature review

The experience of trauma in journalism has been of interest to scholars in Australia since the early 1990s, yet there is still much to be learned. Traumatic reporting has been described as causing a "wound" (Castle 2002) or "lesions on the psyche" (McMahon 2010) of those affected, although each person's experience of and response to trauma is unique (MacDonald, Hodgins & Saliba 2017; McMahon 2016, 2019; Suiter 2001). Because the effects of trauma can be multifaceted, researchers and practitioners have attempted to address a wide range of issues; that research is inspected and analysed in this chapter.

To establish definitions of key terms and concepts, the literature discussed in this chapter will be considered in four sections:

1. Who, how and why: Journalism's identity, culture and ideology
2. What: Definitions of trauma and other relevant terms
3. Why: Journalism and trauma
4. How: Journalism practice and production

This research builds on the work of earlier Australian researchers who have aimed to understand the unique characteristics of the practice of Australian journalism and journalists, particularly Australian journalism research that has considered the effects of daily practice, including that of Henningham (1984, 1996, 1997), Place (1992), Suiter (2001), Castle (1999, 2002) and Green (2005, 2008; Green, Bilboe & Sykes 2004; Green & Sykes 2005). McMahon (2001, 2010, 2016, 2019; McMahon & McLellan 2008) has been instrumental in researching the effects of trauma on Australian journalists in the field of psychology, along with Pearson (Pearson, McMahon & O'Donovan 2018; Pearson et al. 2021), particularly in the area of post-traumatic growth. MacDonald (MacDonald & Fox 2018; MacDonald, Hodgins & Saliba 2017; MacDonald, Saliba & Hodgins 2016; MacDonald et al. 2016) has also contributed to a psychological understanding of trauma in Australian journalism. In this research, Australian journalists' assessment of their career exposure to certain traumatic stories will be quantified, along with their estimations of exposure to traumatic stories they have covered that personally affected them.

## 2.1 Who, how and why: Journalism's identity, culture and ideology

The advent of digital media has prompted a re-examination of what it means to be a journalist, prompting communication scholars such as Deuze (2005, 2008, 2019), Hanitzsch (2007) and Hanusch (2008, 2015, 2016) to argue their positions from the perspective of the journalist. That is, they posit that the work of a journalist is distinguished from other forms of writing by the professional attitudes and values of the journalists themselves. The contemporary recognition of the unique professional culture and characteristics of journalism and journalists builds on earlier research (Hardt 1990; Henningham 1984, 1996; Schudson 2008) to define the distinct culture of journalism as a profession and a practice, particularly in Western countries. Journalism's occupational ideology can be distilled as:

- providing a public service through information and commitment to the truth or accuracy through a sense of duty or responsibility
- a sense of vocation
- the value of the Fourth Estate or "watchdog" role through independence or autonomy, and
- a commitment to objectivity and ethics.

Deuze (2004; 2007, p. 163) outlines five elements of this occupational ideology, which also include immediacy, while Schudson's (2008) list of six journalistic functions includes the "virtues" of curiosity, suspicion and empathy. In Australia, these values are codified in the Journalism Code of Ethics espoused by the union representing journalists, the Media, Arts and Entertainment Alliance (MEAA 2014). This code is based on implicit acceptance—even embrace—of the Fourth Estate or "watchdog" function of journalism (Lloyd & Walton 1999; Meadows 2001). This self-defined role of journalism will be discussed in more detail in section 2.1.4. The values set out in the MEAA Journalism Code of Ethics can exist and be valued even after a journalist has left the profession (Deuze 2019; Nel 2010; Sherwood & O'Donnell 2018). Such long-standing values and their incorporation into professional codes of practice demonstrate the significance of professional ideology and culture among journalists (MacDonald et al. 2016). Acknowledging and understanding the role of this culture and its influence on individual professional identity, and on professional practices and the organisation of work, provide a critical context for the examination of factors in the risk and exposure of a traumatic assignment to a journalist "on the road". Examination of the identity,

culture and ideology of journalism will help provide context for the manufacturing of content processes and place the focus back on people by explaining who journalists are, how they view themselves and why, and how those factors shape and inform their experiences of traumatic stories.

### *2.1.1 What is a journalist?*

To perform their professional role, journalists think, act and perform in unique and particular ways, including while in the same situation as other first responders, whose own work and work practices are similarly codified and defined by professional cultures and modes of practice. This way of thinking, acting and performing is so unique that it has been called a belief system (Nerone 2013). While Hanitzsch and colleagues (2019) argue that there is no universally accepted definition of "journalist", the Worlds of Journalism study defines the work of a journalist as:

- earning 50 per cent or more of income from paid labour for news media
- producing and editing journalistic content (including news, sports, lifestyle, and celebrity stories) as well as editorial supervision and co-ordination (Hanitzsch et al. 2019, pp. 9, 10).

This definition is used throughout this thesis when referring to the work of those described as journalists, although it is also useful to define journalism by its actions and the reasoning behind them. The concept of defining journalism by its practice will also be discussed in a more detailed examination of production theory in section 2.4.

Using Nerone's (2013) definition, journalists do not write for mass audiences in the same way as writers or bloggers, as their unique belief system or ideology informs their intent and output in the form of news production processes such as newsgathering and news writing. Dissemination such as publication or broadcast is similarly informed. Even though the boundaries between conventional journalism and digital media became blurred or permeable towards the end of the twentieth century (Darbo & Skjerdal 2019; Glaser 2010; Hermida 2019), while "citizen journalists" and their legacy counterparts engaged in a digital environment, examples of hybrid works (Benkler 2013; Glaser 2010) serve to highlight their differences. These include collaborations where citizens "dig up facts" and conduct research, and reporters and editors "shape the story" (Glaser 2010, p. 583).

While subject to changing technology, journalism is not synonymous with the technology by which it is carried (Zelizer 2019) or with the media more generally. Instead, it is somewhat dependent on its means of distribution while remaining "highly autonomous" (International Communication Association Journalism Studies Interest Group, quoted in Deuze 2004, p. 277). Australian researchers Josephi and O'Donnell (2022, p. 6) assert that freelance journalists positioned "outside institutional confines" lend weight to an argument the definition of journalism ought to be broadened and diversified due to the influence of social media and digital platforms. This builds on Deuze's view that journalism's distinct ideology has progressed beyond traditional newsroom walls to also inhabit the platform economy:

> The industry that has arisen around journalism's every-dayness does not define what it is—the idea(l)s, debates, and practices of journalists inhabiting these institutions do. (Deuze 2019, p. 3)

Deuze's assertion that the social importance of journalism—that is, the conversations and debates, and the choices that arise from them—shapes its routines and practices is significant in the context of trauma in journalism. First, his assertion places significance not just on the results of these conversations and debates that matter, but on the people making them. The "everydayness" of such social interactions further points to a domestic journalism setting such as a newsroom, subs' desk or car on the way to or from an assignment. These ideals articulated and practised on the road shape and inform journalists' experiences of trauma and responses to it.

This research will therefore use Nerone's (2013) definition of journalism as a belief system or ideology, and Hardt's notion of viewing a journalist as more than a mere "instrument of production" (Hardt 1990, p. 348) to inform examination of how such beliefs influence the traumatic experiences of those who work in journalism.

### *2.1.2 Journalism culture and identity*

As journalism is the practice of a unique ideology, as Nerone (2013) asserts, it follows that this belief system will influence, and in some cases govern, how these beliefs are expressed by journalists on the road and therefore their experiences, particularly with traumatic stories. This collective expression is known as journalism culture. The definition of the word "culture" itself varies, though Hanitzsch (2007, p. 370) provides the most widely accepted and used definition of journalism culture as "a particular set of ideas and practices by which journalists consciously or unconsciously legitimate their role in society and render their work meaningful

for themselves and others". This seminal definition is relevant to this research because, like Deuze's (2019) assertion, the meanings afforded to these ideas and practices within journalism originate with the journalists themselves. While others in different disciplines may have opinions and perspectives about the work produced by journalists and its legitimacy in society, or about the behaviour of journalists with corresponding verdicts or diagnoses, this thesis seeks to research the feelings and responses of journalists in experiences of traumatic stories, so it is important for this to be considered in a cultural context that originates from the journalist's own perspective. Hanitzsch's definition also refers to the meanings given to the practices within journalism, which will be considered later in the context of practice theory in section 2.4. Hanitzsch (2007, p. 370) further defines ideology as system of ideas and ways of thinking "manifest as values, orientations and predispositions". If culture is the "how" of journalism and ideology is the "why", Deuze (2007, p. 169) explains the relationship between the two: "It is through this culture that the values of journalism's occupational ideology get their practical, everyday meaning." The specific meanings attached to these values will be discussed in more detail in sections 2.2.3 and 2.2.5.

Although a distinct journalistic culture, ideology and identity exist, there are nonetheless variations in all three. The Worlds of Journalism study (Hanitzsch et al. 2019; Hanusch & Hanitzsch 2017) examined the culture, ideals and practices of 27,500 journalists in 67 countries since 2006. It found journalistic culture can be influenced by local and geographic factors to form a "kaleidoscope" of cultures (Hanitzsch et al. 2019). This perspective is supported by van Vuuren's (2017) research in South Africa, while Deuze (2002) identified the existence of various national news cultures, and even a "Commonwealth" journalism culture (Deuze 2002, p. 142), which includes Australia. This supports Raemy's (2021) assertion of a three-tiered macro-, meso- and micro-perspective on journalism identity, where the meso-perspective relates to "identity in the context of social systems like nations, cultural identities, and ethnic and corporate identity" (Raemy 2021, p. 842).

In a landmark Australian study, Henningham (1984) examined whether journalistic values were universal or influenced by the mores of the culture in which they were practiced, and found overwhelmingly that the values of Australian and US journalists were "strikingly similar". At the time of the study, both groups claimed they would rather go to jail than reveal a source (Henningham 1984, p. 329). As Henningham (1984, p. 330) also found, journalists' professional values are "more likely to be universal" in Western democracies, which provides justification for using US data on journalistic values where none are directly available for an Australian setting. Henningham (1997) later examined the issue of personality among Australian

journalists, comparing levels of introversion between reporters and sub-editors (often known simply as “subs”, or in the United States as “copy editors”) and found this character trait to be unrelated to their views on ethical issues. His work suggests that news culture is a stronger factor in determining attitudes than personality type (Henningham 1997, p. 620). The Worlds of Journalism project (Hanitzsch et al. 2019) built on this knowledge through its examination of Australian journalists, orienting them towards the Anglo-Saxon epistemological view of positivism, rationalism and empiricism (Hanusch 2008):

> Australian journalists’ most important role orientations are to report things as they are, to educate the audience, tell stories about the world, be detached observers and to let people express their views. (Hanusch 2016, p. 2)

However, Australia’s journalism culture is often defined by its masculinity or “blokiness” (Anderson 2017) and an expectation of willingness to put oneself in harm’s way (McMahon & McLellan 2008). Another Australian review noted a “tendency to under-report exposure” to trauma due to this aspect of the universal professional culture of journalists (MacDonald, Hodgins & Saliba 2017). Green and Sykes (2005) went further, describing Australian journalism’s “culture of denial” (Green & Sykes 2005, p. 3). Newman, Davis and Kennedy outline the risk of such an attitude:

> This cultural norm may prevent journalists from acknowledging distress caused by job-related exposure to horrible events and fostering social support in response to job-related trauma exposure. Journalists, unlike fire, police, and emergency safety have no culture of receiving interventions after covering harrowing events. (Newman, Davis & Kennedy 2006, p. 192)

This tendency towards under-reporting trauma is consistent with research in the United States (Beam & Spratt 2009, p. 433) and South Africa (Marais & Stuart 2005, p. 101). McCaffrey (2019) has interpreted this reluctance to seek help as bravery and stoicism but, when coupled with an ethos which forbids refusing an assignment, it not only influences how a journalist ought to consider a potentially traumatic situation, but also how they ought to respond if they do (Feinstein, Owen & Blair 2002). Previous Australian research explains why:

> Nobody wants to appear wobbly. And if there’s any sense that management will see it that way, they’re not going to go to management and say: “listen, I need a few days off” or “could I have some counselling?” or “do you mind if I don’t go on the road for a few days—I’m just feeling a bit tense”… (Doyle, quoted in Smith 2016, p. 26)

In the aftermath of the Black Saturday bushfires that ravaged Victoria in February 2009, research found that Australian journalism culture still adheres to the ideal that "real reporters don't cry" (Muller 2010, p. 10). Further, if a journalist does express such a "weakness", this response is stigmatised (Buchanan & Keats 2011). Thus, for Hanitzsch,

> shared occupational ideology is believed to be the 'cultural cement' that holds journalists together as a profession and that therefore forms the foundation of a journalist's identity (Hanitzsch 2007, p. 370).

This communal, "cultural cement" or "news ecology" (Deuze 2007) has proven to hold across national and linguistic boundaries, in another expression of Raemy's (2021) meso-perspective of journalistic identity. Comparisons between US and Chinese journalists found a striking similarity in how they thought, or how they processed information to form news stories, and particularly news values:

> Surprisingly, the attention both U.S. and Chinese journalists gave to cognitive information was so counterintuitive that it might point to the possibility of an ever-increasing globalization in journalist standards. It is possible that some core narratives are so deeply embedded in the journalists that the narratives are more or less automatically applied. (Zhong & Newhagen 2009, p. 603)

The narratives referred to above relate to the attention given to certain facts in journalism and their placement within news stories, known as the application of news values. This assessment relates to journalistic decision-making on a professional, or editorial level, as opposed to a judgement on the intrinsic worth of an event or issue. As the relationship of news values and trauma is under-researched in Australia, this research aims to explore the role of news values such as Consequence and Conflict in the coverage of stories that Australian journalists found traumatic (Research Question 3, see section 2.4.1).

Hanitzsch (2007), however, distinguishes between culture and ideology, arguing there is room for more than one ideology within journalism, and that journalism culture is the arena in which diverse ideologies contest for primacy. Jukes, Charles and Fowler-Watt (2021) provide some justification for this position, arguing that adherence to the journalistic principle of objectivity is substantially different in Colombia than it is in the Global North:

> The impartiality that has emerged did not give rise to the neutrality which at times has held sway in European schools of journalism. The development of objectivity

> has instead taken the form of balancing sources and accuracy and there is an acceptance that both personal and editorial preferences inevitably slant news (Waisbord 2000a, 2000b). (Jukes, Charles & Fowler-Watt 2021, p. 771)

The idea of deeply embedded ideals is supported by Deuze (2004), who not only argues that this occupational ideology is universal, but that it helps journalism to make sense of itself. The shared nature of these beliefs is underscored by Raemy's (2021) assertion that journalism is fundamentally a social entity, and its practitioners constitute a community (Raemy 2021, p. 843). This provides an important reminder of Hardt's (1990, p. 353), Knight's (2020, p. 623) and Wahl-Jorgensen's (2019, p. 621) collective appeal for the people in journalism to be put into the spotlight of journalism research. As journalism identity is "constituted by individuals' vocation, the work in an organizational context, and the institutional ideology in relation to society" (Raemy 2021, pp. 856, 857), it can also be expressed as a strong identification with values such as the Fourth Estate or "watchdog" function (Hanusch 2008). This function will be described in more detail in section 2.2.4. Journalism's identity and culture therefore provide the lens through which journalists see themselves and influence how they respond when experiencing traumatic stories.

### *2.1.3 Vocation*

If journalism's ideology is a belief system as Nerone (2013) suggests, and its creed is defined by Deuze's (2004, 2007) and Schudson's (2008) occupational ideals, it follows that one of its guiding principles is a sense of vocation. Raemy (2021) places vocation at the intersection of practice and collective or professional identity, which involves a "process of self-reflection amid individual experiences and knowledge" (Raemy 2021, p. 842). Thus, interpreted on an individual level, journalism as a vocation imbues the work with a sense of meaning, helping journalists to make sense of their work and their relation to it. For many journalists, journalism is more than just a job. This is evidenced in Australian research into large-scale forced redundancies and the attitudes of former news employees post-newsroom and epitomised by the adage "once a journalist, always a journalist" (Sherwood & O'Donnell 2018). While it could be argued that journalists become accustomed to the influence and access afforded to them by the job, it is also likely that newsroom culture in the form of vocation has become so deeply ingrained that it continues to shape and define the identity and lives of practitioners post-newsroom. This is evidenced by the ambivalence felt by some journalists after redundancy:

> So much of my sense of self-worth was tied up with the idea of being a "journalist" with a major metropolitan daily. Frankly, it's been good to get some perspective on

> the very ego-driven and self-centred life of a journalist. I no longer pine for the newsroom, in fact I think it can be a very unhealthy place. I loved it for all my years in news, but now can't imagine being back there. (Ricketson et al. 2020, p. 62)

Others considered journalism to be the best job of their career and said being made redundant was "like being shot in the face" (Ricketson et al. 2020, p. 64). In a more positive expression, UK research showed that journalists strongly identified with the concept of journalism as a "calling" and "more than just a job" (Nel 2010, p. 23). As Australia shares this "Commonwealth" journalism culture (Deuze 2002), this strong sense of vocation explains the manner in which Australian journalist Peter Lloyd described his work. Lloyd returned to work at the ABC in Australia after his incarceration and PTSD in Bangkok:

> After everything that happened, I remain a "believer"—I believe that journalists play a critical role in maintaining a free and open society. I believe that journalism is not so much a career as a vocation. And I believe that I still have a role to play. (Lloyd 2011, p. 295)

The intensity of these anecdotes lends weight to the argument that a sense of journalistic vocation can hold longer than the duration of a journalist's actual career and, in Lloyd's case, even outweighs the experience of trauma. Dworznik (2006) argues that a sense of meaning helps journalists cope better with traumatic experiences (Dworznik 2006, p. 538), which directly links trauma with vocation, while Marais and Stuart (2005, p. 101) argue that "meaningfulness of the occupation, and the feeling of making a difference in people's lives" may even have a protective effect against serious ongoing trauma. Accordingly, McMahon (2010, p. 42) recommends seeking meaning through reflection as a means of developing resilience to trauma.

### *2.1.4 The Fourth Estate*

The meaning attached to the work journalists do and the protective benefits from trauma it accords them can be linked directly to the journalistic cultural ideal of the Fourth Estate, or the media being a watchdog to hold powerful institutions such as governments and business to account (Nai 2017; Newman, Davis & Kennedy 2006; Schudson 2008). This concept is linked to the liberal democratic theory of the media and elegantly defined by Rowe (2005, p. 127) as "a critical check on the use and abuse of power". It can be traced to eighteenth-century England (Hampton 2009) and refers to the political power of the press over the three accepted realms or "estates" of society: that of the UK parliamentary House of Lords, the Church and the House of Commons. As this Westminster system of government is not used in the United States, the

"Fourth Estate" concept of the media holding those in power to account is known there as a "watchdog" role (Hampton 2009, p. 4). The Fourth Estate role has also been applied to the coverage of war and conflict, where the media can be targeted as part of a military strategy to compromise coverage (Høiby & Ottosen 2019). The Fourth Estate view is "central to the self-understanding of journalists around the world" (Wahl-Jorgensen 2014, p. 2583), however, and is closely linked to the concept of editorial independence—particularly independence from government. The concept of editorial independence has come under scrutiny in recent years due to the increasing corporatisation of news and its attendant budgetary constraints (Hampton 2009), leading to criticism of an unhealthy dependence on the state. Schudson (1978) attributes this compromised independence to a "bias" towards official sources and the use of detachment and objectivity as an ideal.

Until relatively recently in Australia, the ideal of the Fourth Estate holding the other three to account has been confined to scrutiny of the first and third estates—interpreted here as the Senate, or Upper House of Parliament, and the House of Representatives, or Lower House of Parliament. The breaking of stories involving sex abuse in the Anglican and Catholic Churches in Australia has also led to scrutiny of this Third Estate in recent years (James 2003; Online News Association 2015). As described in section 2.1, the Worlds of Journalism study built on previous work outlining the attitudes and values of Australian journalists (Henningham 1984, 1996). Australian journalists in its research

> strongly advocated traditional ideals of journalism's Fourth Estate function, with a clear majority favouring approaches such as being a watchdog of government and business elites, while only very few journalists believed the media should support official policies or convey a positive image of political and business leadership (Hanusch 2008, pp. 103, 104).

Such independence of government was expressed on a national level in October 2019, when commercial broadcast entities, the public broadcaster and Australian newspapers joined forces to launch the "Right to Know" campaign. The campaign sought reforms protecting public interest journalism, with support from the Australian Press Council (Australian Press Council 2020, p. 5) through updated defamation law and protections for whistleblowers:

> Worse yet, the industry as a whole has suffered from a wider chilling effect where reporters become cautious of exercising even their legal rights to defend the public's right to know. (Reid 2019)

This invokes the Fourth Estate principle of holding the powerful to account, particularly through the exercise of an ethical independence from government, but also refers to the effect on reporters of fear of reprisals. Recent US research has drawn a clear line between the Fourth Estate function—particularly in politics—and harassment and trauma. Including Australian results in her research, Miller (2021) described a range of journalists' avoidance behaviours after harassment, including avoiding interviewing a person, avoiding reporting on certain topics or dropping a story mid-assignment and considering leaving journalism altogether. She also cited journalism's cultural reluctance to speak up about the effect of harassment, for fear of appearing weak: "Not only is harassment changing what stories are reported and how, but also changing the very voices telling those stories" (Miller 2021, p. 17).

This has been supported by Holton and colleagues (2021), who linked the effects of "uncivil behaviour" as a risk to democracy through journalists' burnout and intentions to leave the industry. They found organisational support was essential in mitigating the negative effects of online harassment:

> Organizations that suggest online interactions are journalists' personal responsibility while at the same time requiring such engagement and reaping the benefits of that labor are at best insensitive and at worst exploitative. (Holton et al. 2021, p. 13)

In countries such as Mexico, the targeting of reporters in an "insecure democracy" (Cancino-Borbón, Barrios & Salas-Vega 2022) is more overt, to the extent that it can even be ranked:

> [W]atchdog or monitorial reporters are the most vulnerable to threats; analytical and change agent journalists face a moderate level of threats; while propagandists deal with the lowest risk. (Cancino-Borbón, Barrios & Salas-Vega 2022, p. 92)

In Australia, the connection between the Fourth Estate function of the media, democracy and trauma were evident in the treatment of Newscorp journalist Annika Smethurst, whose home was raided by the Australian Federal Police (AFP) after a story she wrote in 2018. For almost a year, she and two ABC journalists faced the threat of being charged by the AFP after stories published and broadcast involving national security:

> Until our statutes are overhauled, Australians' right to know will continue to be threatened. Journalists will be jailed for doing their jobs, whistleblowers will be

> intimidated into silence, government information will be locked away and the public will be denied the right to know. In the current [pandemic] crisis, Australians need to be reassured that they are being kept informed—that's how a healthy, functioning democracy should work. (Strom 2020)

The raids prompted a review of national security laws on press freedom in Australia, while the High Court (the highest court in the country, which deals with appeals from lower courts, international law and matters of the Constitution) ruled that the warrant used to raid Smethurst's home was invalid. She later took a "sabbatical" from journalism, saying the "stress and exposure triggered by the police raid on my home has taken a heavy toll" (annikasmethurst 2020).

The journalistic notion of holding those in power to account, which is known as the Fourth Estate function of the media, is clearly connected to the meanings journalists draw from their work and its attendant risk to their mental health, while cultural norms influence their responses to it.

### *2.1.5 Objectivity*

Along with a commitment to values such as accuracy, fairness and balance, another factor driving cultural features of journalism is the aim for objectivity, or a commitment to employing such values with a conscious lack of emotional engagement (Craft 2017; Richards & Rees 2011) and lack of partisanship:

> A key component of the best journalists' sense of professional pride is their commitment to fair, balanced and accurate reporting of the events to which they are eyewitnesses. (Himmelstein & Faithorn 2002, p. 544)

Indeed, Deuze (2005) lists objectivity as one of five universal traits of a shared occupational ideology among news workers and as closely linked with detachment and impartiality (Hanitzsch 2007), as mentioned in section 2.1.

However, the practice of objectivity in journalism has become the subject of recent debate (Jukes, Charles & Fowler-Watt 2021). While the traditional view of objectivity has been challenged and become the subject of a "monumental shift" (Schmidt 2021, p. 1174) in journalistic norms in the United States, this has been particularly so in what is known as narrative journalism. This form of journalism is not as common in Australia as it has been in the past (Graham & Johnston 2013), where "hard news" reporting or use of the inverted pyramid

format is common. This explains why the Worlds of Journalism research revealed that Australian journalists believe "the media should merely report events, rather than get involved in them" (Hanusch 2008, p. 103). While others may argue the efficacy or otherwise of how this may work in practice, this research is concerned with the risk and impact of trauma on Australian journalists and how journalistic ideals inform their decision-making, and therefore their practice, while on the road. The outcomes of these decisions are directly linked to issues of "compartmentalising" or "detachment" as a form of emotional labour and risk of trauma. This "arm's-length" view of reporting events still holds, as evidenced by recent UK research (Knight 2020) supporting the long-held view that the journalist is never the story (Harrington et al. 2007, p. xvi; Richards & Rees 2011, p. 858).

In the context of disasters or critical events, the notion of objectivity has been criticised as an illusion, where reporters can become a "surrogate of the state" (Charles 2021) as victims of "scrupulous passivity" (Didion, quoted in Cunningham 2003, p. 8). The ideals of objectivity, detachment and impartiality have variously been described in religious terms (Cunningham 2003) as having an "almost talismanic influence" on reporters (Richards & Rees 2011), as a "supreme deity" (Mindich 2000) and as a fetish (Carey 1997, quoted in Maras 2013). Others have invoked less than benign supernatural images of objectivity, such as Tuchman's philosophical "garlic" to ward off the evil spectre of criticism (Tuchman 1973) and Richards and Rees' "ghost at the wedding banquet" (Richards & Rees 2011, p. 859) in the United Kingdom and Australia—ever-present, an intrusion of the past, yet still difficult to get rid of. This ambivalence may reflect a growing awareness that journalists may have more than one role in society or at a story location, particularly in situations of disaster (Newman 2002; Richards & Rees 2011; Soledad, Silvia & Daniela 2013; Tandoc & Takahashi 2018). In such situations, journalists might be required to balance or even choose between these roles, making the detachment necessary to remain a "disinterested observer" (Cunningham 2003) impossible. Tuchman (1972) argues that journalists demonstrate their striving for objectivity through the practice of strategic rituals associated with the conventions of newsgathering and writing. Such detachment serves both a professionally (Dworznik-Hoak 2020a) and emotionally protective function (Monteiro & Marques Pinto 2017) for journalists through the use of emotional labour, although it can also lead the journalist to experience emotional turmoil (Richards & Rees 2011) and influence the likelihood of developing PTSD (Lee, Ha & Pae 2018).

### *2.1.6 Ethics*

The ideal of objectivity is closely related to the professional ethics of reporters. If "objectivity is seeing the world as it is, not how you wish it were" (Cunningham 2003), then ethical journalism is reporting the world after you have seen it objectively, using certain principles. Otherwise,

> without ethical judgement, journalism is little more than a particularly pernicious form of entertainment in which real lives are served up to take the place of characters in a soap opera of the damned (Phillips 2013, p. 258).

In other words, just because a thing is true does not necessarily mean it is fit to be reported, if the rights of those being reported on risk being diminished to the point of having no more dignity and respect than characters who are merely fictional. In Australia, the prism of honesty, fairness, independence and respect must also be applied to determine such fitness, as described in the Australian Media Arts and Entertainment Alliance (MEAA) Code of Ethics:

> Use fair, responsible and honest means to obtain material. Identify yourself and your employer before obtaining any interview for publication or broadcast. Never exploit a person's vulnerability or ignorance of media practice. (MEAA 2014)

These principles can also be summed up by the concept of responsibility. This may involve the responsibility to report something, the responsibility not to report it, or the obligation to exercise responsibility in the manner of reporting. Petley (2012, p. 536) invokes the responsibility to report through the interpretation of journalism ideals at an individual level, as "certain duties and obligations, and that these correspond with the rights of citizens to be properly informed". Raemy (2021), however, considers this responsibility at a cultural level, as part of journalism's social contract with its readers. Australian journalist Amelia Brace invoked this principle after she and cameraman Tim Myers were attacked by police while broadcasting live on air in Washington, DC:

> I've been shocked to see how many journalists have been attacked, beaten and detained just for doing their jobs. Covering protests does carry unavoidable risks, but the media's role is essential. We don't just have a right to be there, we have an obligation. (Brace, quoted in Dobbie 2021, p. 26)

This social contract was also implicit in the industry-wide Right to Know campaign described in section 2.1.4, which sought reform for defamation and whistleblower laws in Australia. Among

its aims were “to make sure journalists and their sources can expose wrongdoing without fear of reprisal” (Reid 2019), referring to the conditions faced by some journalists faced while attempting to fulfil their part in this “contract” with readers, and the implications for democracy in this country. Another example involves the case of “Journalist F”, who faces contempt of court charges in Queensland for refusing to name a confidential source. Under Queensland law, the journalist’s name, employer and the story on which he was working are all suppressed (Dobbie 2022):

> The protection of sources is a fundamental responsibility for ethical journalism. Without this protection, whistleblowers and other sources would be more reluctant to provide journalists with information, which is critical for the public’s right to know, to shine a light on injustices and to hold governments and powerful interests to account. Consequently, our democracy would be diminished. (MEAA 2020)

In contrast, one topic on which journalists have agreed not to report—or to do so with a high degree of caution—is suicide. This caution applies in countries such as Australia (Machlin et al. 2012), Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States. While statute or law does not influence this decision in Australia as the advice is rather a guideline, the principles of sensitive and ethical reporting do (MEAA 2014). Simpson and Boggs (1999) acknowledged a demand for more sensitive reporting, which continues through to the present in the examination of its application as a form of emotional labour by Pantti and Wahl-Jorgensen (2021) and Dworznik-Hoak (2020a) and discussed in more detail in Section 2.2.4 below. Moreover, the issue of how a sensitive story can be reported responsibly has given rise to the concept of trauma-informed reporting (Coté & Simpson 2006; Hight & Smyth 2009), which includes “understanding of how to interact with survivors without causing further harm” (Cherry 2021, p. 131). While McCaffrey (2019), Simpson, Coté and Scherer (2006) and Suiter (2001) all note its tension with the professional norm of objectivity and detachment, according to Lyall (2012), “Good trauma reporting cannot occur until and unless journalists are able to protect themselves from the trauma itself” (Lyall 2012, p. 38).

This type of reporting draws a clear line between the unique and distinct culture of journalism, extending to the heart of journalism’s identity and how it is expressed through a sense of vocation and ethics. The line continues through the epistemological principles of positivism, rationalism and empiricism through objectivity, to the ideal of the Fourth Estate function of the media and its impact on journalists through trauma-informed reporting.

Although McMahon (2001) has identified some story subjects known to cause trauma to Australian journalists, it is not known how often or how many times in a career they might be called upon to cover such events. Neither is it known how often a journalist is a victim of, or affected by, the same story on which they are reporting and how this affects them. It is therefore necessary to distinguish trauma from certain emotional and other responses a journalist might experience, and also from a formal diagnosis of PTSD, in order to gain a thorough understanding of the risk and impact of traumatic assignments on Australian journalists. A clear definition of the relevant terms used in psychological research in particular is necessary, as they provide a means by which risk of trauma can be determined. The impact of this trauma may be evidenced in the form of various responses and coping mechanisms that, as an occupational group, journalists have developed to deal with trauma and stress on the road. These will be discussed in more detail in section 2.3.6.

## 2.2 Definitions of trauma and other relevant terms

Trauma is defined as

> events or experiences that are shocking and overwhelming, typically involving major threat to the physical, emotional, or psychological safety and well-being of the individual victim(s) and loved ones and friends (as well as to others) (APA 2017).

This definition will be used throughout this research.

It is estimated that between 80 and 100 per cent of journalists are exposed to trauma (Dworznik 2006; Feinstein, Owen & Blair 2002; Newman, Simpson & Handschuh 2003). Responses may be brief and one-off, or experienced over a prolonged amount of time and deemed chronic. This research is concerned specifically with journalists' responses to traumatic stories—that is, stories they consider to be traumatic, rather than whether another opinion might consider them so.

### *2.2.1 Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder*

PTSD is defined by the American Psychiatric Association as a certain set of behavioural symptoms lasting a month or more after exposure to a traumatic event (APA 2013). These symptoms are arranged in clusters, which include:

- re-experiencing the event (including dreams)
- avoidance or distressing thoughts, memories or reminders of the event

- negative cognitions such distorted thinking or withdrawal from others
- low mood, such as loss of interest in activities, and
- arousal such as hyper-vigilance, sleep disturbance or “flight or fight”.

This definition includes exposure to first- or second-hand trauma, repeated or extreme and work-related, including through electronic and digital media such as television pictures or film. Each of these conditions can be met while a journalist is on the road. The United States National Center for PTSD states that some journalists “may find themselves in situations in which their lives are threatened and they are witness to significant human suffering” (Bolton 2021), which implies exposure to trauma by virtue of its context in the discussion of PTSD. It is therefore acknowledged that a journalist can be exposed to PTSD though the course of their work, but it is not known specifically which types of stories are more likely to cause a journalist trauma and what effect this may have upon them.

The Australian Guidelines for the Treatment of Acute Stress Disorder and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (Raphael et al. 2013) mention the specific needs of emergency workers, the military and other groups, but do not mention journalists or other media workers as recognised first responders. Yet the growing body of global research into PTSD among journalists indicates that journalists should also be considered as first responders due to their proximity to critical incidents and their survivors:

> Journalists have been found to be particularly vulnerable to PTSD and other stress-related mental illnesses when the job involves exposure to graphic and distressing events or their aftermath, as well as close contact with victims, survivors or relatives of traumatic events, such as violent crimes, acts of war or terror, natural disasters or refugee crises (Rizzi 2020, pp. 1–2).

Early research into PSTD among journalists was conducted on the experience of war correspondents (Feinstein, Owen & Blair 2002). It found a 28.6 per cent lifetime prevalence of PTSD (Feinstein, Owen & Blair 2002, p. 1572). This was higher than that of police officers, and at least equal to that of combat veterans (Feinstein, Owen & Blair 2002, pp. 1573–74).

Of the 28 war journalists interviewed, all had been shot at numerous times, three had been wounded (one on four separate occasions), three had close colleagues who were killed while they were working together on assignments, two had been subject to mock executions, two had had bounties placed on their heads, one had survived a plane crash (the pilots were killed),

only to subsequently be robbed by soldiers who looted the wreckage, and two had had close colleagues who committed suicide (Feinstein, Owen & Blair 2002, p. 1573).

As this research seeks to determine how journalists have been personally affected by the stories they cover, incidence of PTSD among journalists is one measure of this impact. Estimations of PTSD rates vary widely from 4.3 per cent to 35 per cent (Smith, Newman & Drevo 2015), while recent UK research suggests a rate of between 6 and 12 per cent (Williams & Cartwright 2021). This is consistent with recent US estimates of PTSD among journalists (Flannery 2021, p. 153), while Hanusch (2010) asserts that a "significant minority" of journalists exposed to traumatic events will develop PTSD symptoms. Hanusch (2010) argues that difference in the range of estimations of the prevalence of PTSD may be due to the differing methods used by psychologists in diagnosing the disorder. These diagnostic methods include the psychological concept of Potentially Traumatic Events (PTEs), a Trauma History Questionnaire (Newman, Simpson & Handschuh 2003) and a particular tool used for journalists called the Journalist Trauma Exposure Scale (Pyevich, Newman & Daleiden 2003). However, a recent study by Feinstein and colleagues called for more research into PTSD in the context of domestic journalism (Osmann, Jonas et al. 2021). An Australian review in this area noted differences in assessment methods as well as a possible "tendency to under-report exposure" due to the professional culture of journalists (MacDonald, Hodgins & Saliba 2017). The under-reporting of trauma exposure as an aspect of journalism professional culture was discussed in more detail in section 1, which deals with journalism's culture, identity and ideology. This research will ask journalists whether they have covered a story they consider to be traumatic and, if so, how many times this has occurred over the course of their career. In doing so, it will avoid the risk of appearing to make, or in fact making, a medical diagnosis, while also responding to Knight's (2020) and Wahl-Jorgensen's (2019) observations of journalists being largely absent actors in journalism studies.

While much research has centred on journalism trauma in the United States and United Kingdom, this thesis will investigate the risk and impact of traumatic assignments on Australian journalists. In the United States, journalists have been found to be at greater risk of developing PTSD, depression and alcohol abuse than the general population (Dadouch & Lilly 2021). High rates of PTSD symptoms have been found among journalists in Pakistan (Shah et al. 2020), Mexico (Feinstein 2012), Korea (Lee, Ha & Pae 2018) and Iran (Feinstein et al. 2016), suggesting that cultural or geo-political influences may influence national results. It cannot therefore be assumed that US or UK results will apply in an Australian setting. More recently, PTSD has been found to be the most common stress disorder experienced by Australians, with

a lifetime prevalence of 6.4 per cent (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2008). While this statistic was due to be updated in the latter half of 2022, the estimated PTSD rate for Australian journalists reporting on domestic matters of 7.4 per cent has not been updated since McMahon's (2016) work on journalists and post-traumatic stress and post-traumatic growth. Even though a medical diagnosis of PTSD will not be made in this research, it will nonetheless ask Australian journalists about their experience of trauma in the context of their work.

### *2.2.2 Vicarious trauma*

In recent years it has been acknowledged that symptoms of trauma can be experienced vicariously as part of a person's work (APA 2013), while second-hand or vicarious trauma has previously been known as "compassion fatigue" (Backholm & Björkqvist 2010; Brayne 2006). In a journalistic setting, vicarious trauma can be experienced by a journalist when they interview another person who is describing their own trauma, such as a survivor of a critical event or disaster. Exposure also includes exposure to online and user-generated content (Dubberley 2020; Dubberley, Griffin & Mert Bal 2015). This means that journalists can be vulnerable to this type of trauma as one impact of their work on the road. There is still scant research in Australia about exactly which assignments are likely to cause such responses and who among journalists is more likely to have such experiences. Vicarious trauma has been of concern in Australian newsrooms at least since the turn of the century, when McMahon (2001) conducted a pilot study into newspaper journalists reporting disasters. Her conclusions supported earlier suggestions by Place (1992) that journalists can suffer serious effects of trauma resulting from stories they cover, resulting in PTSD. In the United States, Newman, Simpson and Handschuh (2003) found that 6.7 per cent of news photographers (known in the United States as photojournalists) met the medical criteria for PTSD.

Distinctions between vicarious trauma and PTSD can be problematic, as these conditions fall within a spectrum of experience and can have overlapping symptoms (Ravi, Gorelick & Pal 2021). While Seely (2019) notes that reporters may experience secondary trauma through indirect exposure, she also describes bearing witness to graphic scenes in the same sentence, which could be considered direct. Therefore, in this research, no distinction between these types of exposure will be made. Justification for this position can be found in two legal cases. In 2012, the first case of negligence for PTSD against an employer by a journalist or photographer was heard in Australia. This was known as the AZ Case, and while it may not have been the first lawsuit against a media employer in the world (Ricketson 2017), it was believed to be the first to have reached trial. It was brought against *The Age* newspaper in

Melbourne by a Walkley award-winning photographer, whose name was not made public. This case was rejected by the court, but in 2019 another case against the same newspaper was won by a journalist in what is known as the YZ Case. YZ worked as a crime reporter for *The Age*, but after covering a particularly distressing story, asked to be moved to the sport round. She also sought support from the newspaper's Employee Assistance Program but was initially told it was overbooked. Once she started receiving counselling, she realised the counsellors lacked an understanding of the nature and demands of her job and the levels of pressure placed on reporters by the newsroom (Rizzi 2020, pp. 3, 4). When interviewed (using a pseudonym) by Dale (2019) for inclusion in a legal journal article, the journalist concerned said:

> "For six years—all day, every day—I navigated my way across the state, covering murders, stabbings, fires, train crashes," she says. "It was just death all day, every day." (Dale 2019, p. 32)

The judge in her case found that "it would have been relatively obvious to a reasonable employer that the cumulative effect of that exposure would create the distinct risk of psychological injury in the nature of PTSD or a similar disorder" (Dale 2019). This finding came after a period of intense industry upheaval that resulted in intensification of work for many journalists, itself associated with "role overload" and burnout (Osmann, Jonas et al. 2021, p. 477).

After a partial recovery, YZ was moved to the courts round, where she was exposed to "distressing scenes including horrific testimonies" (Rizzi 2020), including the trial of the initial story that had caused her distress as a crime reporter. *The Age* was found to have breached its duty of care towards YZ (also known by the pseudonym "Sarah") to the extent that in the course of her work as a journalist she developed PTSD:

> Journalists have been found to be particularly vulnerable to PTSD and other stress-related mental illnesses when the job involves exposure to graphic and distressing events or their aftermath, as well as close contact with victims, survivors or relatives of traumatic events such as violent crimes, acts of war or terror, natural disasters, or refugee crises. (Rizzi 2020, pp. 1, 2)

This case was prosecuted in Australia in 2019. Although the decision was appealed, it was substantially upheld:

> Firstly, that the defendant ought to have had knowledge of the risks of mental harm to their employees at the time the plaintiff first started working at *The Age* in 2003, as there were multiple studies and reports available at the time illustrating such risks—not to mention that it should have been reasonably obvious to an employer such as *The Age* that reporting on criminal events can be inherently traumatic. (Rizzi 2020)

Furthermore, the trial judge in the case recommended a list of measures the newspaper ought to have taken, including training new journalists to prepare them for the types of trauma they would be likely to experience and alerting them to any warning signs, along with training senior staff to recognise symptoms of trauma in reporters (Rizzi 2020, p. 8). In these remarks, the judge also noted the norm of stoicism in a newsroom culture, which discourages frank discussion and disclosure of trauma (Rizzi 2020, p. 7).

> Newsrooms across Australia trembled as the decision came out—awarding Sarah $180,000 in damages for pain and suffering. The blistering judgment sent a message to media organisations accustomed to blooding young reporters on a diet of early morning or late-night crime scenes, and often distressing breaking news. (Dale 2019, p. 30)

Australian research before and since has found journalism to be innately hazardous (Anderson 2017; Lyall 2012), due to the physical and emotional impact of frequent and repeated exposure to high-risk situations, including death and human suffering. In the United States, researchers have noted the trauma of witnessing violence, human suffering and/or death at first or second hand can have lifelong consequences (Hill, Luther & Slocum 2020), and acknowledged that for journalists it may be associated with primary and secondary traumatic stress and burnout.

### *2.2.3 Burnout, anxiety and stress*

Burnout, anxiety and stress all form part of the possible emotional repercussions of Australian journalists' work on the road and, while they are distinct from the experience from trauma, they may nonetheless be related to it. The conditions under which journalists perform their jobs have been the subject of some documentation in recent years, particularly with the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, while the issue of burnout in journalism is not new (Reinardy 2011, Macdonald 2016, Monteiro 2016), it has come under renewed attention since the pandemic (Hao 2021; Kunova 2021; Messer 2021).

Burnout is measured on a psychological scale called the Maslach Burnout Inventory and its variations, and examines components such as exhaustion, cynicism and professional efficacy. It is distinguished from vicarious trauma or compassion fatigue by how the respective symptoms develop:

> [B]urnout is gradually developed and caused by emotional exhaustion, while compassion fatigue can emerge very suddenly without warning and also has a faster recovery rate. (Backholm & Björkqvist 2010, p. 140)

These authors also suggest that long-term exposure to victims of trauma may be an indicator for risk of burnout due to its tendency to develop over a period of time.

In Australia, the renewed attention on burnout during the COVID-19 pandemic comes amid a period of increasing pressure on journalists due to the contraction of the labour workforce and media convergence, which will be explored in more detail in section 2.4.2 and Chapter 5. MacDonald and colleagues (2016) note in their systematic literature review that female journalists with the least experience are most at risk of burnout in the context of a shrinking workforce and increased workloads. However, poor workplace or job satisfaction alone are not necessarily indicators of trauma (Hanusch 2010). For example, it is possible for a journalist to be traumatised while still being immensely satisfied with their work (Beam & Spratt 2009; Smith 2016), while another may become burnt out while also suffering little work satisfaction (MacDonald et al. 2016).

Journalists have also been found to experience other emotional repercussions in response to exposure to traumatic stories on the road, such as depression, anxiety and stress. While these are not the focus of this research, they are worth mentioning as they can occur as symptoms of trauma. These are also measured on a psychological scale (Dadouch & Lilly 2021). In the context of this research, an important type of stress to consider is organisational stress, as it originates from what Hardt (1990, p. 360) describes as “conditions of the workplace that enhanced the mechanisms of managerial control over the labor force”, which effectively separates journalists from their publishers and managers. This is supported by MacDonald and colleagues (2016), who directly links “omnipresent” organisational and industry factors to burnout. They argue that journalists are at greater risk of burnout when their desire for high practice standards is in direct conflict with a diminished sense of workplace control (MacDonald et al. 2016, p. 35). This kind of stress or anxiety is distinct from the type facing a journalist in the performance of their role, such as a broadcast journalist might experience immediately before or during a live cross. Reinardy (2011) provides a comparison between

such “acceptable” workplace stress and organisational stress resulting from factors outside the journalist’s control:

> In newspaper journalism, stress is an acceptable by-product when pursuing deadlines, scoops, and the demands of editors and readers. Stressors are compounded when working long hours, when the job conflicts with family and with the increased pressure to produce not only on a daily basis but perhaps on an hourly basis. (Reinardy 2011, p. 38)

Australian researchers have conducted systematic literature reviews into the kind of workplace stress suffered by journalists and their patterns of substance abuse (MacDonald, Saliba & Hodgins 2016; MacDonald et al. 2016) to establish that younger female journalists working at small-circulation newspapers are at greatest risk of burnout, but this group of journalists might also develop more effective coping mechanisms as they mature. They also found journalists’ alcohol use may be a coping mechanism used to alleviate stress. However, the research into substance abuse, including that on cannabis and cigarette smoking among journalists, relied heavily on data from the United States, which the researchers conceded was decades old and not built upon preceding research, leading to an incomplete picture of the problem.

Backholm and Björkqvist (2010) point out that while burnout and trauma are not the same, there is a link between them. They argue that burnout is caused by emotional exhaustion and can be slow to develop, whereas trauma can develop suddenly but can also be recovered from more quickly; however, vicarious trauma experienced over a long period of time might be a predictor of burnout among journalists (Backholm & Björkqvist 2010, p. 140). Monteiro, Marques Pinto and Roberto (2016, p. 765) assert that burnout is a cause of journalists leaving the industry, while Huxford and Hopper (2020) argue that burnout may also be connected to the routine practice of emotional labour.

### *2.2.4 Emotional labour*

In recent years, insight has deepened into the emotional cost of performing the work of a journalist and its potential risks in the long term to journalists’ mental health. In particular, journalism has been acknowledged as requiring emotional labour, or “the labor required to induce or suppress feelings in order to sustain the outward appearance prescribed by one’s job” (Dworznik-Hoak 2020a, p. 2; Pearson et al. 2021). This can occur on two levels: “surface acting” requires a person to act as though they do not feel a certain emotion, or to put on a professional mask, while “deep acting” involves consciously or deliberately manipulating an

emotion to modify it. The concept was first outlined by sociologist Arlie Hochschild in 1983, in the context of customer service. Referring to airline attendants in the 1970s, she observed their "worked up warmth of feeling was replaced by put on smiles" (Hochschild 2012, p. 90). The "working up" of an emotion the attendants did not authentically feel constitutes deep acting, while the "put on" smile to affect a professional demeanour to passengers is an example of surface acting. While this type of behaviour could be considered "faking it", in this context it is more accurately described as enacting both forms of emotional labour, due the suppression of authentic emotion in a favour of a deliberately adopted, more occupationally appropriate one.

In journalism, a common form of emotional labour is the suppression of emotions, such as disgust or anger at the opinions or views of an interview subject with whom the journalist personally disagrees or who they may even find abhorrent. This requires a form of surface acting to suppress a personal response so the journalistic ideal of objectivity is maintained during the interview:

> One journalist felt that most keenly when interviewing criminals and corporate malfeasants whom he disliked: "You're not acting as a normal human being in those circumstances. You're having to adopt a very tough, unfeeling position against people who are really monsters." (Richards & Rees 2011, p. 860)

The type of emotional labour described here of "unfeeling" is also described as detachment. However, if the journalist then consciously manipulates their emotions to summon and then display a more "appropriate" response such as curiosity or even empathy, this may also constitute deep acting. Regardless, both forms require some form of conscious manipulation of emotion and therefore emotional labour while on the road. Other examples where emotional labour would routinely be employed on the road include crisis events or highly sensitive stories involving the suppression of grief, triggered personal trauma or horror during "death knocks", and stories involving the injury or death of children. Emotional labour is a complex, multidimensional and even at times contradictory process (Knight 2020, p. 614). As mentioned, suppression of emotions through compartmentalising or detachment is directly linked to the journalistic ideals of objectivity and impartiality (Jukes, Charles & Fowler-Watt 2021; McCaffrey 2019; Pearson et al. 2021), but it can have serious mental health consequences for journalists. Lee, Ha and Pae (2018) found that the effort to achieve these journalistic ideals was related to a higher likelihood of developing symptoms of PSTD, while Huxford and Hopper (2020) warn that emotional labour can be difficult for journalists to

practise regularly, linking the practice of emotional labour to instances of burnout. As the primary aim of this research is to identify the types of stories that cause journalists trauma and the effect it has had on them, stories that necessitate the use of emotional labour may provide an insight into such an impact.

### *2.2.5 Moral injury and institutional betrayal*

The occupational setting for analysis of Australian journalists' experience of traumatic stories is validated by Hardt (1990) and Knight's (2020) appeal for focus on the lives of those who work in journalism, rather than the industry itself. Hardt also highlights the separation of journalism's workers from its management, which creates a tension between policy and practice for journalists on the road. Reinardy (2011) lists several factors contributing to journalism burnout, including the pressure to meet deadlines and produce good work, low pay, professional competition, long hours, implementing new technology and difficulty maintaining work–life balance (Reinardy 2011, p. 34). Heston and Pahang (2019) go further, contending that a "major driver" of burnout is the concept of moral injury.

Moral injury can be experienced when a person acts "in ways that transgress deeply held moral beliefs or they may experience conflict about the unethical behaviors of others" (Litz et al. 2009). This involves two components: the transgression of one's moral compass, and a sense of betrayal of what is "right" in a context of serious risk (French, Hanna & Huckle 2021; Shay 2014). Shay extends the definition of moral injury to violations perpetrated by institutions and authorities, or "powerholders" (Shay 2014, p. 184). In other words, when the actor or perpetrator of violence or neglect is trusted, depended upon or necessary for survival, a form of trauma known as institutional betrayal can occur (Smith & Freyd 2013; Smith & Freyd 2017). This also has two forms: acts of moral "violence" and those of neglect or failure to act (Smith & Freyd 2017). Shay (2014) explicitly mentions duty of care in this context, supporting the view that failure to protect those under authority can constitute this form of moral injury. French and colleagues (2021) argue the two types of betrayal are marked by different emotional responses: "self-perpetrated" events are evidenced through expressions of guilt and shame, whereas "betrayal events" by those in authority are mediated by anger and frustration (French, Hanna & Huckle 2021, p. 3). While Drevo (2016) was the first to link moral injury directly to journalism, Heston and Pahang (2019) also found moral injury was associated with breaches of ethics. In Australia, Pearson, McMahon and O'Donovan (2018, p. 1649) found journalists' moral injury "can in turn feed into their susceptibility to post traumatic stress". McMahon (2016, p. 45) suggests moral injury combined with poor organisational support could pose a risk to journalists'

mental health equal to “actual exposure to potentially traumatic events”. Dadouch and Lilly (2021) were the first to explicitly link journalism with the concept of institutional betrayal:

> [E]xperiences of IB lead to increased levels of anxiety, stress, and fear, and seem to predict worse outcomes in a group that expects support and help from their news organizations. (Dadouch & Lilly 2021, p. 968)

However, it is important to note that, like disorders such as PTSD and its variants, experiences of moral injury and institutional betrayal fall on a spectrum, and therefore may not necessarily constitute the most serious expressions of such stress disorders.

Feinstein and colleagues (2018) found factors such as working alone, increased workload and lack of organisational support were contributors to moral injury, which characterised the working conditions of some journalists during the COVID-19 pandemic. Journalists described both aspects of moral betrayal (Messer 2021; Osmann et al. 2022)—that is, some felt they had betrayed the public in their reporting of public health information, even though health authorities themselves were “fumbling the ball” in providing them with accurate and timely information (Messer 2021). This is supported by Simunjak’s (2022) description of a multifaceted and high-risk context:

> The (trauma) reporting [on COVID-19] was coupled with personal experience of living through it, and anxiety about the loved ones at risk from the virus. At the same time, there was seemingly never higher demand for journalists to perform at their best, with the bar to provide reliable, trustworthy, relevant and timely information set very high. (Simunjak 2022, pp. 320, 321)

Other risks of moral injury include being assigned “death knocks”, which require journalists to seek interviews from those who are recently bereaved. While cathartic for participants in some cases (Duncan 2012; Muller 2010), these interviews cause “most distress” for journalists (Castle 1999, p. 146). Huxford and Hopper (2020, p. 47) found journalists’ most common responses to conducting death knocks were guilt and shame, indicating possible moral injury (French, Hanna & Huckle 2021). Other organisational stressors found to negatively affect journalists when they are on the road will be discussed in more detail in section 2.3.3.

### *2.2.6 First responders*

Journalists are considered “first responders” to disasters and emergency events (Brayne 2006; Dworznik-Hoak 2020b; Hanusch 2010; Herbert 2005; Newman & Shapiro 2014; Newman,

Simpson & Handschuh 2003; Seely 2019; Tandoc & Takahashi 2018; Weidmann, Fehm & Fydrich 2008), which now routinely include terrorism (Hight & Smyth 2009; Hill 2022; Hill, Luther & Slocum 2020). Although this aspect of journalists' work is not always recognised (Raphael et al. 2013) or can even be overlooked (Flannery 2021), journalists are exposed to events not usually witnessed by the community, and may even arrive at those events before other first responders (Berrington & Jemphrey 2003; Ricketson 2017; Suiter 2001).

The cumulative nature of trauma has been studied among police officers (Leigh Wills & Schuldberg 2016) and other first responders (Geronazzo-Alman et al. 2017), such as firefighters:

> The more typical scenario is where the individual breaks down after repeated experience of a variety of traumatic incidents, which entail varying degrees of a sense of personal threat, often combined with the witnessing harm or death to others rather than after a single incident. (McFarlane & Bryant 2007, p. 406)

However, McFarlane and Bryant also note that emergency service workers receive specific training in dealing with the threat and danger that come with their role. In contrast, journalists do not (Dworznik-Hoak 2020a; Monteiro & Marques Pinto 2017). This leaves journalists exposed to the effects of cumulative trauma, but without the means to understand both the trauma and the importance of seeking support in dealing with its attendant risks.

## 2.3 Journalism trauma

To place the issue of trauma in context with the professional setting of this research and its unique challenges, a closer examination of trauma in journalism is necessary. Journalism trauma is an emerging field of research in Australia, although a substantial body of work has been produced from research in the United States and Europe since the turn of the century. Over the past decade, the concept of emotional labour and research on the toll of emotional aspects of work has also been applied to better understand journalism and possible damage to mental health. However, comparatively little is known in Australia about the types of stories likely to cause trauma for journalists.

The work of Place (1992) is among the earliest Australian research on journalism trauma, along with Castle (1999, 2002), McMahon (2001, 2016; McMahon & McLellan 2008), Suiter (2001) and Green (Green, McLellan & McMahon 2005; Green, Bilboe & Sykes 2004; Green & Sykes 2005). These researchers established the need for ongoing and specific research into

Australian journalism trauma by identifying the behaviour and coping mechanisms of Australian journalists amid potentially traumatic situations. In recent years, further research has been conducted on the effects of a journalist's work, especially if that work involves a traumatic or stressful assignment (Lyall 2012; McMahon 2016; McMahon & McLellan 2008), while other research looks at the effects of trauma on journalists in wider contexts (Castle 2002; Embelton et al. 2003). MacDonald (2018; MacDonald, Hodgins & Saliba 2017; MacDonald, Saliba & Hodgins 2016; MacDonald et al. 2016) has synthesised current worldwide research to highlight the need for further work in the field of journalism trauma. In documenting the impact of the organisational stressors faced by Australian journalists, the work of researchers on the New Beats Project since 2012 (O'Donnell, Zion & Sherwood 2016; Ricketson et al. 2020; Zion et al. 2016a, 2016b, 2017) have added crucial insights to the context in which journalists work.

In the United States and United Kingdom, a growing body of knowledge has also developed on examining the risk and impact of trauma on journalists. Gaba (1991) felt it necessary to remind readers that journalists were in fact "normal", and pioneered advocacy for counselling, peer support and the use of logbooks to document trauma exposure. Newman, Smith and Drevo, as individuals and co-authors, have contributed to the understanding of the risk of PTSD, journalism's role in disasters and its attendant toll on those who report on them, as well as the more recent development of trauma-informed reporting (Drevo 2016; Idås, Backholm & Korhonen 2019, 2002; Newman, Davis & Kennedy 2006; Newman & Drevo 2015; Newman, Risch & Kassam-Adams 2006; Newman & Shapiro 2014; Newman, Shapiro & Nelson 2012; Newman, Simpson & Handschuh 2003; Newman 2011, 2015; Smith, Newman & Drevo 2015; Smith, Drevo & Newman 2017). Feinstein (2006, 2010; Feinstein & Owen 2002; Feinstein, Owen & Blair 2002) detailed the emotional hazards of reporting, particularly in conflict zones and theatres of war, while Simpson, Coté and Boggs, separately and together, linked journalism and trauma, as well as covering violence and ethics (Cote & Simpson 2000, 2004, 2006; Simpson & Boggs 1999; Simpson, Coté & Scherer 2006). Dworznik (2006, 2018; Dworznik & Grubb 2007) also drew attention to the traumatic impact of "daily work" or domestic journalism.

Over the past few years, this understanding of journalism trauma has been developed by the work of Seely (2019, 2020), who has noted the risks associated with frequency of trauma exposure. Subsequently, the concept of journalism as emotional labour has emerged as a developing strain of research, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic and in natural disaster situations (Dworznik-Hoak 2020a, 2020b; Huxford & Hopper 2020; Nee & Chacón

2021; Simunjak 2022), while Dadouch and Lilly (2021) have linked declining workplace support in journalism and institutional betrayal.

### *2.3.1 Trauma risk*

Journalism is acknowledged as one of the most stressful occupations in the world (Monteiro & Marques Pinto 2017; Reinardy 2011) and journalists are described as a "high-risk population" for developing PTSD (Browne, Evangeli & Greenberg 2012), as it is common for them to work in "intensely traumatic" environments (Marais & Stuart 2005), facing "mental health danger daily" (Lyall 2012, p. 32). Approximately 80 per cent of journalists surveyed in the United States had covered a traumatic event during their careers (Smith, Drevo & Newman 2017), although it is not known how the experiences of Australian journalists compare with this finding. This figure was derived using a psychometric measure called the Journalist Traumatic Exposure Scale. US research found the types of events that journalists are likely to witness while they are on the road are car accidents, fires, murders, mass casualty events, war and disaster (Smith, Newman & Drevo 2015). However, these results may be subject to national variations. In Korea, for example, journalists are more likely to report on fires, car accidents and rail or subway accidents, with 66 per cent of journalists exposed to such events (Lee, Ha & Pae 2018). In Australia, McMahon (2001) found that murder, rape and vehicle accidents were among the most common traumatic story subjects for Australian journalists. While Suiter (2001) found that 68 per cent of those surveyed remembered their first traumatic story, it has not previously been known how many times over a career a journalist may do so. This research aims to build on the work of Smith, Drevo and Newman (2017) to determine the percentage of Australian journalists who have covered a story they found traumatic. It also aims to build on McMahon's (2001) findings by classifying the types of stories journalists found traumatic according to news or journalism concepts, as well as the extent to which this happens.

A "significant minority" of journalists are at risk of long-term psychological effects such as PTSD, depression and substance abuse (Smith, Newman & Drevo 2015). According to Smith, Newman and Drevo (2015), risk factors include frequency of exposure, frequency of high-intensity assignments, work-related stressors, time in the field (known as "on the road" in Australia), organisational factors, personal history and factors, social support and cognitive factors. Other predictive factors include moral injury and occupational intimidation or harassment, while the extent of exposure has been linked to severity of psychological symptoms. In other words, the greater the exposure to trauma on the road through career longevity, the higher the risk of more severe psychological effect (Lee, Ha & Pae 2018;

Newman, Simpson & Handschuh 2003; Pyevich, Newman & Daleiden 2003; Weidmann, Fehm & Fydrich 2008). In fact, noted journalism trauma scholar Elana Newman has observed (with others) that it is not the experience of journalism trauma itself or the fact that some journalists do not develop long-lasting symptoms that is noteworthy; rather, it is "somewhat remarkable" that more of them do not (Newman, Davis & Kennedy 2006, p. 188).

### *2.3.2 Natural and other disasters*

Natural disasters have featured prominently in recent research into journalism trauma because they are recognised as situations likely to expose journalists to a risk of experiencing trauma. Journalists face many challenges in such conditions, especially while they are working remotely. In particular, reporting on natural disasters exacerbates fatigue and frustration, including frustration at perceived organisational support (Dworznik-Hoak 2020b; Tandoc & Takahashi 2018). Journalists covering natural disasters are particularly vulnerable, as they can also be victims of the event (Dworznik-Hoak 2020a; Herbert 2005; Hill 2022; Soledad, Silvia & Daniela 2013; Tandoc & Takahashi 2018):

> This is why the states of anxiety, stress, chaos or emergency are not only experienced by testimonial sources but also by journalists, who must perform their work trying to set aside personal situations of high emotional impact, without necessarily having psychological structures more prepared to be periodically exposed to disaster situations. (Soledad, Silvia & Daniela 2013, p. 108)

Australian journalism is replete with examples of this phenomenon. In 1983, the Ash Wednesday bushfires ravaged South Australia and Victoria in one of the worst disasters in Australian history. As described in the Introduction, radio journalist Murray Nicoll reported live while he was holed up behind a stranger's house with a cameraman and several other people, and subsequently while watching his own home destroyed. *The Australian* reporter Kimina Lyall was on a Thai beach in 2004 when the Asian tsunami struck. She became separated from her partner and saw friends being taken by the waves:

> The fact that I was part of the tsunami story did not alter my responsibility as the Southeast Asia correspondent for *The Australian*. Within hours of the wave hitting, the acting editor was on the phone, checking to see if I was OK to get on the reporting task. (Newman, Shapiro & Nelson 2012, p. 291)

This can lead to other difficulties, such as deciding between competing roles when first on the scene of an emergency, or dealing with a large-scale disaster (Hollings 2005; Newman 2002; Richards & Rees 2011; Soledad, Silvia & Daniela 2013; Tandoc & Takahashi 2018). Reporters in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks on New York's World Trade Center faced such overwhelming demands:

> [F]or the most part, it fell to the domestic correspondent, photographer, broadcaster, and cameraman to weather the threats, collate the facts, and sift through the fraught and jumbled emotions of the moment, all the while managing his own fears and feelings. (Feinstein 2006, pp. 141–42)

Natural disasters can also affect the family members of journalists (Dworznik-Hoak 2020a; Spicer 2017). Australia's Black Summer bushfires of 2020–2021 were another "constellation of stressors" (Feinstein 2006) for reporters. The News Editor of *The Guardian Australia* took the unprecedented step of publishing a breakout story on the responses of several of its reporters to this national disaster, including:

> The feeling of guilt having firefighters check on our welfare and make sure we weren't hungry. The steely bravery on the face of a 12-year-old kid who wasn't evacuated before the roads closed and was now helping their mum put out spot fires in the backyard. The overwhelming desire to hug interview subjects, either because they'd just gone through something horrific or they'd just done something extraordinarily selfless, and because this isn't just a news story, this is home. (Tichner et al. 2020)

This is an example of where the requirement to suppress emotions as a type of emotional labour is harmful and "unfeasible" where journalists are part of the disaster-affected community, according to Kotisova (2019, p. 6). Willis (2003) connects a desire for meaning to a journalist's physical and emotional security, especially for those directly affected by disaster, while Dworznik (2006) argues that attaching a sense of meaning to a story functions as a coping mechanism, particularly in more difficult or traumatic situations.

### *2.3.3 Organisational stressors*

Organisational stressors are known to be particularly challenging for journalists to navigate, especially during natural disasters. These include inconsistent leadership styles, conflicts with supervisors and organisational policy changes (Smith, Drevo & Newman 2017). These stressors

have been split into two categories: organisational, including from newsroom managers and peers (Monteiro & Marques Pinto 2017; Newman, Simpson & Handschuh 2003) and operational (Monteiro, Marques Pinto & Roberto 2016; Soledad, Silvia & Daniela 2013) relating to the performance of tasks:

> Participants noted the long hours, the victim-focused coverage and their inability to get away from it, combined to produce an emotional overload that became almost crushing. (Dworznik-Hoak 2020a, p. 8)

Monteiro, Marques Pinto and Roberto (2016) compared the types of stress experienced by domestic journalists and those working on high-intensity assignments in other countries, and found domestic journalists were more susceptible to burnout due to chronic stress throughout their careers and experienced more stress from organisational stressors. In contrast, those working overseas on major critical incidents were required to deal more with operational or task-related stressors. Herbert adds to this understanding:

> Often trauma as a result of reporting a particularly horrific story comes not just from the story itself but from the frustration felt by reporters who feel their newsrooms don't understand or sympathise or make unreasonable demands. Poor management support and understanding makes reporter trauma worse. (Herbert 2005, p. 79)

Beam and Spratt (2009) were among the first to recognise that management support was critical to help journalists cope with trauma on the road. Such support is significant, as journalists who perceive their environment to be manageable and predictable "will be less vulnerable to the development of PTSD" (Marais & Stuart 2005, p. 102):

> Demands from superiors were mentioned as an example of such daily work stressors, often regarded by journalists as being unrealistic, highlighting, once again, the weight of critical incidents-related stressors. (Monteiro, Marques Pinto & Roberto 2016, p. 768)

Similarly, Williams and Cartwright (2021, p. 8) found a similar frustration "at an apparent disconnect" between reporters and those who manage or supervise them, along with examples of perceived management insensitivity and lack of awareness of reporters' needs. These are referred to by Castle (1999, p. 145) as "unreasonable and uninformed demands" from newsroom leadership. While it was not possible to find empirical research documenting

the reporting experience of Australian newsroom managers and/or leaders, a lack of on-the-road experience may partly be to blame (McLennan 2011), while research from the United States and South Africa indicates a lack of experience in both editorial (Cummings 2020) and human resources (Steyn & Steyn 2009) expertise. The comments are similar to those described by Herbert (2005, p. 79), who asserts that "poor management support and understanding makes reporter trauma worse", while Beam and Spratt (2009, p. 432) argue that "management support may be critical in helping journalists cope effectively with trauma". Muller (2010) listed this type of pressure among those creating a "maelstrom effect" during Victoria's "Black Saturday" bushfires in 2009, which pulled journalists "at the centre in several directions at once" (Muller 2010, p. 7). Other researchers noted insensitive demands from newsroom managers in the context of "death knocks" (Anderson & Bourke 2020). Willis puts it bluntly:

> Leaders such as editors, producers, publishers, and network executives can help prevent traumatic stress or they can exacerbate it. (Willis 2003, p. 142)

Organisational stressors have also been linked to institutional betrayal, where

> if one's presumed safety in a trusted institution, much like safety in a family home, is threatened, they could be faced with more damaging outcomes than if the trauma occurred in a context unrelated to the institution. (Dadouch & Lilly 2021, p. 957)

These authors note that "support for employees from news organizations has fallen short, possibly exacerbating journalists' psychological distress" ((Dadouch & Lilly 2021, p. 957), but point out that "'any half-decent office' would recognize its onset and offer broadly appropriate and supportive action" (Richards & Rees 2011, p. 859). When conflicting ethical constraints are added to these organisational and operational stressors (Soledad, Silvia & Daniela 2013) and/or institutional betrayal, situations of moral injury can also occur. This concept was outlined in section 2.2.5.

### *2.3.4 Journalism as emotional labour*

The emotional labour of suppressing emotions through compartmentalising or detachment is linked to the journalistic ideals of objectivity and impartiality, as mentioned in section 2.2.4. Formal training for journalists on how to handle or manipulate their emotions on the road through emotional labour is not routine or widespread, although it can occur informally through observation and emulation of the behaviour of more experienced journalists through

the “schooling” of those who are less experienced (Dworznik-Hoak 2020a; Huxford & Hopper 2020). Knight’s (2020) research on journalists covering genocide describes a form of journalism ideology that necessitates emotional labour—that is, the journalists interviewed considered it “self-indulgent” to focus on their own emotions while dealing with victims of genocide (Knight 2020).

Huxford and Hopper (2020) note that suppression of emotion can have both negative and positive effects:

> The ethos of objectivity I think directly suppresses emotion. I think the unspoken rule of objectivity is that it’s a synonym for emotionless. (Huxford & Hopper 2020, p. 49)

> “If I’m not going to be objective, what separates me from being just another blogger shouting my opinion?” (journalist 10). (Huxford & Hopper 2020, p. 50)

Detachment or compartmentalising can also function as a type of wall or “shield” for the journalist (Brayne 2007; Buchanan & Keats 2011; Monteiro & Marques Pinto 2017).

> “We get too close upon too many stabbings, shootings, holdups, too many wild or drunken crimes by degenerate men and women who talk and think and look through red-rimmed eyes like beasts. We get too close upon too many brutal cops,” adding: “If we don’t watch ourselves, we are thinking their thoughts after a period, talking their talk, and living in their world of sudden crashes, gun bursts, flashing knives, blood, bodies, ambulance stretchers, hospital information sheets ...” (Thomas Sancton, quoted in McCaffrey 2019, p. 234)

This detachment can be expressed as a form of dissociation necessary to complete the work required (Dworznik-Hoak 2020a), but journalists must also balance such self-protection with a professional imperative to “feel”:

> If you protect yourself too much by screening out the unpleasantness, you cheat the reader by failing to convey the horror, which is, after all, your job. On the other hand, if you allow yourself to absorb the reality of what you see and hear, you run the risk of destroying yourself emotionally. (Simpson, Coté & Scherer 2006, p. 40)

This creates a further internal conflict (Richards & Rees 2011) when balanced against a growing awareness of the need for more empathetic, trauma-informed reporting (McCaffrey 2019):

> Journalists must process this grisly information and package it for an audience expecting the thrills of conflict—but are not to include the nasty bits, like pieces of dead bodies or the smell of rotting flesh. Journalists are expected to be unbiased and objective, yet fresh and honest in their approach. They are meant to be detached and unemotional while putting feeling and humanity in their stories. They are meant to be hard working and professional with a nose for news and an eye for detail. They are also meant to sleep easy, knowing they have contributed to a job well done. (Suiter 2001, p. 94)

At the same time, this emotional labour takes place in a less than hospitable occupational environment in journalism (Richards & Rees 2011). This is particularly so in covering natural disaster events, where journalists are required to manage their own emotional responses to the disaster while they also carry out the routines and practices required by their occupation. The emotional labour required of journalists on the road in these circumstances takes two forms: suppression of emotions (Buchanan & Keats 2011; Lee, Ha & Pae 2018) and manipulation of emotions (Huxford & Hopper 2020).

The difficulty of managing personal reactions to a disaster scene while remaining "professional" and objective can lead to an inner conflict (Richards & Rees 2011) or a form of cognitive dissonance. Lee and colleagues provide an example:

> The macho-like journalist might have felt confused when he or she actually strongly reacted to the scene despite his or her belief in being emotionally resistant, and that would have caused internal conflicts and self-discrepancy. (Lee, Ha & Pae 2018, p. 1313)

In the example outlined in the Introduction, radio journalist Murray Nicoll was awarded Australian journalism's highest honour, a Walkley Award, for his reporting during the 1983 Ash Wednesday bushfires. The award recognised not just the drama unfolding live, but one person facing a horrific deadly bushfire, dealing with his own fear of death and even losing his family home. Nicoll's peers instinctively recognised the enormous challenge he faced dealing with all of those while at the same time trying to do his job, which was strongly oriented towards objectivity and positivism. To remain objective during his assignment, Nicoll was attempting a form of "surface acting" emotional labour—that is, suppressing his own horror and fear at the destruction around him in order to do his job. That he did not entirely succeed is evidenced by the exclamations that punctuated his reporting ("oh God-damn it—it's just beyond belief" (n/a

2002)). These also provide evidence that he did not manipulate his emotions to effect "deep acting" and assume a form of emotional distance or detachment and calm he did not authentically feel. Further, it demonstrates tension between a reporter's "commitment to serve their journalistic mission and their regular human concern regarding their personal lives" (Dworznik-Hoak 2020a, p. 10). Another example of this type of surface acting emotional labour involved the CNN journalists who put on a "brave face" to continue reporting after the events of September 11, 2001 (Feinstein 2006, p. 147). Other US journalists strove to suppress their emotions while reporting in its aftermath:

> In one highly publicized incident, the veteran CBS news anchor Dan Rather broke down while on air, prompting a debate about the importance of a journalist maintaining his professional sang-froid, no matter how disturbing the content of the story. (Feinstein 2006, p. 140)

There are times on the road when suppression of emotion is neither appropriate nor achievable, and may even be psychologically harmful:

> Although journalists tend to insist on their ability to distance themselves from the events they cover, in this case many of them were not able to separate their personal experience of trauma from the facts they were covering, and especially those who had direct ties with the most affected places. To this condition, that might be called self-referential factor, was added, in some cases, a dissociation factor related to the need to make an effort to void their emotions and feelings in those moments, in order to carry out to their professional work. In those cases they were forced to make an extra effort that caused them emotional problems later. (Soledad, Silvia & Daniela 2013, p. 110)

Huxford and Hopper (2020) draw a clear line between the dissonance caused by the emotional labour of journalism and burnout: "Emotional dissonance is positively related to emotional exhaustion and negatively related to job satisfaction" (Huxford & Hopper 2020, p. 42).

Pantti and Wahl-Jorgensen (2021) found that this ideal of detachment was the most difficult to perform in a crisis, while Lee and colleagues (2018) found a positive correlation between striving for objectivity and a higher likelihood of PTSD symptoms. The magnified pressure of the situation, coupled with the immersion and repetition required by these activities (Dworznik-Hoak 2020a), further intensifies this challenge:

> Because emotional labour requires individuals to manipulate as well as suppress their own feelings, it can be hard for individuals to engage in it on a regular basis. (Huxford & Hopper 2020, p. 41)

As mentioned previously, journalists can play more than one role at a disaster site and may be forced to choose between them (Richards & Rees 2011; Soledad, Silvia & Daniela 2013). When combined, all these factors raise serious mental health risks for journalists:

> A journalist's beliefs regarding his or her occupation, especially concerning the perception of the idealistic journalist, have been suggested as one of the key factors influencing development of PTSD symptoms among journalists. (Lee, Ha & Pae 2018)

Such risks exist without the added burden of being personally affected by the story a journalist is covering, which can add to this emotional distress (Dworznik-Hoak 2020a; Herbert 2005). In this context, an argument could be made to consider the COVID-19 pandemic as a type of disaster reporting:

> "We're being traumatized by the pandemic and then retraumatized by reporting on it and talking to healthcare workers," she said. "I remember someone telling me that the reason they were talking to me was because they were afraid people would die if they didn't. That just really hit me in a way that it hadn't before: People could literally die if we did our jobs wrong." (Messer 2021)

Crucially, the use of emotional labour can also be extended to the management of online abuse and trolling within journalism. Binns (2017) argues the effort required of journalists to deal with constant criticism online not only constitutes emotional labour, but likens doing so to debating with a "Hydra-headed monster" (Binns 2017 p. 191).

The concept of emotional labour in journalism provides a useful tool with which to analyse the responses of Australian journalists in semi-structured interviews because of its relationship to established journalistic ideals such as objectivity and detachment. It also provides a sociological framework for analysis of journalists' descriptions of their perceived trauma, as opposed to a therapeutic or medical model.

### *2.3.5 Other factors*

The use of emotional labour to set aside authentic emotional reaction to a story could explain the long-held perception journalists were made of "Teflon", or immune to the emotional impact of stories they cover (Houston et al. 2019; Hughes, Stuart 2011; Lee, Ha & Pae 2018). It has also led to the need for statements reminding others that journalists are, after all, human (Gaba 1991; Hill, Luther & Slocum 2020; Norwood, Walsh & Owen 2003; Tandoc & Takahashi 2018), while Feinstein notes that there is only so much a person can take:

> Like their war colleagues, the domestic journalists each respond differently to traumatic and stressful events. Apply enough pressures, and symptoms of psychological distress become frequent. (Feinstein 2006, p. 149)

The types of stories covered by journalists can provide insight into the kinds of events they cover and their exposure to trauma over the course of a career. Psychometric tests such as the Journalist Traumatic Exposure Scale have been applied in several countries such as the United States (Pyevich, Newman & Daleiden 2003), Finland (Backholm & Björkqvist 2010), Korea (Lee, Ha & Pae 2018), Pakistan (Shah et al. 2020) and the United Kingdom (Williams & Cartwright 2021) to identify these types of stories. In Australia, McMahon (2001) identified murder, rape, vehicle accidents, fire, child abuse, domestic violence and natural disaster to be among the types of traumatic incidents reported by journalists. Stories involving children in other ways were also known to be traumatic for journalists (Browne, Evangeli & Greenberg 2012; Dubberley 2020; Huxford & Hopper 2020; MacDonald, Hodgins & Saliba 2017; Simpson, Coté & Scherer 2006; Teegen & Grotwinkel 2001). While Smith, Newman and Drevo (2015) identified a set of risk factors for journalists, as mentioned in section 2.3.1, other factors linked to trauma include those requiring a journalist to be immersed in a story for a protracted amount of time (Dworznik-Hoak 2020a; Muller 2010; Seely 2019; Simpson, Coté & Scherer 2006) and those contributing to cumulative exposure to trauma through repetition of story subject (Browne, Evangeli & Greenberg 2012; Dadouch & Lilly 2021; Pyevich, Newman & Daleiden 2003).

Bullying and harassment (both physical and online or digital, such as trolling) have also been known to influence journalists' decision-making. Research conducted in the United States but involving journalists from other countries found 37 per cent avoided covering certain stories and 29 per cent considered leaving journalism as a result of being attacked, threatened or harassed (Ferrier 2019); Miller (2021) found 47 per cent of journalists under 25 had considered doing so for the same reason. ABC presenter Leigh Sales announced that she was quitting as

host of the network's nightly current affairs program after almost 12 years, six months after her mental health was flagged with network executives (Sharp 2022). This was about that time she wrote that the trolling towards her had become worse:

> It is that the bullying and harassment now comes, not in an occasional phone call from a real person, but at a furious pace on social media from politicians' acolytes, lackeys, fans and proxies, mostly—but not always—operating anonymously. It is non-stop, personal, often vile, frequently unhinged and regularly based on fabrications. It has the effect of an angry phone call from a politician magnified thousands of times over. (Sales 2021)

This results in a net loss to the industry, and to audiences, who have already suffered a decline in quality reporting—particularly in regional areas—due to large-scale job losses in recent years according to Zion and colleagues (2016b). It is estimated that a quarter of all journalist jobs in Australia were lost between 2011 and 2017, leading to increased workloads for those remaining (Ricketson et al. 2020).

> In the weeks leading up to the announcement of the results of redundancy process it became obvious that the company was keen to rid itself of the bulk of its older and senior journalists. People with 30-plus years' experience, some of whom had literally put their lives on the line while reporting … walked out the door with no public acknowledgement. (Ricketson et al. 2020, p. 62)

Increasing workloads and media convergence also required many journalists to file multiple versions of the same story for different media formats. This work requires the journalist to be immersed in the issue while also repeating salient facts:

> The news industry's changing landscape has increased the demands put on journalists, making them more likely to cover traumatic stories and more likely to cover these types of stories more frequently. (Seely 2019, p. 241)

These factors all contribute to the organisational stressors facing Australian journalists and influence their experience of traumatic stress (Dadouch & Lilly 2021; Herbert 2005; Monteiro, Marques Pinto & Roberto 2016; Willis 2003). The need to manage "the specter of redundancy" (Rizzi 2020, p. 182), job insecurity and constant technological change has cumulative effects on journalists' mental wellbeing (Wahl-Jorgensen & Hanitzsch 2020), while Calumbiran (2021) further asserts that the experience of trauma can affect the quality of a journalist's work.

These factors further compound the pressures already faced by journalists, who are "having to do more with less" according to Nee and Chacòn (2021, p. 5). They found journalists were dealing with increased organisational stressors, along with lower perceived organisational support, during the COVID-19 pandemic, amid a context of industry downsizing and digital disruption. This was also the experience of UK journalists, who argued that journalists who are not mentally well "cannot properly tell the stories that matter to their audiences" (Bailey 2020). Zion and colleagues (2016b) argue the loss of experienced journalists through trauma and abuse not only threatens the quality of reporting, but the long-term viability of Australia's news media. Further, Wake (quoted in Quinn 2021) believes it can damage Australian democracy itself. Further argument for this was provided by Kelly (2022), who claimed that "cheaper to produce" opinion stories and breaking news had increased in Australian journalism at the expense of expert coverage of political issues and detailed investigations.

### *2.3.6 Coping mechanisms*

The emotional labour performed by Australian journalists can also have a positive effect, particularly on others. Simunjak (2022) compared the experiences of journalists working remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic in the United Kingdom with those pre-pandemic and found the socialisation performed in a newsroom environment enabled emotional release and support, as well as building confidence and team cohesion. These effects were experienced by early-career journalists, in particular. This confirms previous findings that a strong newsroom culture provides journalists with informal peer support (Huxford & Hopper 2020; Idås, Backholm & Korhonen 2019; McMahon 2016). Similarly, MacDonald and Fox (2018) found that for those exposed to trauma, working in a crew reduced both psychological and physical stress in television journalists, through mentoring and the protection of less-experienced colleagues.

Another positive response to trauma can occur through post-traumatic growth (PTG). Williams and Cartwright (2021) found that this may be influenced by the element of personal risk experienced at the time of the trauma, and whether adequate support exists from both newsroom managers and peers:

> The importance of time and space to reflect on the trauma with peers, or in open conversations with management, echoed the high scores on the PTGI 'relating to others' subscale, and reflects previous research which suggests social support and dialogue about potential ethical dilemmas, can help develop PTG. (Williams & Cartwright 2021, p. 8)

However, the importance of "opportunities to reflect" (McMahon 2016) for journalists on the road is both intensified and prevented by the repetition and immersion required in some story assignments. This increases the need for careful consideration by newsroom managers when assigning stories. This issue will be examined in more detail in section 5.2.5. Other post-traumatic growth strategies include resilience training and formal peer and management support. McMahon (2016) also found that a third factor in post-traumatic growth was being able to "step back" from a reporting role for a period of time. This supported earlier findings from Buchanan and Keats (2011), who also advocated the use of exercise in stress management.

As mentioned in section 2.3.4, the act of compartmentalisation or detachment is related to the ideal of objectivity, which Tuchman (1972) considers a coping mechanism in itself, by functioning as a prophylactic against criticism of one's work. However, detachment is also a form of emotional labour journalists use to manage their emotions in response to trauma. This can be expressed in the form of "gallows" or "black" humour, where one emotion is substituted for another (Buchanan & Keats 2011; Nunan 2011). Other coping mechanisms include avoidance strategies at work, exercise, focusing on the job and substance abuse. As discussed above, the COVID-19 pandemic brought many of the mental health issues facing journalists into sharp focus:

> It is not all the fault of the pandemic. Stress, burnout and trauma have long plagued the news industry, only we did not want to talk about it. Sleep deprivation was worn as a badge of honour. Angry outbursts of exhausted editors were revered as a sign of their grandeur. Excess drinking and substance abuse were just what everyone was doing to blow off steam, right? (Kunova 2021)

The symptoms of PTSD have previously been outlined in detail, but mention should be made of substance abuse in this context:

> Sadly, from our feedback it appears to be far from unusual for journalists to self-medicate, often with alcohol, to cope with unwanted feelings. 'There's a reason journalists drink' as one respondent (journalist 11) put it, with another observing that there was a lot of truth 'in the old stereotype of the reporter who heads straight to the bar at the end of the day' (journalist 13). (Huxford & Hopper 2020, p. 49)

Alcohol has historically played a "seemingly central" role in newsroom culture (MacDonald, Saliba & Hodgins 2016, p. 402), with Australian journalism students describing their aspirant colleagues as alcoholics "in training" (Tapsall & Varley 2001, p. 3). More recent research and anecdotal evidence suggest alcohol still plays a prominent role in Australian journalism culture (Anderson 2017). It is used by journalists to numb the pain of trauma (Buchanan & Keats 2011; Dadouch & Lilly 2021; Feinstein, Owen & Blair 2002; Lee, Ha & Pae 2018; Norwood, Walsh & Owen 2003), while Dadouch and Lilly (2021) also link increased alcohol use with PTSD and institutional betrayal in journalists. Australian journalism is replete with anecdotes of alcohol consumption—even while in the newsroom (Tabakoff 2022; Vine 2021).

### *2.3.7 Whose responsibility is journalists' mental health?*

There is a growing body of evidence about the mental and physical risks of journalism worldwide, but the issue of its impact, and ultimately of responsibility, is still unresolved:

> It is in the nature of the journalist to run towards danger rather than away from it. But the industry has been forced to confront the question: At what cost? (Green, McLellan & McMahon 2005, p. 68)

A second question could also be asked: *whose* responsibility? Martin and Murrell (2020, p. 105) argue that the news media as an institution actually depend on journalists "suppressing rather than dealing with emotional harm". While resilience training has been suggested as a possible response, they argue that such training needs to be tempered with an orientation towards social, not just individual, responsibility:

> In the case of journalism and dialogic interaction, this would mean reporters considering how they could care for themselves and others in online talk and putting limits on the extent to which they will engage in dialogue when it is damaging to their health, the health of their colleagues and their working relations. (Martin & Murrell 2020, p. 99)

Indeed, Feinstein notes the effect of journalism's cultural adherence to objectivity has been to provide employers with a sense of comfort:

> Embedded within the persona of the war journalist is an element of self-deception: the idea that he is someone who can confront war with impunity. It could be argued that this is a necessary prerequisite that allows war journalists to practice their profession. The news bosses are not immune to this way of thinking

> either, for it affords them a degree of comfort when dispatching journalists to wherever the latest conflagration erupts. (Feinstein 2006, p. 6)

However, in an ethical analysis, Calumbiran goes further, arguing that a strong journalism culture was linked to an expectation of resilience from media companies:

> It must thus be clear, in a broad sense, that media companies, like any other company, have the moral, legal, and ethical duty to protect their workers from harm, including psychological harm. (Calumbiran 2021, p. 7)

Hill (2022) found an association between physical attacks and higher likelihood of PTSD symptoms, while Ferrier (2019) asserts that physical and online reporting has become more dangerous for reporters. Reporters Without Borders (2021) list seven journalists as being attacked at various protests on the same day in Europe, and Australian journalists were also attacked both at home and overseas. A newspaper reporter and photographer were handcuffed and escorted from an anti-vaccination protest in Melbourne in early 2021 despite wearing masks and being easily identified as media (Dobbie 2021). Television reporter Amelia Brace and cameraman Tim Myers were live on air when they were attacked by US police as the police charged at protesters in Washington, DC. Australian reporters were involved in four other incidents and attacks involving police or others, while in the execution of their duties during 2021, while hostility towards journalists in New Zealand is also increasing, according to Stevens (2022). In its 2021 Press Freedom Report, the union for journalists in Australia associates such attacks with trauma:

> The trauma that arises from the wave of abuse is a clear workplace health and safety issue that must be addressed by media employers, social media platforms and lawmakers. (Dobbie 2021)

However, the threats and attacks faced by journalists are not confined to the physical, according to Ferrier (2019):

> Not only are they being required to use social channels as part of their work, they are also using social channels that blend personal and professional identities, exposing them to threats 24 hours a day, seven days a week, from domestic and international sources. (Ferrier 2019, p. 11)

This is consistent with a report from Australia's Press Freedom Report:

> Much of the abuse, harassment and threats are directed at women journalists. Often the abuse relates not to their journalism but to their gender. The abuse is a weapon to hurt and to harm, to goad and provoke a response and to spur others into piling on. The abuse directed at women is the exercise of deeply ingrained misogyny from male abusers. (Dobbie 2021)

ABC TV host Lisa Millar closed her Twitter account in response to a level of animosity that went "well beyond" criticism of her work, in what Quinn (2021) described as "gender-based abuse". This is also consistent with research into online violence against female journalists commissioned by UNESCO (Posetti, Harrison & Waisbord 2020):

> Since 2016, several studies have concluded that some women journalists are withdrawing from frontline reporting, removing themselves from public online conversations, quitting their jobs, and even abandoning journalism in response to their experience of online violence. (Posetti, Harrison & Waisbord 2020)

Martin and Murrell (2020) assert that journalism practice has historically depended on the suppression of emotions associated with emotional labour, while at the same time caring poorly for its employees:

> Sustained attacks can have the effect of overwhelming the victim, distracting them from their work and damaging their public reputation, while targeted threats can raise concerns about the physical safety of journalists and their loved ones. Some women journalists say they self-censor their reporting, avoiding contentious topics and social media engagement, feel the violence has affected their career trajectory and have considered leaving the profession. (Martin & Murrell 2020)

This is supported by evidence from Lyall (2012), who found 135 mental health claims had been lodged with workers' compensation authorities against Australian media outlets in the decade to 2010. A total of $4.2 million had been paid in compensation to employees, with an average of 26.4 weeks' time off work per person. Claimants included journalists, camera operators, sound technicians and TV equipment operators, pointing to a growing argument to shift the onus of responsibility:

> [P]eer support doesn't remove the ultimate responsibility of the employer to create a safe working environment and to respond to occupational hazards. (Lyall 2012, p. 41)

Shortly after Lyall's book was published, journalists' risk of trauma and breach of duty of care received increasing attention in Australian legal circles:

> Given the prevalence of research on news journalists and risk of psychiatric injury, it is surprising that Australian courts and workers' compensation schemes have often not had to consider issues of foreseeability of injury and breach of duty in the context of common law proceedings brought by a psychiatrically injured news journalist against his or her media-outlet employer. The material available on the risk of news journalists suffering psychiatric injury is extensive. In the face of such extensive material, it is tempting to conclude that the occupation of a news journalist is intrinsically dangerous from a psychiatric perspective. (Knoester 2013, p. 44)

It is clear that journalism in Australia can be stressful and carries significant physical and mental risks:

> Just as today's journalists ought to realize that being the first on a critical scene carries significant physical and psychological risks (Hight & Smyth, 2003), the media organizations also need to acknowledge that journalists are in a risky profession and subject to physical and psychological traumas and, therefore, should be responsibly involved in the promotion of their mental health and well-being. (Monteiro & Marques Pinto 2017, p. 478)

Further, in April 2022, the High Court of Australia found in favour of a Victorian lawyer who appealed a decision to overturn the $435,000 in damages she was awarded, after suffering PSTD while working for Victoria's Office of Public Prosecutions. The High Court's unanimous finding was considered "ground-breaking":

> Her lawyer, Patsy Toop, described the case as "extremely important and significant for workplace psychiatric injury that's suffered generally throughout Australia" … [Employers] should be aware that "there are significant occupational health and safety issues around mental health" and that when "work is dangerously traumatic … there's a likelihood of these individuals developing psychiatric illness", she says. "The onus is very much on the employer to develop policies and procedures to deal with the way in which they help people to continue working [and] not expose them to trauma all the time." (Kelsey-Sugg & Carrick 2022)

These findings provide evidence the onus of responsibility for employee psychiatric and physical safety rests with Australian employers, including those from media companies.

## 2.4 Journalism production

The study of journalism benefits from perspectives from a melting pot of academic disciplines such as sociology, psychology, political science, philosophy and anthropology (Wahl-Jorgensen 2020). However, Couldry (2004) advocates the use of practice theory, which asks what people (in this case, journalists) are doing and how they categorise these actions. This research adopts the same model and will examine journalism production in two parts: through the discourse of journalism and through the profession's routine activities (Couldry 2004). It will begin by discussing decision-making in news production, including the application of news values, the framing of news and the construction of story angles, and will continue through discussion of the context in which decision-making occurs.

Ahva (2017, p. 1529) argues that journalism is best seen as a set of practices, and posits that because practice theory draws from philosophy, gender theory, cultural theory, and science and technology studies, it is especially suitable for the analysis of journalism. She notes:

> Practice theory seems fitting for journalism studies, because journalism is certainly characterized by routine enactments. In its simplest form, journalism consists of regular core practices of selection, production and distribution of information to a public not previously known to the author or to each other. (Ahva 2017, p. 1529)

These routine enactments include the practices of newsgathering and news writing, as well as the technical production and broadcast or publication of news stories:

> Approaching media as practice provides a productive way of analysing not only the complex range of aural experiences, political interventions, and journalistic activities that emerge when we ask what people are doing in relation to listening, but also the rationales they offer for the turn to listening in journalism and media practice. (O'Donnell 2009, p. 503)

The routine practices of newsgathering and news writing and the reasons or rationales for them will be considered in this thesis, through decision-making in journalism and how it affects the experience of trauma on the road.

### *2.4.1 Decision-making in journalism (discourse in practice)*

Journalists are concerned with "what makes news", or the evaluation of facts for inclusion in news stories, which can be considered through the assessment of news values and the subsequent framing and development of story angles. This assessment of newsworthiness is distinct from the intrinsic value of the events themselves. In her seminal work, Tuchman (1973) considers this process of "routinizing the unexpected" in terms of newsroom routines, or sets of organisational tasks journalists use in various situations considered through the relative unexpectedness of a story. She argues that the use of journalists' "'expert' or 'professional' stock of knowledge" (Tuchman 1973, p. 123) enables them to impose order on unexpected chaos in situations such as breaking news. In contrast, Bourdieu (2001, p. 250) sees this as a form of homogeneity produced by journalism's "game of mirrors", associated with competition in the field. However, at the same time he draws a distinction between journalism as a commercial enterprise and journalism at its operational level, undertaken by "the invisible drones who put the news together" (Bourdieu 2001, p. 255). These drone journalists, he argues, are under "dreadful" pressure as they evaluate information in the hunt for the extraordinary in a news story. However, what is extraordinary to a reader, may be considered "perfectly ordinary" by the journalist (Bourdieu 2001, p. 248). This observation is significant because it leads to the suggestion that repeated exposure to events such as fires, floods and murders may influence perceptions to vary greatly between readers and the journalist reporting these events. This research which will investigate how many times a journalist can expect to cover certain types of news stories over the course of their career (RQ1) and the impact it has had on them (RQ2). Further, this research will consider the use of such journalistic "glasses" (Bourdieu 2001, p. 247)—the selection of facts through news values—to determine whether certain news values are more likely to be evident in stories Australian journalists found traumatic (RQ3). This theoretical approach falls closest to what Scheufele (2004) calls the "communicator approach", dealing particularly with journalist cognition. Therefore, in contrast to the "end-user" or media effects approach (McQuail & Deuze 2021; Scheufele 2004; Scheufele 1999; Valkenburg, Peter & Walther 2016), this research considers the meanings and interpretations placed on information by the journalist in their decision-making (Zhong & Newhagen 2009) while on the road.

News values "refer to journalists' judgement of how relevant news factors of a particular news story are" (Tandoc, Cheng & Maitra 2021), while Brighton and Foy (2007) argue that news values "isolate the features of an event which make it likely to qualify as newsworthy". The use of this "sacred knowledge, the secret ability of the news man which differentiates him from

other people" (Tuchman 1972, p. 672), known as news judgement, is still considered useful despite objections by one of its original proponents (Haagerup 2019) and the use of digital audience metrics (Tandoc, Cheng & Maitra 2021; Zelizer 2019). News values can be evaluated through "the [intensity of] intrinsic qualities of an event, on the one hand, and the significance ascribed to these qualities, on the other hand" (Paulussen & Van Aelst 2021, p. 41). The significance considered in this context refers to certain news values only, not the worth or otherwise of the events they describe. To consider this journalistic significance, Conley and Lamble (2006, p. 83) define these intrinsic elements as:

- Impact
- Conflict
- Timeliness
- Proximity
- Prominence
- Currency
- Human interest, and
- The unusual.

While the news value of Impact is widely applied in journalism theory, it is also known as Relevance, Significance or Consequence. As the impact being defined in this news value is on the reader rather than the journalist, the use of the word "Impact" in this research may lead to confusion, so the alternative term "Consequence" will be used instead. Conley and Lamble (2006, p. 85) describe this news value as the most common criterion for a news story: "the greater the impact, the bigger the story". Examples include the Boxing Day tsunami of 2004, wars and armed conflict, the COVID-19 pandemic and the September 11 attacks in the United States. These stories are more likely to involve large-scale, critical or emergency events, which may place the journalist under greater pressure than they are accustomed to, due to the scale of seriousness or the number of people affected (Allan & Zelizer 2011). News stories that satisfy the criterion of Consequence are often also those covering events that are most momentous, as they can have "multi-faceted" consequences, which signify both weight and importance (Conley & Lamble 2006, p. 85).

The news value of Conflict can involve stories about literal conflict, such as war or other types of armed combat, but this news value can also be applied to stories of metaphorical/ideological and stylised conflict, such as politics (O'Neill & Harcup 2020; Schultz 2007) or sport (Webb, Schirato & Daniher 2002). While not specifically mentioning news values, it is nonetheless possible to infer these from the rounds or "beats" journalists occupy:

> Studies focusing on the occupational characteristics of threatened journalists suggest that certain newsbeats and positions in the media outlet may expose journalists to greater risk … This may be because watchdog journalism can plunge a journalist into headlong conflict with corrupt politicians or police. (Hughes, Sallie & Márquez-Ramírez 2018, pp. 543, 554)

Further, recent research from Mexico explicitly connects journalism practised using the Fourth Estate ideal to a heightened risk of violence, intimidation and harassment for some journalists:

> Investigative reporters and journalists covering crimes, human rights, and dangerous environments are frequent targets. (Cancino-Borbón, Barrios & Salas-Vega 2022, p. 92)

Stories on crime and human rights abuses and those covered in dangerous or unstable environments would therefore be likely to satisfy either or both the news values of Consequence and Conflict. Trauma involves events or experiences that involve "major threat to the physical, emotional or psychological safety or well-being" (APA 2017) of individuals and their loved ones. It can also be cumulative (Browne, Evangeli & Greenberg 2012; Dadouch & Lilly 2021; Pyevich, Newman & Daleiden 2003). This thesis will therefore seek to answer the following questions:

> RQ3: Are stories with the news values of Consequence and Conflict more likely to be traumatic for the journalists covering them? and
>
> RQ4: Test if a previously developed Story Category Matrix (see Appendix B) has some relationship to the previous question, in other words, does the Story Category Matrix have some relationship to these values in a way that will be useful to journalists?

In investigating the risk and impact of traumatic assignments on journalists in Australia, section 5.5 examines whether the stories with the news values of Consequence and Conflict are more likely to be traumatic for the journalists covering them.

### *2.4.2 Decision-making in action (routine activities, imperatives and context)*

Two elements providing both context and imperatives in journalism culture include the pressure arising from meeting deadlines and the requirement to adapt to changing technology. At different times in the history of the profession, technology has been heralded as the harbinger of all kinds of new threats and possibilities (Deuze 2007, p. 153):

> Charles Lindstrom (1960) described the newsman, "caught by the cutting edge of creeping deadlines and lashed to the newsroom clock in the pit of circulation unlimited, a cavernous maw nearly filled with ads, gewgaws, divertissement, and fiction. The pit must be further filled with the issue of reporters' typewriters, with 'news of the moment,' or store-bought features". (Hardt & Brennen 1995, p. 11)

However, over the past 20 years, Australian journalists have been required to accommodate these pressures through the routine activities of newsgathering and news writing, amid a declining workforce (Hanusch 2015) similar to that experienced in other parts of the world (Simunjak 2022). Since 2012, Australia's media workforce has faced the "most serious contraction in its history" (O'Donnell, Zion & Sherwood 2016), placing the Fourth Estate "under very real threat" (Vine 2017) through the loss of an estimated total of 5000 journalism jobs:

> More journalism jobs have been lost in the past year than in any other 12-month period. MEAA estimated that over the course of 2020 at least 1000 jobs disappeared from the Australian media industry, with journalists at rural and regional media outlets the hardest hit. (Dobbie 2021, p. 70)

The average working hours of a journalist have increased (Hanusch 2015, p. 48), while working conditions have further intensified or "sped up" due to budget cuts (Hampton 2009; MacDonald & Fox 2018). The pressure to be first and fast in a digital environment is also having an effect, diminishing the quality of journalistic work and "minimizing or bypassing editorial review and fact-checking" (Anderson, Downie & Schudson 2016; Zion et al. 2016b). This precarity of employment, intensification of workload and concern about declining quality coincide with a high burnout rate in journalists and declining levels of wellbeing (Dobbie 2021; Monteiro, Marques Pinto & Roberto 2016). This pressure is further exacerbated by the need to be "always on" in a 24/7 online environment (Herbert 2005; Pearson et al. 2021; Reinardy 2011; Snowden & Green 2007), but those covering stories involving the news values of Consequence and Conflict may be particularly vulnerable: "Every minute is a deadline now for

the journalist covering catastrophe. There is little rest for the modern digital-age journalist" (Herbert 2005, p. 78).

"Omnipresent" organisational factors such as these outlined above have been linked to an increased risk of burnout in journalists (MacDonald et al. 2016, p. 35). The "emotional toll of working as a journalist" (Osmann, Jonas et al. 2021, p. 477) is also cumulative, as mentioned in section 2.3.1 and evidenced in this tweet from Australian journalist Bernard Keane:

> I always thought in my job the problem would be I'd run out of things to write about. But the main problem is the psychological toll of dealing with an incessant tide of stupidity, lies and bullshit. It grinds you down, slowly but surely. Makes you miserable, angry and cynical. (Keane 2021)

Australian reporters were the subject of several attacks while working in high-intensity environments overseas in 2020. According to Flannery's (2021) definition, this makes them victims of these stories, not just messengers, and therefore possible candidates for developing psychological trauma, including PTSD. Workplace factors such as exposure to work-related traumatic events and perceived organisational support have been linked to the likelihood of developing PTSD symptoms (Smith, Drevo & Newman 2017). The same authors (2015) also cite occupational intimidation and harassment as a predictive factor in developing PTSD, depression and substance abuse.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also contributed to a volatile environment for journalists. One reporter was sprayed with urine and injured at a protest in Melbourne when a drink can was thrown at his head—on the same day:

> I want to report what they are saying, I want to report on their cause, and hope to get some respect and be treated in a way that's better than that. What happened came out of nowhere. Didn't see it coming. It's such a cowardly way to behave. (Dowsley, quoted in Paynter & Clench 2021)

A worldwide survey including Australian journalists revealed that 70 per cent of those surveyed found the impact on their mental health was the most difficult challenge of covering the pandemic (Dobbie 2022, p. 14), while a second survey found "mental health and uncertainty for the future" were the two greatest challenges faced by Australian journalists (Dobbie 2022, p. 17). The union for Australian journalists (MEAA) reported 92.5 per cent of respondents to its annual press freedom survey feared threats, harassment and intimidation of

journalists were increasing (Percy, cited in Dobbie 2022, p. 3). The same union-sponsored survey also found journalists were "unprepared for working in this dangerous environment" (Phillips, cited in Dobbie 2022, p. 29), as only 27.4 per cent agreed their employer had provided sufficient training and support when they faced threats and/or assaults. Situations such as these may also constitute institutional betrayal, where a trusted entity such as an employer has failed to protect a worker, leading to greater risk of developing PTSD while at the same time decreasing the chances a journalist will actually seek help from their employer (Dadouch & Lilly 2021).

Further, misogyny and online violence pose "a real threat" to women's participation in journalism and public communication (Posetti, Harrison & Waisbord 2020), with Australian women journalists leaving social media accounts or their jobs after sustained and personal attacks (Ferrier 2019; Sales, 2021; Sharp 2022).

Newsgathering and news writing practices and the pressures under which they are practised help to explain journalism's "intrinsic" stress (Monteiro, Marques Pinto & Roberto 2016, p. 766). However, when exacerbated by industry contraction and media convergence, as well as physical, verbal and online threats that constitute institutional betrayal, and repeated exposure to certain types of stories, the effects can be traumatic.

### *2.4.3 Conclusion*

It is possible to ask journalists to describe their mental or emotional responses to certain assignments, even though in another discipline such as psychology these responses might lead to a diagnosis of PTSD. However, to guard against drawing unqualified clinical conclusions—either the researcher's or respondents'—responses will be considered in light of their application in the field of journalism only. This builds on the research of Henningham (1984, 1996, 1997), Place (1992), Suiter (2001) Castle (1999, 2002) and Green (2005, 2008; Green, Bilboe & Sykes 2004; Green & Sykes 2005), as it is oriented in journalism practice and Australian in origin.

Despite extensive research conducted into PTSD in other first responders, "only a handful" of these in relative terms consider journalists' experience of trauma (Tandoc & Takahashi 2018, p. 920). Similarly, the trauma suffered by journalists after covering certain assignments is under-researched in this country. It is also not known how many times in a career journalists are personally affected by the stories they are covering. This thesis will investigate the risk and traumatic impact of certain stories on Australian journalists resulting from their assignments

when they are on the road. This research also identifies the factors involved in managing traumatic assignments by testing whether a previously developed Trauma Category Matrix (see Appendix B) is useful in establishing a relationship with certain news values that might be valuable to journalists. Further, this is the first known research to quantify the extent to which an Australian journalist may be required to cover a story that has personally affected them over the course of a career. Journalists' own estimations of their career exposure to certain traumatic stories are collated, along with their estimations of exposure to traumatic stories they have covered that also personally affected them. This research also identifies the potential trauma responses or impacts this may have.

# 3 Methodology

## Introduction

Australian researchers have been concerned with the issue of trauma in journalism since the turn of the century, but limited empirical data has been collected since then to develop understanding in this country of the problem and its extent beyond the anecdotal. To allow the risk and the impact of traumatic assignments in Australia to be investigated fully, a mixed methods approach to data collection and analysis was used, and both qualitative and quantitative research methods were adopted. This dual approach was considered useful for several reasons. First, it supported the primary purpose of the research, which was to gain a deeper, broader understanding of the phenomenon being researched (McKim 2017). Second, a mixed methods approach was appropriate to follow up, gain detail or further clarification of data and thus enhance its validity. Third, using both quantitative and qualitative research methods allows at least one element of the research to be repeated in future, thus ensuring reliability (Silverman 2006) through triangulation of data. But most importantly, to gain a thorough understanding of the risk and impact of trauma in Australian journalists, these different aspects of the larger research problem (Hesse-Biber 2010) must be explored. More specifically, before an investigation of such a qualitative phenomenon occurs, its scale needs to be quantitatively measured, to provide a "distinctive" research question "that can be answered with a mixed methods approach" (Bryman 2008, p. 89).

The data are considered in light of the cultural studies tradition of mass media research, using a phenomenological approach (Maxwell 2009) and interpretive paradigm (Hesse-Biber 2010; Weerakkody 2015; Wimmer & Dominick 2006). This concerns a cultural approach to mass communication theory, primarily with the analysis of "the formulaic, protocol-based and routinized nature of the media production process" (McQuail & Deuze 2021). For this reason, qualitative and quantitative research methods were analysed in an integrated manner.

## 3.1 Research Questions

The primary research problem of identifying the risk and impact of journalism trauma in Australia and the extent to which it happens was investigated through the following research questions:

RQ1: How many times can a journalist expect to cover certain types of news stories during the course of their career?

RQ2: What impact has that had upon them personally?

RQ3: Are stories with the news values of Consequence and Conflict more likely to be traumatic for the journalists covering them?

RQ4: Test if a previously developed Story Category Matrix (see Appendix B) has some relationship to the previous question, in other words, does the Story Category Matrix have some relationship to these values in a way that will be useful to journalists?

To prosecute these questions fully and analyse the complex experiences of Australian journalists and their understanding of them (O'Donnell, 2009), a practice model of research was adopted. As Couldry's (2004) use of practice theory would ask what journalists are doing, a survey was used to provide this data in both qualitative and quantitative means. This would provide data on the "breadth" of such experiences. The second part of Couldry's concept, how journalists categorise these actions, would be investigated through the use of semi-structured interviews.

Neither the research design nor the interview questions altered over the course of the research due to "implicit theories which guide work at an early stage" (Silverman 2011). As there was potential for interview subjects to be adversely affected by discussing research concepts, ethical protocols were considered and approval was obtained prior to conducting both quantitative and qualitative aspects of this research. The participant information sheet and other material relevant to the ethics protocol are attached as Appendix E.

## 3.2 Research design

The use of qualitative and quantitative methods was necessary to provide essential detail and context about the risk and impact on journalists in Australia (McNeill & Chapman 2005; Strauss 1987). This approach had two main advantages. First, approaching the primary research questions in the tradition of qualitative research allowed the benefits of attaining both complexity through qualitative methods along with the objectivity afforded by quantitative research (Hesse-Biber 2010). Second, using mixed methods gave the advantage of being able to test the validity of data obtained through either method (Hesse-Biber 2010; Maxwell 2009; Silverman 2006):

> Beginning with a quantitative study in order to establish a sample of respondents and to establish the broad contours of the field. Then using qualitative research to look in depth at a key issue using some of the earlier sample. (Silverman 2011, p. 48)

Both methods were employed in a parallel or concurrent design (Hesse-Biber 2010, p. 70), placing primacy on the qualitative research questions, RQ1–RQ4. Quantitative data were collected from a self-administered survey, while the qualitative data were gathered from some portions of the survey but primarily from in-depth, semi-structured interviews.

### *3.2.1 Sampling technique*

#### 3.2.1.1 Quantitative data collection

The quantitative portion of this research was conducted using a self-administered survey, which asked journalists to provide details about the types of assignments they considered traumatic (if any), the estimated number of times they had covered such assignments and the effect (if any) it had upon them personally. This form of data collection was conducted first to "provide options for enhancing the validity and reliability of qualitative findings" (Hesse-Biber 2010, p. 66). This survey instrument also elicited a number of demographic variables, such as gender, age, length of career, geographic location (city/town and state/territory), current newsroom role and number of traumatic assignments covered (Muijs 2004; Weerakkody 2015; Wimmer & Dominick 2006), to provide context to the research through an overview of journalists' experience in Australia. This enabled a sample to be obtained across Australia from journalists and other media workers across all platforms (print, radio, television and online) and status (part-time, full-time or freelance). No stipulations were placed on whether a respondent needed to be currently working or retired, as the purpose of the survey was to elicit data over the course of a respondent's career. A breakdown of demographic data of survey respondents is included in Appendix A.

The survey was hosted online through CANVASS, a web survey service through the Australian Consortium for Social and Political Research, to allow for ease of access by potential respondents (Muijs 2004). It included a Participant Information Sheet and consent form as required by the University of South Australia (Appendix E) which all respondents needed to read before answering questions. Access to the URL was primarily provided through an invitation email, which included a brief introduction and the survey URL. However, promoting awareness of the survey and distribution of the survey URL raised a number of issues. First, the University of South Australia's

Human Research Ethics Application for this research proposed that the survey URL be distributed using the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA) mailing list (Idås, Backholm & Korhonen 2019). The MEAA is the union representing journalists in Australia and the closest thing to a professional body that exists in this country; it was selected to ensure access to as broad a range of metropolitan and regional journalists in the country as possible.

This method of distribution posed a significant limitation, however, as membership in a union is not required to undertake the work of a journalist in Australia so not all members of the media are members of the union. By extension, no definitive, verifiable list of journalists exists in Australia (North 2012). Nonetheless, the infrastructure and networking facilitated by the MEAA remains an efficient means of accessing a wide range of working journalists in Australia and has been the primary distribution system for previous Australian research in 1996 and 2012 (North 2012).

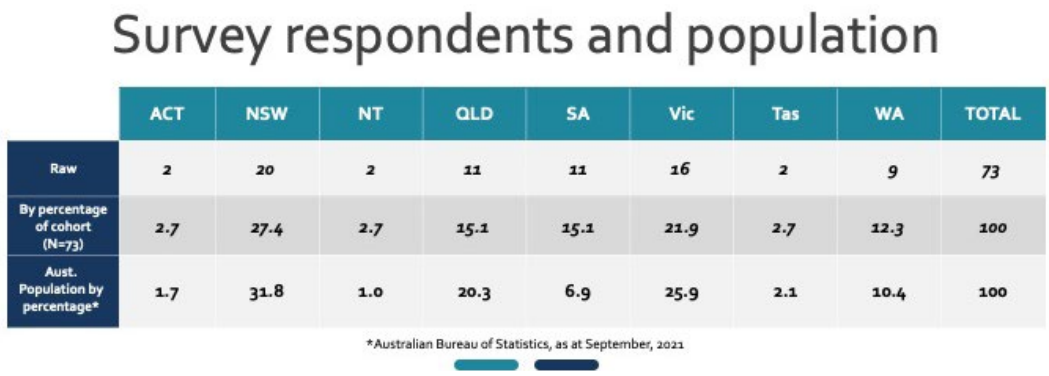
Second, to ensure access to the survey beyond MEAA membership, the snowball technique (Morgan 2008) was also employed by using informal networks among journalists to provide a secondary distribution system for the survey email. In the third instance, social media networks including Twitter and closed Facebook groups were also used to distribute the URL link to the survey (Moy & Murphy 2016) to obtain a robust and representative overview of the industry. In one instance, the survey URL was spontaneously shared to a closed Facebook writers' group by a recipient, demonstrating the usefulness of this technique.

Third, email participants were identified through *Margaret Gee's Media Guide* (Information Australia 2000), which was accessed through the University of South Australia's Library subscription. Specifically, in an introductory covering email recipients were requested to consider distributing the survey to their colleagues, workmates, employees, students, industry friends and acquaintances as appropriate. This approach also included locating former journalists who left the industry voluntarily or through redundancy, using a similar approach to Harvey and colleagues (2016) whose research included retired firefighters.

Fourth, some individuals were approached to provide endorsement and distribution of the survey and email it to their personal or professional networks. These individuals are sometimes referred to as methodological "gatekeepers" (Donoso 2021; McNeill & Chapman 2005). In this instance these individuals were not asked to provide contact details of potential participants, but to distribute the survey URL and its covering email directly.

The survey was distributed to Australian journalists via email, social media and word of mouth. A total of 207 emails containing a cover note and survey URL in which the Participant Information Sheet and consent forms were embedded were sent directly by the researcher. Of these, 106 responses were received, resulting in a response rate of 51 per cent. The survey contained 35 questions. However, as not all questions in the survey were compulsory, resulting in the omission of 33 responses through duplication or incompletion, a total of 73 complete responses were received. These results were analysed using the General Linear Model in SPSS to identify statistically significant differences in instances of traumatic reporting assignments, especially with reference to the Story Category Matrix (Appendix C). Baruch and Holtom (2008) recommend the response rate be calculated using the number of usable responses, which therefore takes the response rate to the survey to 35 per cent. This rate compares favourably with international research on journalism trauma, including Browne, Evangeli and Greenberg (2012), which used a sample of 50 journalists, with a response rate of 15 per cent. A similar German study by Teegan and Grotwinkel (2001) used 61 responses, although participants were drawn from the USA and Europe. Despite its sample size, the research for this thesis is therefore commensurate with similar research around the world. It was not intended to provide a representative sample, due to the self-selective nature of the survey, however responses were received in every state and territory in Australia in roughly proportionate numbers to the population (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2021a). The highest responses were from New South Wales and Victoria respectively, while the lowest number were from the two territories and Tasmania. A larger than proportionate number of responses was received from South Australia, but this was to be expected (Muijs 2004) as the researcher is well known to journalists in this state, either directly or by reputation. As mentioned in the Introduction to this thesis, bearing witness to the traumatic experiences of colleagues was the impetus behind this research. A breakdown of the respondents by home state or territory as compared with the Australian population is included in Table 1.

**Table 1** Breakdown of survey respondents by home state location



Survey respondents and population

| | ACT | NSW | NT | QLD | SA | Vic | Tas | WA | TOTAL |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Raw | 2 | 20 | 2 | 11 | 11 | 16 | 2 | 9 | 73 |
| By percentage of cohort (N=73) | 2.7 | 27.4 | 2.7 | 15.1 | 15.1 | 21.9 | 2.7 | 12.3 | 100 |
| Aust. Population by percentage* | 1.7 | 31.8 | 1.0 | 20.3 | 6.9 | 25.9 | 2.1 | 10.4 | 100 |

*Australian Bureau of Statistics, as at September, 2021

The survey questions were arranged in three sections:

1 demographic data (about you)

2 perceptions of traumatic experiences (your experience)

3 professional experience (professional experience)

Most questions were structured in both closed (yes/no) and open-ended formats allowing brief written responses (Wimmer & Dominick 2013), while other questions designed to elicit numerical data allowed participants to select from a range of numbers arranged on a ratio scale (Sarantakos 2013).

#### 3.2.1.2 Qualitative data collection

As part of a mixed methods design, the self-administered survey included questions that allowed for both qualitative and quantitative responses. The qualitative responses invited respondents to provide brief answers explaining or providing examples of their experiences. Further, at two points within the survey (that is, at the end of sections B and C) respondents were asked whether they would like to take part in the interview portion of the research. This was aimed at strengthening the reliability of the research findings:

> By linking the qualitative with the quantitative at the data-gathering stage (i.e., the researcher draws a qualitative sample directly from the quantitative sample first collected), the researcher is given the possibility of assessing the validity and reliability of her or his qualitative findings. (Hesse-Biber 2010, p. 66)

The interview component of the research was considered an important means to elicit detailed data from respondents, as no known study has asked journalists specifically about the extent of their coverage of stories of a traumatic nature across a career. The final question of section B asked whether respondents wished to be interviewed using a yes/no answer format. A total of 34 respondents, or 47 per cent indicated they would be willing to be interviewed. From those, a total of 12 respondents were selected from every mainland state to provide a spread of representation from across Australia. Volunteers' gender, employment status and media type were also considered, to ensure representation of women, freelance and journalists working outside newspapers/online and provide a non-random, purposive sample (Weerakkody 2015, p. 192). Two respondents were interviewed twice to ascertain more detail and clarify responses from their initial interview, resulting in a total of 14 interviews in a 7:5 male/female split. They were also recruited from various media sectors (see Table 2). While one journalist identified as a print-only journalist, as their stories had also appeared online they were reclassified as a "multimedia" journalist, to be consistent with respondents from other newspapers. The introductory email describing the aims of the research invited journalists to take part in the survey regardless of their experiences, to gain insight into these experiences and coping mechanisms, both positive and negative. Consequently, it was considered necessary to include such "voices and experiences" (Silverman 2006, p. 114) involving complex issues from this hitherto under-researched cohort. Two volunteers who said they had not been emotionally affected by a story they had covered were also included in the interview group. That is, these respondents answered no to question B07: "Have you ever covered a traumatic story that affected you emotionally, or that you can't forget?".

**Table 2** Interview participants by media type

Interview participants by media type

| | Percentage |
|---|---|
| Television | 33 |
| Multi-media | 42 |
| Print | 8 |
| Radio | 8 |
| Online | 8 |

N=12

The interview process was severely disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, which necessitated the use of the online video chat platform Zoom to complete the interviews (Wimmer & Dominick 2013). All but one of these interviews were conducted on Zoom as interstate movement was restricted at that time and lockdowns were instituted (Branco & Wood 2021). The exception to this was the first interview, which was conducted face to face before the pandemic. While all participants agreed to be identified, it was later decided that they would not be identified specifically by name, to remain consistent with other academic research. The application of their survey responses to create an individual Story Category Matrix was employed instead to provide context to their responses and reflect the mixed methods employed. The various themes and concepts that emerged during the interviews are discussed in detail in Chapter 5.

The interviews for this research were conducted using a semi-structured method (Houston et al. 2019; Silverman 2006; Weerakkody 2015) and ranged in duration from approximately 30 minutes to 90 minutes. Participants were asked similar questions but not always in the same order, and given as much time as they wished to answer. Field notes, interview notes and in one case meta notes and transcripts were all employed for this portion of the research and were made after each interview (Silverman 2006; Strauss 1987; Weerakkody 2015; Wimmer & Dominick 2006), including observations about the setting of the interview, participants' non-verbal responses and the interviewer's perception of the quality of the interview conducted. These were separate from a series of notes taken on each of the interviews themselves, which

were concerned with the content of the interview. In one case, the interview was punctuated at several intervals by the participant needing to leave to attend to a sick child—one interval was approximately 15 minutes long. Field notes from this interview contained a record of these breaks, but also the observation that the participant was so invested in what she was saying that she continued after each interruption as though nothing had happened. Watching the recording during the transcription stage of data analysis, it was not possible to tell from the participant's demeanour on the Zoom recording (Weerakkody 2015) there had been any interruptions, and the researcher had forgotten they had happened as well. The only indication was provided in the accompanying field notes. In another case, the field notes mentioned a concern that a migraine may have affected the researcher's ability to conduct an interview of comparable standard to the others. Again, the only indication of this risk was contained in these notes, indicating neither participants' focus nor contribution were diminished.

## 3.3 Data analysis

A mixed methods approach was used for this research, in both data collection and analysis. A fixed model of thematic analysis was employed to "identify a set of themes that reflect the essence of the textual data, and to discover recurrent patterns" (Sarantakos 2013, p. 379). As Sarantakos points out, in some cases quantitative procedures can strengthen qualitative conclusions while also producing quantitative results.

Grounded theory was considered as a method of research practice due to its employment of constant comparative analysis in refining concepts and categories (Chun Tie, Birks & Francis 2019). This method was not adopted, however, as Sbaraini and colleagues (2011, p. 2) assert that researchers in this method "may know little about the meanings that drive the actions of their participants". In this case, such a condition did not apply, as the researcher is a journalist with 30 years' experience, and therefore may have more than slight understanding of these meanings. Further, the "defining characteristic" of grounded theory (Birks, Hoare & Mills 2019, pp. 1, 2; Chun Tie, Birks & Francis 2019) is producing a theory, while the goal of this research was to determine research findings.

### *3.3.1 Investigating risk and impact: quantitative results*

Once data were obtained as outlined above, the results were analysed using both qualitative and quantitative methods. The results were initially analysed using the General Linear Model in SPSS to identify statistically significant differences in instances of traumatic reporting

assignments especially with reference to the Trauma Category Matrix. This is described in more detail in sections 3.3.7, 3.4 and 3.5. The main survey question (Question B01: Have you covered or witnessed a traumatic event as part of your job?) was included in the mandatory completion portion of the survey. Variables such as age, gender, type of employer and length of service were also included in the mandatory section of the survey. However, the numbers of responses in the non-mandatory questions of the survey were largely insufficient to provide a statistically significant result at the customary 0.05 level of significance. While Kim and Choi (2021) assert that this level of significance is only considered customary, the survey data were further analysed using a frequency chart and a two-sided chi-square test to reveal tendencies and facilitate description of correlations (Wimmer & Dominick 2006). Although it was not possible to identify a subsample from the data that was representative of the target population (Hesse-Biber 2010), two-sided chi-square analysis nonetheless enabled identification of clear tendencies from the data (Levaot, Sinyor & Feinstein 2013), which are discussed in detail in Chapter 4.

### *3.3.2 Career longevity*

Previous research shows that the longer a reporter is on the road, the more likely they are to report symptoms of trauma (Lee, Ha & Pae 2018; McMahon 2001; Simpson & Boggs 1999; Simpson, Coté & Scherer 2006; Smith, Newman & Drevo 2015). A chi-square test was used to test this hypothesis in an Australian setting, using Question A05: Number of years working as a journalist. The five possible options of 0–2 years, 3–5 years, 6–10 years, 11–25 years and 25+ were collapsed into three categories: 0–5 years, 6–11 years and 11+ years. This variable was compared against Question B01 “Have you covered or witnessed a traumatic event as part of your job? (That is, an event that you found traumatic, as opposed to whether someone else would have found it traumatic or whether it was considered traumatic generally)”. The variable of experience is expressed in years (see Table 3).

**Table 3** Career longevity expressed in years in journalism (collapsed) compared with experiences of trauma at work

| | Experienced Trauma Yes | Experienced Trauma No | No Answer | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Career length: 0-5 years | 16.4% | 5.5% | 4.1% | 26% |
| Career length: 6-11 years | 27.4% | 1.4% | 2.7% | 31.5% |
| Career length: 11+ years | 38.4% | 1.4% | 2.7% | 42.5% |
| TOTAL | **82.2%** | **8.2%** | **9.6%** | **100%** |

N=73

In this case the chi-square test indicated a slight tendency for length of career to be a factor in this area, although experiences of trauma were reported in all age groups. As the average length of workforce experience of an Australian journalist is 12 years (Josephi & Oller Alonso 2018), it might be expected that the greatest number of responses would appear in this career middle option of 6–11 years. However, this relatively even distribution is consistent with results from other research (Dale 2019; Embelton et al. 2003; McMahon 2001; Teegen & Grotwinkel 2001), which found that younger journalists—especially those commencing their careers—were also likely to report symptoms of trauma.

### *3.3.3 Organisational support*

Building on previous research (Idås, Backholm & Korhonen 2019; McMahon 2016; Smith 2014; Smith & Freyd 2017; Smith 2008; Smith, Drevo & Newman 2017; Weidmann, Fehm & Fydrich 2008; Weidmann & Papsdorf 2010; Williams & Cartwright 2021), it was hypothesised that a media worker's perceived organisational support may have some relationship with the age of the respondent. While not statistically significant due to the number of responses to this non-compulsory question, a chi-square test revealed a tendency towards this hypothesis in this relationship (see Table 4). As a component of mixed methods research, these results are useful to add to a "deeper understanding of experiences from the perspectives of the participants" (Johnson 2009 p26).

**Table 4** Adequate employer support compared with age of respondent

Adequate employer support & Age

| | 18-25 years | 26-30 years | 31-50 years | 51-65 years | 65+ years | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Adequate employer support YES | 1.4% | 0% | 6.8% | 4.1% | 2.7% | 15% |
| Adequate employer support NO | 1.4% | 0% | 8.2% | 6.8% | 4.1% | 21% |
| No Answer | 2.7% | 11% | 26% | 21.9% | 2.7% | 64% |
| TOTAL | **5.5%** | **11%** | **41%** | **32.8%** | **9.5%** | **100%** |

Non compulsory question
N=73

These figures reveal a tendency towards negative perceptions of employer support as the age of respondents increased. The most responses to this non-compulsory question came from the middle-aged and older age groups, which is consistent with an increase in the average age of an Australian journalist from 35 years (Josephi, Beate & Oller Alonso 2018) to 39 years (Australian Government 2022).

### *3.3.4 Traumatic events outside of work*

In order to account for any extra vulnerability to trauma (Creamer et al. 2001), it was important to consider whether Australian journalists who reported exposure to traumatic events at work had also been exposed to traumatic events in their personal lives (Backholm & Björkqvist 2010; Teegen & Grotwinkel 2001; Weidmann, Fehm & Fydrich 2008). To this end, question B06 asked "Have you ever experienced or witnessed a traumatic event outside of work? (That is, an event that you found traumatic, as opposed to whether someone else would have found it traumatic or whether it was considered traumatic generally.)" This variable was compared with responses to the main survey question, Question B01 "Have you covered or witnessed a traumatic event as part of your job? (That is, an event that you found traumatic, as opposed to whether someone else would have found it traumatic or whether it was considered traumatic generally)". Results are detailed in Table 5:

**Table 5** Experiences of a traumatic event at work compared with experiences of a traumatic event outside of work

| | Work traumatic event Yes | Work traumatic event No | No Answer | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Non-work traumatic event Yes | 38.4% | 32.9% | 11% | 82.3% |
| Non-work traumatic event No | 5.5% | 0% | 2.7% | 8.2% |
| No Answer | 0% | 0% | 9.6% | 9.6% |
| TOTAL | **43.9%** | **32.9%** | **23.3%** | **100%** |

Non compulsory question
N=73

In this case, of the 60 respondents who said they had experienced trauma while reporting, almost half (28 or 46.67 per cent) had also experienced a traumatic event outside of work, in their personal lives.

### *3.3.5 Gender*

It was hypothesised that women may be more likely to report having experienced a traumatic event as a result of their work, as previous research found they were more likely to report symptoms of stress and burnout (MacDonald et al. 2016), be at greater risk of exposure to trauma (Creamer et al. 2001) or be more likely to report harassment (Martin & Murrell 2020). In this case, the main survey Question B01 "Have you covered or witnessed a traumatic event as part of your job? (That is, an event that you found traumatic, as opposed to whether someone else would have found it traumatic or whether it was considered traumatic generally)" was compared with the variable of gender (see Table 6).

**Table 6** Gender compared with experiences of trauma at work

Gender & traumatic event

| | Traumatic event at work YES | Traumatic event at work NO | Traumatic event at work No Answer | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| MALE | 30.1% | 5.5% | 4.1% | 39.7% |
| FEMALE | 52.1% | 2.7% | 5.5% | 60.3% |
| TOTAL | **82.3%** | **8.2%** | **9.5%** | **100%** |

Non compulsory question N=66

However, a two-sided chi-square test did not indicate a strong correlation between the respondents' gender and their experience of trauma because of their work.

### *3.3.6 Current role*

The current role of respondents was also used as a significant variable to determine whether it influenced experiences of trauma at work. News executives such as chiefs-of-staff, news editors and news directors were included in this group, as people in these roles were likely to have had substantial experience as reporters before operating at senior editorial levels (Simpson & Boggs 1999). It was also relevant to consider whether those in professional categories where the focus of the work was capturing and working with visual content, such as photographers and camera operators, reported higher levels of trauma exposure at work. In this case, the main survey question, Question B01 "Have you covered or witnessed a traumatic event as part of your job? (That is, an event that you found traumatic, as opposed to whether someone else would have found it traumatic or whether it was considered traumatic generally)" was compared with respondents' current roles (see Table 7).

**Table 7** Respondents' current role compared with experiences of trauma at work

Current role & traumatic event

| | Traumatic event at work **YES** | Traumatic event at work **NO** | Traumatic event at work **No Answer** | **Total** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Reporter | 46.6% | 4.1% | 5.5% | 56.2% |
| Sub-editor | 5.5% | 0% | 1.4% | 6.9% |
| News executive | 5.5% | 1.4% | 0% | 6.9% |
| Photographer/ Camera Operator | 5.5% | 0% | 0% | 5.5% |
| Other | 19.2% | 2.7% | 2.7% | 24.6% |
| TOTAL | **82.3%** | **8.2%** | **9.6%** | **100%** |

Non compulsory question

A chi-square test revealed that while reporters were the largest respondents to the survey overall, all of those in roles with a focus on visual content reported experiencing trauma at work, while all but one of those in senior roles reported work-related trauma exposure. A significant number of reporters reported experiencing work-related trauma exposure.

### *3.3.7 Investigating risk and impact: Qualitative results*

Two sources of qualitative data were used for this research: brief written responses submitted in a free-form text field as part of the online survey; and data from semi-structured interviews. First, qualitative responses from the online survey were collated and analysed by using data analysis software NVivo. Investigating the impact of a journalist's work on them was prosecuted through several questions in the survey. The first was Question B05, which was supplementary to the main survey question, Question B01: "If you answered yes to the previous question (have you witnessed or covered a traumatic event as part of your job), what impact has this had on you personally, or on your family? Please describe". An example of a free-form text response to this question was:

> Lasting emotional and psychological toll, impact on personal relationships. (Participant 6)

Two other questions were designed to elicit qualitative answers. These were supplementary to Question C04: "How many times have you been affected by a story both personally and professionally?" The supplementary questions were Questions C05 and C06. Question C05 was "What impact (if any) did this have on your ability to recover from the event? Please describe:". An example of a response to Question C05 was:

> I had trouble concentrating and sleeping. I was also given to crying often for some time after. (Participant 71)

Question C06 was "What impact (if any) did this have on your ability to continue to perform your duties? Please describe." An example of this included:

> I found it very hard to write my stories on the subjects. I felt overly invested in the outcomes of my writing. (Participant 25)

During analysis, these responses were all collated and grouped into themes, and a frequency count was performed using the NVivo software to obtain summary statistics and an overview of the qualitative data (Hesse-Biber 2010, p. 92). This frequency count revealed the four highest responses to traumatic stories respondents described were:

1. sadness and distress
2. anxiety
3. impact on relationships
4. affected sleep or dreams; (equal 4$^{th}$ with) unsure.

This last theme (unsure) described responses from those who answered the question but said they did not know or were simply unsure of what impact their work may be having upon them. The outcomes were then added to the fifth column of the original Trauma Category Matrix (see Appendix B), which allowed for this matrix to be revised and renamed Story Category Matrix (see Appendix C) as these characteristics were revealed by data. The last column of the matrix, "Impact", indicates the impact that covering traumatic stories has had on the journalist as an individual. This updated Story Category Matrix is also presented in Figure 1 and discussed further in sections 3.3 and 3.4.

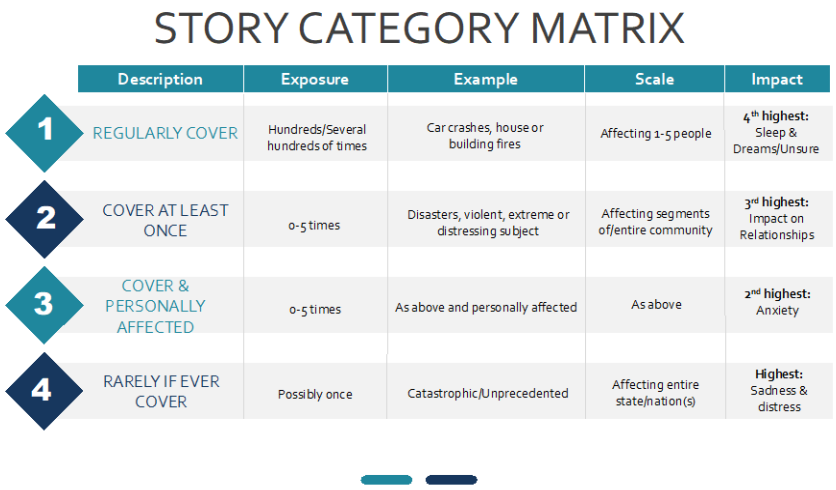



**Figure 1** The Story Category Matrix populated with results from survey data on the impact of covering traumatic stories

The other source of qualitative data was semi-structured interviews, which were also transcribed for analysis to determine common themes and sub-themes (Weerakkody 2009, p. 176). Semi-structured interviews are suitable in cases where "the researcher's interest is limited to specific topic areas and they have some idea of what they are looking for" (Weerakkody 2015, p. 187). The same questions were asked in each interview, although not verbatim or in the same order. These included seeking an overview of the participant's career; description of an assignment (known colloquially as a "job") they could not forget; which condition they found worse to experience as a journalist—immersion in a story or its repetition; and descriptions of support they had received from loved ones or colleagues. Follow-up questions were asked when necessary to seek clarity or more detail, thus demonstrating research qualities of steering and interpreting (Brinkmann 2007, p. 137). It was originally intended to conduct the interviews with a less firm structure (Qu & Dumay 2011) to provide more flexibility in exploring other relevant matters as they arose. However, Weerakkody (2015, p. 197) asserts the interviewer may probe any new lines of inquiry in semi-

structured depth interviews while still following the same interview protocol. An open-ended question at the end of the first interview ("Is there anything else you want to say?") also provided flexibility and consistency, so this question was added to the interview protocol.

Contrary to Sarantakos's (2013) assertion, the researcher did not determine the time or location of the interviews. Rather, these were determined by the participants, in accordance with Weerakkody's (2015) recommendation. Interview lengths ranged from 28 minutes to one hour and 35 minutes; most were between 30 and 45 minutes, however, which is consistent with Weerakkody's (2015) advice on in-depth interviews. The length of interview was determined by the participants in all cases. Two interviews took considerably longer than their recorded duration, as recordings were paused while the interviewees took breaks to attend to family members in the home. These interruptions were necessary due to the constraints of conducting research during rolling lockdowns across several Australian states during the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. Interview subjects also gave varying lengths of responses to interview questions. One interviewee spoke for more than 20 minutes without interruption, describing exposure to trauma during her career. While participants were warned that the interview was conducted for research purposes and did not constitute a therapeutic environment, she nonetheless commented that she found the experience "cathartic" (Participant 44).

### *3.3.8 Emerging trauma themes*

As mentioned above, field notes were written for each interview participant, noting their demeanour and non-verbal responses, while key phrases and issues were recorded in separate research notes for future reference (Weerakkody 2015, p. 234). From this information, a working master document was created to record emerging themes and responses to key issues as the interviews were conducted, and provide an overview of the interviews themselves. This is supported by Hesse-Biber (2010, p. 94), who asserts the researcher's main goal in coding is "to find larger themes or significant patterns of meaning in the data by grouping, comparing, and contrasting various codes". Analysis of interview transcripts was conducted manually and using the NVivo software (Weerakkody 2015, p. 310). Themes included:

- immersion versus repetition
- stories involving children
- personal issues concurrent with news story/stories
- empathy for victims

- mentions an “end point” as a positive
- black humour
- rounds
- spate of similar stories
- full cup/bucket metaphor
- proximity of threat
- contact with source after publishing/broadcast.

These themes were refined into a series, to which COVID-19 was also added due to the context in which both the research and the participants’ work was being conducted. This final list became:

- widespread experience of trauma
- never being “off duty”
- stories involving children and
- concurrent personal issues (trauma comes home)
- COVID-19
- any story can cause trauma
- repetition versus immersion
- collision course with catastrophe
- industry attitudes and responses
- newsroom leadership.

The analysis of these themes and their implications will be discussed in sections 5.2.5, 5.3 and 5.4.

## 3.4 A Story Category Matrix: Tracking trauma over a journalist’s career

This thesis builds on previous Australian research (Castle 1999, 2002; Embelton et al. 2003; Green, McLellan & McMahon 2005; Green & Sykes 2005; Herbert 2005; MacDonald et al. 2016; McMahon 2001; Place 1992; Suiter 2001) to explore in further detail the impact of

certain types of reporting assignments on Australian journalists, and the repetitive nature of some of those tasks, to determine the likelihood of symptoms of trauma being experienced by journalists. To determine how many times journalists covered stories which exposed them to risk of trauma, a means of understanding these stories needed to be developed. Specifically, a Trauma Category Matrix was developed to classify the types of stories a journalist might cover over the course of a career and its impact upon them (Smith 2016). This same model has been employed in this thesis to discover characteristics about journalists, their practice, and experiences of trauma. Its value lies within the setting of practice theory to "routinize the unexpected" (Tuchman, 1973, p123). That is, by categorising and classifying certain types of stories, the unexpected though repetitive nature of a journalist's work may be better understood. Bourdieu (2001) provides an invitation for this work to be examined at an operational level, through the routine decision-making by journalists in assessing the editorial merit of a story known as newsworthiness. This can be further broken down into component news values, which can be used to provide an indication of a story's potential to expose a journalist to trauma. It has been renamed in this thesis as the Story Category Matrix, and developed as those characteristics were revealed by data, to provide a scale with which to measure such exposure, as well as a hierarchy of story significance. In this case, "exposure" refers to the number of times a journalist may expect to cover stories of varying significance over a career. This matrix in its original form is included as Appendix B and Figure 2 below.

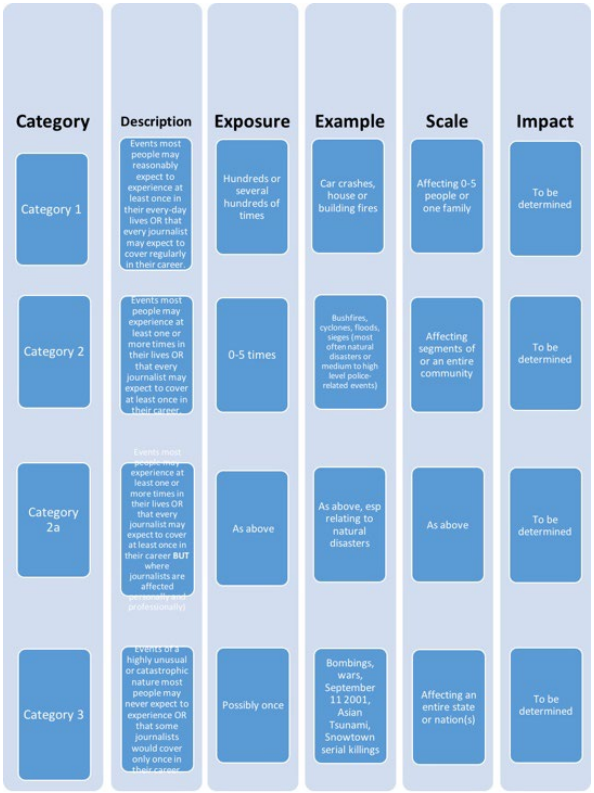


**Figure 2** The original Trauma Category Matrix

The first category of stories can commonly be described as “ordinary” or “run-of-the-mill” crime or accident stories such as car crashes, minor court stories or building fires (Idås, Backholm & Korhonen 2019; Smith, Newman & Drevo 2015). This Story Category, Category 1, was created to describe stories of highest ubiquity, or the “bread and butter” of journalism hard news pages. Stories in this category can be described both from the perspective of the reader/listener/viewer and from the journalist’s perspective, but significantly, the frequency of exposure to the same event by the two groups differs greatly (Bourdieu 2001, p. 248). In this case, these stories involve events most people may reasonably expect to experience at least once in their lives or that every journalist may expect to cover regularly in their career. It was previously estimated that a journalist might expect to cover, and therefore be exposed to, this type of story hundreds of times over the course of a career (Smith 2016). This was an estimation based on the researcher’s previous industry experience; no empirical evidence was available to determine the actual frequency of exposure to events in this category. Several questions in the survey component of this research were allocated to providing quantitative data for the exposure column of the matrix to determine, if possible, how often a reporter would be expected to cover stories of this nature. Another measurement of the significance of such stories is reflected in the scale, or number of people involved. In this case, Category 1 stories might involve up to five people or a single family. In terms of content, these stories may involve some degree of violence or threat to human life or property. Examples include car crashes, or house or building fires.

Other survey questions allowed for limited text responses for respondents to provide qualitative data for the fifth and last column, titled “impact”. The word “impact” refers to the influence of a phenomenon—in this case, that of trauma in journalism. Specifically, the impact being examined is confined to its influence on the journalist, as opposed to the news value of Impact (Caple & Bednarek 2016; Conley & Lamble 2006). This news value is variously known as news of Consequence (Burns & Matthews 2002, p. 36), Significance (Brighton & Foy 2007, p. 439; Caple & Bednarek 2016, p. 439) and Magnitude (Harcup & O’Neill 2017, p. 1471). It refers to “the high significance of an event or issue in terms of its effects/consequences” (Caple & Bednarek 2016, p. 439), and can be considered in terms of the numbers of people involved or potential effect (Harcup & O’Neill 2017, p. 1471), but not in terms of the inherent worth of the event being covered. This thesis is concerned with the impact of trauma on an Australian journalist, or the influence, effect or impression created on the journalist rather than its effect, or the consequence of that impact. As synonyms are already in use for this concept, the term “Consequence” will therefore be used when referring to the news value and “Impact” when

referring to effects upon the respondents. Several other news values may be evident in Category 1 stories, including Conflict, and in some cases Unusualness and Timeliness. In this and the following Story Categories, news values apply to journalistic decision-making in editorial terms only, and do not extend to ethics or other considerations.

The second Story Category, Category 2, describes events that can affect a segment of a community or an entire community, and includes most natural disasters such as small bushfires or minor floods. Stories in this second category are less common both in the experience of a reader and for the journalist covering them. However, as with the first category, the experience of actual exposure to this type of events differs greatly. Stories in this category refer to events most people may experience at least one or more times in their lives or that every journalist may expect to cover at least once in their career. These stories also occur regularly in newspapers or broadcast bulletins, and may involve similar matters such as violence, but to a greater extent than in the previous category. Another way to consider these types of stories is by scale: Category 2 stories may affect segments of or an entire community or, if limited to a few people, the extent to which they are affected would be greater. The news value of Conflict can apply literally in terms of violent crime and war; it can apply ideologically in stories involving politics or disagreements, or even figuratively when applied to sport. It is also known as “Drama” or “Bad News” (O’Neill et al. 2009, pp. 165, 168). Other news values of Timeliness and Unusualness might also be relevant here. Unusualness is also known as the news value of Novelty or Unexpectedness (Bell 1991; Brighton & Foy 2007; Caple & Bednarek 2016) or even “the gosh factor” (Conley & Lamble 2006, p. 81). Conley and Lamble also assert that this concept is not confined to entertainment stories, but can “be important in jarring readers’ stereotypes and can, therefore, fulfill the ‘inform’ and ‘educate’ functions” of news (Conley & Lamble 2006, p. 97). The Unusualness news value of such stories in Story Category 2 would also be stronger. Natural disasters such as bushfires, floods and cyclones would fall into this category, but so would stories that affect fewer people but more deeply, such as stories of a violent, extreme or distressing nature such as court stories or victim accounts. These may also be critical events (Monteiro & Marques Pinto 2017), but where the scale of impact or the news value of Consequence is limited to a town, city or state. Therefore, the same news values would also apply, but in stronger terms than the previous category. For example, these stories might involve Conflict or Consequence, but where Category 1 stories might involve a serious car crash or housefire, stories in Category 2 might involve fatalities or mass casualties. Where a response did not specify the degree of severity of the incident covered (for example, a car crash), it was assumed that this involved a fatality:

> Although the fatal auto crash is a common assignment, it is not a benign one for many reporters and photographers who witness its results. (Simpson, Coté & Scherer 2006, p. 42)

These responses were therefore coded as Category 2 stories due to the stronger news values of Consequence and Unusualness.

An under-researched phenomenon of journalism practice occurs when reporters and other news workers are also directly affected by events they are covering. This may include risk or harm to their person, possessions or family. An example of this occurs when reporters assigned to covering a bushfire or flood know their own homes and loved ones may be at risk from the same event, but must continue their reporting. The Story Category Matrix therefore includes reference to situations where a journalist may play more than one role at a significant or catastrophic news event: the professional role of reporter and a simultaneous personal one where the event may also impact their life outside of work (Dworznik-Hoak 2020a; Embelton et al. 2003; Green & Sykes 2005; Herbert 2005; Hollings 2005; Lu 2019; Muller 2010; Suiter 2001). This Story Category refers to events that most people may experience at least one or more times in their lives or that every journalist may expect to cover at least once in their career, but where the journalist is also one of the victims or directly affected by the event they are covering. This convergence of the personal and professional has been described as "rare" (Dworznik-Hoak 2020a), but no empirical research was found documenting the frequency of such experiences, or their impact on those affected. This phenomenon was initially created as a subcategory of Category 2 and previously named Category 2a; however, in its current iteration in this research, it has been renamed Category 3.

While the other factors classifying these types of stories remain the same, the journalist's exposure to this type of event differs most sharply from that of the reader due to the extra "layer" of personal impact on the journalist covering the story. The news values of Conflict, Consequence and Unusualness would apply to the same extent as with Category 2 stories, with potential for stories involving the news value of Human Interest to also feature more strongly. While it might appear tempting to invoke the news value of proximity in the case of stories that directly affect the journalist, this news value describes the distance between the event and the reader or its "closeness to home" (Zhong & Newhagen 2009, p. 590). This research is concerned with the journalist's proximity to the perceived area of risk attendant with the story, which is a different phenomenon. Examples include natural disasters such as the Black Summer bushfires (O'Neill 2020) and even Darwin's Cyclone Tracy (Webber 1976), due to the

scale of devastation caused by each event, and the challenges faced by those reporting on them while simultaneously dealing with the disaster's effects.

The fourth Story Category, Category 4, describes the least common stories both in the experience of a reader and for reporters. This category was reserved for those "once in a lifetime" events of catastrophe, or the making of history. According to Duncan, "very few" journalists would be required to cover stories of this magnitude, such as wars, mass killings or major disasters (Duncan 2012, p. 590). In an Australian setting, they include the Black Summer bushfires of 2019–20, particularly gruesome or brutal crimes such as the Snowtown serial killings, the Asian Boxing Day tsunami, bombings, war and the events of September 11, 2001. To use Tuchman's (1973) analogy, if Category 1 and 2 stories constituted "other people's emergencies" (1973, p. 127), and Category 3 stories constitute the reporter's own emergency, Category 4 stories involve events which place the newsroom itself into a state of emergency (1973, p. 128). These were described both in terms of exposure for the audience and journalist—again, in sharp contrast—as events of a highly unusual or catastrophic nature most people may never expect to experience, or that some journalists would cover infrequently during their career. Examples include bombings in a domestic setting, acts of terrorism, stories reported from war or conflict zones, the September 11, 2001 attacks, the Boxing Day tsunami and the Snowtown serial killings[2]. These stories occur comparatively rarely in newspapers and broadcast bulletins due to their extremely rare, violent or unprecedented nature, or the scale of those affected. Consequently, the news value of Unusualness would be at its strongest in stories of this Story Category—as would Consequence and Conflict. In stories such as these, it is likely that most if not all other news values would also be relevant to some extent. The scale measured by these stories is considered in terms of a story that would affect an entire state or nation(s). It was anticipated that due to the unprecedented nature of these types of stories, while journalists were likely to be exposed to them more often than the once-in-a-lifetime of an average news consumer, they would still only be required to report on them a small number of times in a career. Again, as no empirical evidence could be found to gauge exposure to these types of stories, this estimate of one or two times during a career was used.

This fourth Story Category is used to describe events of a highly unusual or catastrophic nature, the high-profile, serious or far-reaching events affecting an entire state, nation(s) or geographic

[2] A series of murders in South Australia during the mid- to late 1990s involving crimes of an extremely grotesque and violent nature: see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Snowtown_murders

region. These stories satisfy the news values of Consequence and Conflict to a high degree, as their significance was evident at a national or international level. In the case of the Snowtown murders, the horrific and extreme violence involved initially satisfied the news value of Conflict to a high degree, which then increased the level of Consequence it also satisfied. As these two news values were so strongly expressed, it could be argued that this story also satisfied the news value of Unusualness. In the examples of the Boxing Day tsunami, September 11 and Snowtown murders, it is the unprecedented level of Consequence or Conflict that defines their Unusualness. Stories such as these have been referred to as "megastories" (Green, McLellan & McMahon 2005), as they are extreme in their expressions of the news values of Consequence, Conflict and Unusualness. Finally, the last column of the Story Category Matrix in each category—that is, the column indicating its impact on the journalist—was left blank in its first iteration as it was not then possible to assess the impact of covering these stories. One of the objectives of this research was to gather data about the impact of reporting the various stories defined in the Story Category Matrix to populate this column.

## 3.5 The Story Category Matrix applied

The purpose of this research is to investigate the risk and impact of traumatic assignments on journalists and other news workers in Australia. Through the application of the survey data and semi-structured interviews, it is now possible to indicate exposure to traumatic factors such as how many times a journalist could expect to cover a given type of story over the course of their career. While the use of logbooks to monitor journalists' exposure to trauma was first proposed more than 30 years ago (Gaba, 1991) no evidence could be found of their widespread and consistent use, necessitating estimations of exposure by survey respondents. The original estimate of exposure for Category 1 stories was "hundreds of times"; however to remain consistent across the survey, questions relating to this issue limited selection options to 20+ times in a career.

During the research design, it became apparent that brief definitions would be required in the online survey to allow for ease of response for participants and consistency of response in analysis (MacDonald, Hodgins & Saliba 2017; McMahon 2001). Therefore, for example, the main survey question, or Question B01, reads:

> Have you covered or witnessed a traumatic event as part of your job? (That is, an event that you found traumatic, as opposed to whether someone else would have found it traumatic or whether it was considered traumatic generally.)

During research design, it also became necessary to further refine the definition of Story Category 2 to include “stories of a violent, extreme or distressing nature for example, court stories, victim accounts”, such as those involving death, thus indicating the news values of Significance and Conflict.

To determine the appropriate category of certain stories, Question C01 posed a series of sub-questions. The definitions in these sub-questions correspond to the definitions of news story Categories 1, 2 and 3 as outlined above. Two questions were devoted to each Story Category. A completed example of how this appeared in the survey is presented in Figure 3.

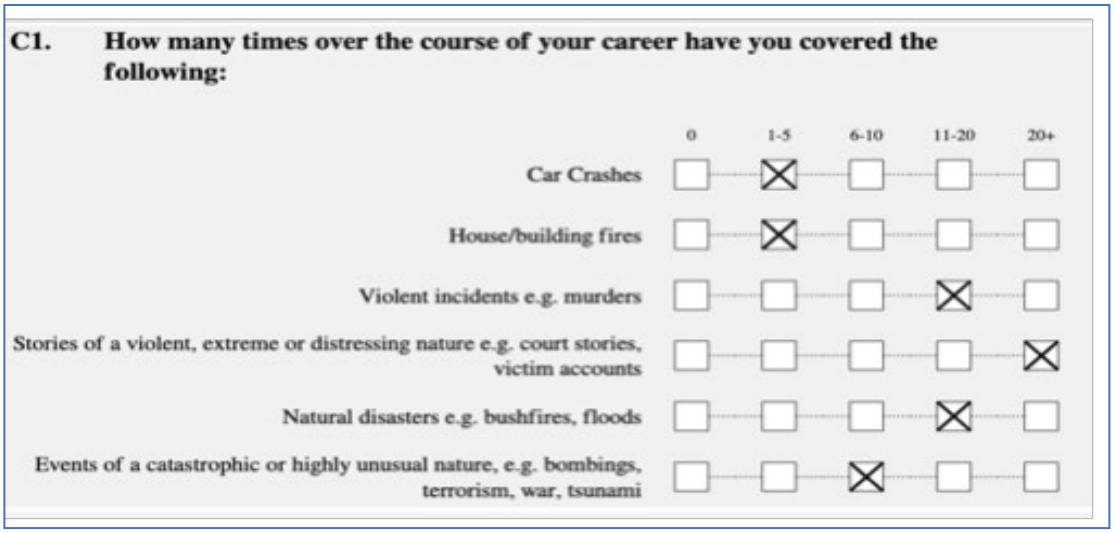
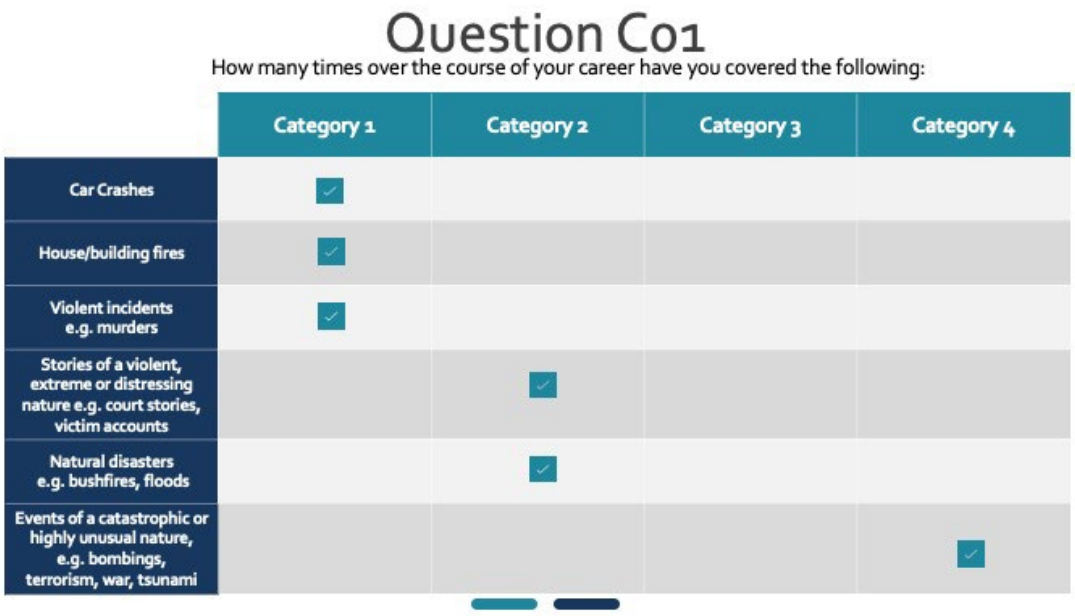



**Figure 3** An example of a section of a completed survey estimating the journalist’s exposure to certain categories of story

The first three options of Question C01 relate to the definitions included in Story Category 1, while options 3–4 correspond to Category 2 and options 5–6 to Category 4. These are represented in Table 8; questions relating to Category 3 were treated separately.

**Table 8** Question C01 as applied to Story Category Matrix Categories 1, 2 and 4




Subsequent questions, Questions C02–C08, were devoted to Story Category 3:

> C02. Have you ever had a situation where you were affected by a story both personally and professionally? e.g. covered a natural disaster that you or your loved ones were also affected by?

This group of questions included an estimation of the number of times a journalist had directly been affected by a story they had covered, ranging from 0 to 10+. This section also included a limited text option for participants to describe how covering stories in this Story Category had affected their ability to recover (where relevant) and the impact it had on their ability to perform their duties, and perceived adequacy of employer support both in quantitative (yes/no) and qualitative (limited text box) terms. As a means of testing the reliability of the data through triangulation (Hesse-Biber 2010; Maxwell 2009; McNeill & Chapman 2005; Silverman 2011; Wimmer & Dominick 2006), these qualitative responses were coded according to their categories (for example, Category 1, 2, 3 and 4).

## 3.6 Other considerations

Other factors considered in designing and analysing the research included identifying certain risk factors to determine whether and how these factors might work together and in isolation to affect Australian journalists when faced with potentially traumatic assignments. These included:

- repetition of certain types of stories (Dworznik-Hoak 2020b; Simpson, Coté & Scherer 2006; Smith, Drevo & Newman 2017) where survey respondents were asked how many times they had covered a particular type of story, and interview participants were asked to nominate how many times they had done so (where relevant) and in what timeframe

- immersion in a story or issue (Dworznik-Hoak 2020b; Muller 2010; Simpson, Coté & Scherer 2006), where interview participants were asked to compare their experiences of these two conditions

- previous workplace experience was elicited through a question (B03) designed to aid respondents' estimation of their trauma exposure over a career, and

- longevity of career (Lee, Ha & Pae 2018; Simpson, Coté & Scherer 2006), where survey respondents were asked to nominate how long they had worked as a journalist, as distinct from how long they had worked at their current role

- experiences of bullying or harassment, both physical and online (Dobbie, 2022; Ferrier 2019; Martin & Murrell 2020; 2021; Miller 2021; Sharp 2022), where respondents were asked whether their physical health or safety had been threatened, and whether they had been threatened, harassed or bullied at work, including sexual harassment and online bullying or trolling. A subsequent question asked respondents to estimate the number of times this occurred, where relevant.

## 3.7 Summary

A mixed methods approach to both data collection and analysis provided benefit to investigating the risk and impact of traumatic assignments on Australian journalists by providing the means to explore these two differing aspects of the research problem. This mixed methods framework employed quantitative techniques to determine how many times a journalist can expect to cover certain types of stories during their career, and qualitative means to provide details about the impact of this reporting experience. In doing so, the result was to "generate something that is over and above its individual quantitative and qualitative components" (Bryman 2008, p. 4). The results of this mixed methods design will be discussed further in Chapters 4, 5 and 6.

# 4 Findings

## 4.0 Introduction

Relatively little is known in Australia about the impact on a journalist of covering a traumatic story, and the extent to which this occurs. More up-to-date empirical data is required on the extent of a journalist's exposure to trauma and what risk factors exist, to enable an effective response that can be generalised. This research set out to determine how many times a journalist can expect to cover certain types of news stories in their career (RQ1) and the impact this exposure has on them (RQ2). This is in addition to investigating the usefulness of a tool developed to determine whether certain news values are more likely to be associated with trauma (RQ3) and to categorise this data in journalistic terms (RQ4).

This chapter is divided into two sections. The first explains a tool developed to categorise news stories from the journalist's perspective, based on the story content, frequency of exposure and impact. This Story Category Matrix was developed from concepts used in journalism theory and builds on Australian (MacDonald, JB et al. 2016; McMahon 2001, 2010) and international research (Coté & Simpson 2006; Dworznik 2006; Hight & Smyth 2009). This section sets out the analytical framework that will be used in this research. Chapter 5 will explore themes arising from the data relating to trauma risk and impact.

The second section of this chapter describes data on the extent of traumatic experiences of Australian journalists and its impact on them. Data were collected using a mixed methods approach, as discussed in Chapter 3, through a survey and interviews.

## 4.1 The matrix reloaded

Journalism in Australia often requires exposure to traumatic events such as accidents, natural disasters and crimes. As understanding about the complex nature of trauma develops (MacDonald, Hodgins & Saliba 2017; MacDonald, Saliba & Hodgins 2016; MacDonald et al. 2016), relatively little is known about the specific types of stories likely to cause trauma for Australian journalists. Research from the United States and Chile has shown that producers, editors and sub-editors, as well as other media professionals, are also exposed to potentially traumatising events (Hill 2022; Soledad, Silvia & Daniela 2013). A system of classifying the exposure journalists might experience over the course of their careers, defined as a Story Category Matrix (see Appendix C), was developed during previous research (Smith 2016) to

understand and document possible risk to Australian journalists. It explores in further detail the impact of certain types of reporting assignments on Australian journalists, as well as the repetitive nature of some of those tasks, to determine the likelihood of experiencing trauma. These tasks or assignments were coded into four story categories according to their prevalence, news values and scale. Each Story Category was described in two ways: from the journalist's perspective and from that of the reader. Exposure to a particular category of story was measured by the number of times it was covered over the course of a career and, as no empirical evidence was available to gauge the frequency of this variable, an estimate was used, based on the researcher's newsroom experience. The scale in each Story Category was measured in terms of the number of people, communities or countries affected and examples were included to help easily identify the types of stories in each category.

The Story Category Matrix, in codifying these situations, allows researchers to address questions relating to the experience of journalists in a variety of situations, and provides a theoretical tool to indicate levels of associated risk of trauma. It also assists researchers in identifying and classifying elements such as exposure, scale and impact, and enables those working in journalism to understand the cumulative risk of harm of repetitive traumatic assignments, and the risk of trauma symptoms associated with covering major catastrophic news events. Combining a Story Category Matrix with analysis of textual responses using NVivo (or a similar program) also affords researchers a measure for the impact of traumatic assignments on journalists. In turn, this methodology may allow researchers in countries other than Australia to measure and compare that impact. Being able to measure, or "know", impact allows those in newsroom leadership to adjust practices in ways that might ameliorate its effects.

Responses to the questions in Table 9 were collated according to their Story Categories. For example, all those who had selected the first three "common" types of news stories less than five times in their career were collated into Category 1. As the total number of mandatory survey responses (n = 73) and voluntary responses (n = 34) were insufficient in most cases to provide statistical significance, the columns indicating exposure were used to indicate trends in the data only. Future research in this area should consider making all questions mandatory to ensure statistical reliability. Qualitative analysis of those responses is discussed below.

**Table 9** Set of questions relating to participants' exposure to story categories 1, 2 and 4

## Set of category questions

How many times over the course of your career have you covered the following:
*Please choose the appropriate response for each item

| | Category | 0 times | 1-5 times | 6-10 times | 11-20 times | 20+ times |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Car Crashes | 1 | | | | | |
| House/building fires | 1 | | | | | |
| Violent incidents e.g. murders | 1 | | | | | |
| Stories of a violent, extreme or distressing nature e.g. court stories, victim accounts | 2 | | | | | |
| Natural disasters e.g. bushfires, floods | 2 | | | | | |
| Events of a catastrophic or highly unusual nature, e.g. bombings, terrorism, war, tsunami | 4 | | | | | |

### *4.1.1 Story Category 1*

#### 4.1.1.1 Risk

This group of stories relates to events most people may reasonably expect to experience at least once in their lives, or that every journalist may expect to cover regularly in their career. Examples include car crashes, house or building fires and violent incidents such as murders. Participants selected the highest option (20+ times) in 32 per cent of cases for crashes, 25 per cent of cases for fires and 32 per cent of cases for violent incidents. This revealed a limitation of this research, as it was not possible to determine the absolute maximum of exposure for this category. Future research should consider using a wider numerical range from which respondents can select, to gain a more accurate indication of how many times a journalist might be expected to cover stories of this type in their career.

#### 4.1.1.2 Impact

A section of the survey relating to trauma contained both quantitative and qualitative components. Question B01 asked, “Have you covered or witnessed a traumatic event as part of your job? (That is, an event that you found traumatic, as opposed to whether someone else would have found it traumatic or whether it was considered traumatic generally)?” Questions B02 and B03 asked respondents to describe and estimate exposure to this experience, while Question B04 asked, “If you answered yes to the previous question, what impact has this had on you personally, or on your family? Please describe”. The (quantitative) response was

calculated and showed 60 respondents or 82 per cent had answered yes to Question B01. The (qualitative) responses to B04 were coded using NVivo software. The top four responses were then added to the "impact" column of the Story Category Matrix.

The equal fourth most common response in terms of the impact of a story or stories on journalists' personal lives related to sleep and dreams. The first interrogation of this data revealed that the researcher had applied separate codes for both sleep and dreams; the latter referred to disturbing dreams or nightmares, while the former referred to lack of sleep or difficulty sleeping. Given that they both referred to sleep in some way, it was considered appropriate to aggregate them, making this the equal fourth highest response to traumatic stories overall, with 17 per cent of respondents expressing this response. Examples of this response include:

> … the stories of senseless death and having to coordinate newspaper production and do my job made me feel heartless and ghoulish. I had trouble sleeping and struggled to make sense of such tragedies. (Participant 13)
>
> I've laid awake at night thinking about stories. (Participant 31)
>
> I had a period where I just didn't sleep for three weeks … I actually don't know how I got through the story I was working on. (Participant 20)
>
> I have had nightmares about some of the stories I have covered. (Participant 50)
>
> I had trouble concentrating and sleeping. I was also given to crying often for some time after. (Participant 71)
>
> Interrupted sleep at the time of the events. Interrupted sleep at subsequent developments many years down the track. (Participant 97)
>
> An inquest into child suicides in WA's Kimberley stuck with me for a long time, as did details of a little girl's horrific sex abuse at the hands of her parents. In both cases I went home and cried and struggled to sleep. (Participant 108)

The same number of respondents (or 17 per cent) were unsure of what this impact might have been upon them as individuals. This does not indicate there was no impact on the part of those respondents; rather, they were unable to identify or articulate what such an impact might be.

During the first iteration of data analysis, car crashes and murders were thought to belong in Category 1 due to their ubiquity. However, when this was considered in conjunction with data from two other survey questions (B01 "Have you covered or witnessed a traumatic event as part of your job? (That is, an event that you found traumatic, as opposed to whether someone else would have found it traumatic or whether it was considered traumatic generally)" and B07 "Have you ever covered a traumatic story that affected you emotionally, or that you can't forget?"), it required further analysis. Some responses describing such events in this category were rather confronting. Examples included:

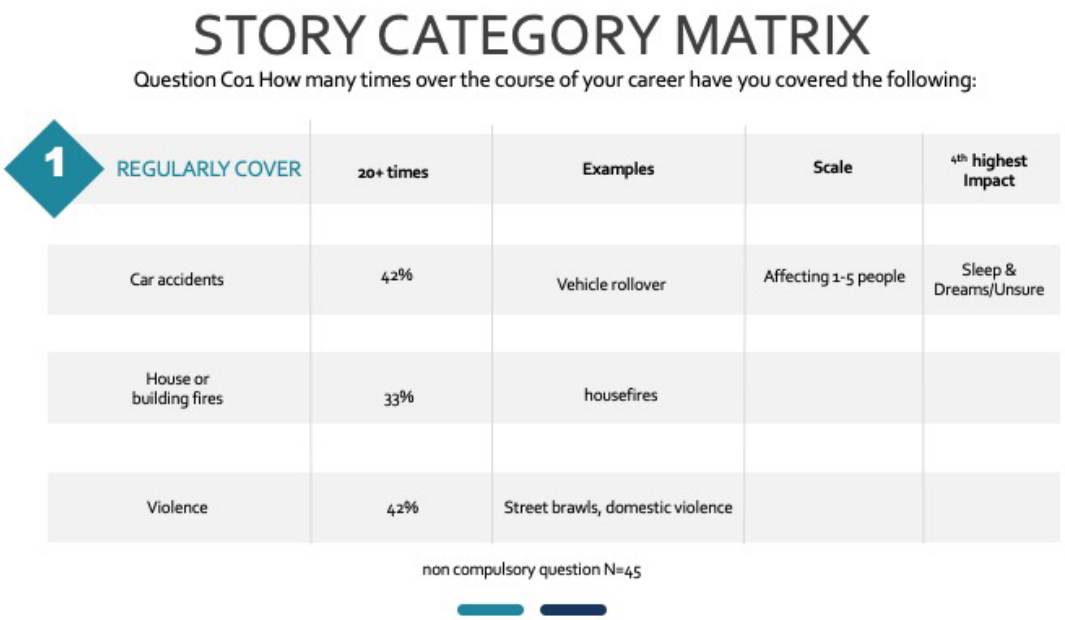
> Seen dead bodies removed from crime scenes. (Participant 72)
>
> Murders, drownings, tsunami, car accidents, child deaths. (Participant 3)
>
> Seeing dead bodies, crime scenes, calling relatives of victims of crime (Participant 88)
>
> Several times when working in TV in the country I was sent out to crashes. One where a man was burnt to death in the car and melted into the seat sticks in the mind. A witness said he was yelling "help! help!" It ended up being a suicide, but my boss made me 'pack'[3] it anyway. (Participant 35)
>
> Vehicle rollover. (Participant 25)
>
> As a crime and court reporter, we witness trauma every day. Car crashes, families devastated by death, cocky criminals. (Participant 117)

In these cases, the news value of Conflict was used in coding to determine whether such stories should be considered as part of Category 1 or Category 2. While the conflict in this case is literal (for example, that between a car and another object) the degree of severity and associated injury or death—and therefore its potential to cause trauma—can vary considerably. In extreme cases, an argument could be made to shift these to Category 2. Such cases demonstrate that ubiquity should not be considered an indicator of whether a news story may be benign in terms of its potential to cause trauma. These responses indicate that

[3] This is Australian television news slang for a "package" or a complete news story containing quotes, voiceover and piece to camera or "stand-up". As it involved a suicide, the story would not have been aired, but the reporter was tasked with producing a complete version of it until suicide was officially confirmed, therefore prolonging her exposure to a story she found traumatic.

stories in this category can leave an imprint upon a journalist that can last the rest of their life. Future research in this area would be beneficial, as Category 1 assignments can and do cause trauma for journalists. Table 10 shows results for Category 1.

**Table 10** A portion of the Story Category Matrix relating to Category 1, populated with examples of responses to survey questions C01 and B04




Results from Story Category 1 of the Story Category Matrix reflect previous research indicating journalists can experience trauma early in their careers, with lifelong impact (Hill 2022, Dworznik & Grubb 2007, Simpson & Boggs 1999). The confronting nature of some of these comments indicates the strength of this experience and its impact on these individuals. Knowledge of the risks posed by exposure to Category 1 stories—particularly at a younger age—can help newsroom managers to effectively manage journalists not just in terms of their output but their professional wellbeing.

### *4.1.2 Story Category 2*

#### 4.1.2.1 Risk

Category 2 relates to events most people may experience at least one or more times in their lives or that every journalist may expect to cover at least once in their career, affecting segments of or an entire community or those stories of a more violent or extreme nature. When asked to estimate their exposure from a range of values, 86 per cent of the total responses to this question fell into the 20+ option. While this might have been an expected outcome for Category 1, the reality that so many respondents had covered stories of this

nature so frequently had not been anticipated due to the extreme or distressing nature of stories in this category. Future surveys could consider using a wider numerical range for respondents to select from, to determine with greater precision how many times a journalist might be expected to cover stories of this type over the course of their career. Table 11 shows examples nominated by respondents.

**Table 11** A portion of the Story Category Matrix relating to Category 2, populated with examples of responses to survey questions C01 and B04

STORY CATEGORY MATRIX

Question C01 How many times over the course of your career have you covered the following:

| 2 COVER AT LEAST ONCE | 20+ times | Examples | Scale | 3rd highest Impact |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Stories of a violent, extreme or distressing nature e.g. court stories, victim accounts | 53% | Plane crash, Port Arthur Massacre in 1996, six children burnt to death in a housefire | Affecting segments of or an entire community | Impact on Relationships |
| | | Street march massacre, fired upon, witness to death of child | | |
| Natural disasters e.g. bushfires, floods | 29% | Flash flood disaster with 23 fatalities including children and babies, 138 houses destroyed, severe damage to infrastructure in eight communities. | | |

non compulsory question N=59

#### 4.1.2.2 Impact

Responses from Question B04, "If you answered yes to the previous question, what impact has this had on you personally, or on your family? Please describe" were coded using NVivo. The third highest of the four most common responses was added to the "impact" column, denoting the impact that covering these stories had on the journalist.

The third most nominated response to covering a traumatic story was its effect on a journalist's relationships. Of the 34 responses to this question, 12 respondents or 35 per cent nominated this effect. This impact was almost always negative. Examples include:

> I still talk about the plane crash, and it happened in 1982. Fortunately, my husband is an excellent listener so I could debrief with him. (Participant 92)

> My wife was extremely worried as I drove away one Sunday night to meet a cameraman at the scene of what turned out to be the Hoddle Street Massacre. (Participant 124)

> Lasting emotional and psychological toll; impact on personal relationships. (Participant 6)

> I found my relationships with friends and family suffered because having reported death and destruction on the scale I did, I did not want to discuss what I had seen with my close ones. (Participant 27)

> Confuses boundaries, more emotional reaction, remembered for longer, risks pissing off friends and family. (Participant 47)

> My family were supportive and took me to buy flowers so I could pay my respects. (Participant 83)

Results from Story Category 2 of the Story Category Matrix indicate some individuals can be significantly impacted by their reporting of the stories in this category. Further, those in relationship with these journalists may also be affected, as the data describing Impact demonstrates. Those affected indicated their loved ones can express fear or concern, or simply be on the receiving end of journalists' emotional withdrawal or outbursts. This may be compounded by a "cascading effect" of journalists managing simultaneous work and personal difficulty.

### *4.1.3 Story Category 3*

#### 4.1.3.1 Risk

This category was intended to indicate the number of times a journalist had personally been affected by a story they were covering and was previously classified as a sub-category of Category 2. However, 19 respondents, or 35 per cent of those who responded to this question, answered in the affirmative. As data analysis revealed this experience to be more common than had been anticipated, Category 3 was renamed to reflect this phenomenon.

It is possible that some respondents may not have understood the question and therefore answered in the affirmative in error, although given that the definition was included in the question itself, this is unlikely. It is also possible that it may not have been answered consistently across the respondent cohort; further research is needed on Category 3 to ensure

respondents both answer consistently and understand the question, as well as to ascertain the exact nature of exposure to conditions found in this category.

#### 4.1.3.2 Impact

While it was anticipated that journalists would be more likely to be personally affected by natural disasters including bushfires, cyclones and floods, responses were nonetheless deeply emotional and sometimes difficult to read:

> The impact of being directly threatened (although we had evacuated) was hard enough, but it was compounded by then having to write a number of intense stories for a range of international outlets, which meant I had to deep-dive into the subject at a time when I would have benefited from focusing on healing. I have been experiencing post-traumatic stress in the form of panic dreams, exhaustion, emotional volatility, anger. I've not been much fun to be around for the past month. (Participant 73)

The types of stories nominated by respondents in this category also included a reporter who realised her husband had been a victim of sexual abuse by clergy when she was covering the story. Another participant nominated his producer being murdered while they were on assignment in a foreign conflict zone. An obvious example of this category would also have been those who reported on COVID-19, yet although it was mentioned as a source of stress by interview participants, it was mentioned in only one survey response.

The second highest response to covering a traumatic story from survey participants was anxiety, including expressions of fear and avoidance. Of the 34 responses to this question, 15 responses or 44 per cent nominated this experience. The first interrogation of this data indicated that a review of the separate codes of fear/avoidance might best be included under this overall heading, so these codes were listed in NVivo as subheadings or "children" of the anxiety code. Examples include:

> I'm paranoid to drive on Christmas because I always feel like you see sad stories on the news. And when I bought a new car recently, I bought a very safe one. (Participant 35)

> I felt very anxious, and it became stressful to go to work, knowing there might be another tragedy to cover. (Participant 66)

> Hyper-vigilance around personal security and periods of anxiousness when home alone at night. **(**Participant 97)
>
> I am far less able to cope with stress now and feel panicked, with a racing heart and a need to "escape", if I am put under any form of sustained pressure by my work. I am less able to cope with criticism and can feel personally wounded, whereas before I could power on. The incident of the boy drowning keeps coming back to me … (Participant 114)

Results from Category 3 responses to the Story Category Matrix indicate journalists may be exposed to risk of trauma from stories they are affected by more often than previously thought. Further, 20 per cent of those who responded estimated they had covered stories they were also affected by more than 10 times in their career. As it had been expected that this experience would have been rare (Dworznik-Hoak 2020a), a narrower value range was used for this question to include a maximum of 10+ times. That any respondents had experienced this more than once in their careers—let alone more than 10 times—is grave cause for concern, and necessitates specific consideration from newsroom managers, proprietors and human resources departments.

**Table 12** A portion of the Story Category Matrix relating to Category 3, populated with examples of responses to survey questions C04 and B04

STORY CATEGORY MATRIX

Question C04 How many times have you have been affected by a story both personally and professionally?
non compulsory question)

| 3 COVER & PERSONALLY AFFECTED | 10+ times (maximum available) | Examples | Scale | 2nd highest Impact |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 20% | We had to flee our house during the 2011 Brisbane floods | Affecting 1-5 people | Anxiety |
| | | I have covered news and events that have been about trauma or that have had personal triggers for me | | |
| | | I have been doing in-depth coverage of these bushfires, while also being affected by them directly. | | |

non compulsory question N=49

### *4.1.4 Story Category 4*

#### 4.1.4.1 Risk

Category 4 includes the "most serious" and rarest type of story a journalist might be expected to cover during their career, relating to events of a highly unusual, unprecedented or catastrophic nature which apply on a national or global scale. Respondents were asked to estimate how many times they had covered a story of this magnitude, but response was not compulsory. Five people or 10 per cent of those who did respond (n = 51) estimated they had covered stories of this nature more than 20 times in their careers, indicating the experience was not as rare as had initially been thought. Future research would seek to gain a more detailed estimation of exposure to this type of story. Examples of the types of stories nominated are included in Table 13.

**Table 13** A portion of the Story Category Matrix relating to Category 4, populated with examples of the most common response to questions C01 and B04

STORY CATEGORY MATRIX

Question C01 How many times over the course of your career have you covered the following:

| 4 RARELY IF EVER COVER | 20+ times | Examples | Scale | Highest Impact |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Events of a catastrophic or highly unusual nature, e.g. bombings, terrorism, war, tsunami | 10% | Conflict, tsunami, first Bali bombing, military coup | Affecting entire state/nation(s) | Sadness/ distress/ weeping |
| | | Civil wars across 8 former Soviet republics, uprisings, revolution | | |
| | | conflicts in Afghanistan, Syria and Sri Lanka; combat, terrorist attacks, disease, malnutrition and poverty. | | |

non compulsory question N=51

#### 4.1.4.2 Impact

Responses from question B04 ("If you answered yes to the previous question, what impact has this had on you personally, or on your family? Please describe") were coded using NVivo. The most common response to covering a traumatic story was found to be sadness, which included expressions of distress and weeping. This was separate from responses that mentioned depression and treatment or medication. Of the 34 responses to this question, 24 responses or

70 per cent nominated sadness and distress. Examples of this code were so poignant it was difficult not to include them all; however, a selection includes:

> Nostalgia and occasionally lachrymose sadness. (Participant 18)

> A lingering feeling of sadness and concern about various incidents, and how the people impacted are coping. (Participant 60)

> It is not an overwhelming sadness, and it is hard to gauge exactly what effect it has had on my family, but it is a sadness that lives within me. It was such a horrific event that I sometimes wonder if that is the proper human response; that when I think of it, I should cry. (Participant 81)

> I have been moved to tears only a couple of times in the courtroom or when covering a story. (Participant 117)

> I've been affected by a lot of the evidence [presented in court]. Some of the details have appeared in dreams and I find myself getting upset by minor things outside of work. (Participant 108)

Results from Story Category 4 of the Story Category Matrix reflect a significant and, at times, profound impact on the journalists who responded to this survey. These results hold equal significance for industry practice and Australian journalism as a whole, in understanding the risk of exposure to trauma and its impact on journalists. As such, these results also necessitate particular consideration by newsroom managers, proprietors and human resources departments.

### *4.1.5 Summary*

It is clear from these comments that in some cases the journalists were struggling to articulate or come to terms with the impact their work had on them personally. Not all participants noted a negative impact upon their personal lives, however:

> I wouldn't say experiencing traumatic events has had an adverse or negative impact on me. If anything, it's taught me life is short and there are some things in life you can't control. For example, the four adults who died at Dreamworld had no idea the ride considered the theme park's "safest" at the time would ultimately take their lives. (Participant 113)

While the phenomenon of post-traumatic growth is acknowledged, 43 per cent of respondents to Question C02 said they had not covered a story by which they were personally affected and 24 per cent selected “not applicable”, none of the survey participants described experiencing any positive impact. The closest any came to a positive response was “so far so good”, but in response to a subsequent question, “What impact (if any) did this have on your ability to continue to perform your duties? Please describe”, the same respondent wrote “more good days than bad”.

Although it did not develop as a theme in the survey, during the interviews drinking alcohol to excess emerged as a coping mechanism. Examples were too significant to be omitted:

> Gin was my best friend, literally. I’m not backward about that—I'll tell anybody. I wasn’t a drunkard. I have a teetotalling husband, so I would never have been a drunkard as such, but I self-medicated by gin. That was the easiest way to de-stress. (Participant 44)

> If something bad happened [the advice given] was: ‘have a bottle of wine instead of a glass of wine and away you go’. (Participant 48)

> There’s a lot of dope smokers as well, and heavy drug use. The drinking has been a major thing. (Participant 57)

This is supported by previous research by MacDonald, Saliba and Hodgins (2016), which found that journalists’ exposure to potentially traumatic events, high levels of stress and anecdotal reports within the industry “seem to suggest that journalists are at greater risk than the general population to experience substance abuse disorders” (MacDonald, Saliba & Hodgins 2016, p. 403).

The development and application of the Story Category Matrix has been used as a system for classifying the exposure journalists might experience over the course of their careers and can be used as a tool to understand and track possible trauma risk. Its application of practice theory to understand journalism from the perspective of those working within it uses the widely-known and understood concept of news values to assess the editorial merit of the stories covered. These in turn can be used to alert journalists and newsroom managers to the potential risk of trauma they face when covering, or assigning a journalists to cover, such stories. Closer examination of responses to the self-administered survey and in-depth interviews will allow for deeper understanding of these results.

## 4.2 Journalism trauma in Australia: Survey data

This research set out to quantify the number of times Australian journalists have covered a traumatic story over the course of their careers, and to provide clearer understanding of how this has affected them. Data were obtained from a survey and a series of interviews. In analysing data, patterns emerge in terms of the effect this has upon Australian journalists and certain risk factors involved, such as repetition, immersion and longevity of career. The survey and interviews allowed this research to be distilled into two basic questions and four Research Questions (repeated below) to be operationalised. These were:

1. How many times can a journalist expect to cover certain types of news stories during their career?
2. What impact has that had on them personally?

These queries were developed into the following Research Questions:

> RQ1: How many times can a journalist expect to cover certain types of news stories during the course of their career?
>
> RQ2: What impact has that had upon them personally?
>
> RQ3: Are stories with the news values of Consequence and Conflict more likely to be traumatic for the journalists covering them?
>
> RQ4: Test if a previously developed Story Category Matrix (see Appendix C) has some relationship to the previous question, in other words, does the Story Category Matrix have some relationship to these values in a way that will be useful to journalists?

To operationalise these questions, an online survey was constructed to ask participants how many times they had covered stories from each category. While the Story Category names were not used in the survey question, they have been included here for ease of reference.

The analysis showed the numbers of responses to most non-compulsory questions were insufficient to provide a statistically significant result. However, the primary survey question (Question B01: “Have you covered or witnessed a traumatic event as part of your job? (That is, an event that you found traumatic, as opposed to whether someone else would have found it traumatic or whether it was considered traumatic generally)”?) was mandatory and therefore attracted enough responses to gain statistical significance. This will be discussed in more detail in section 4.2.2. As demographic questions such as gender were also compulsory, it was

possible to compare this data with the main survey question (Question B01 as above). For example, this research showed that a journalist's gender was not a statistically significant factor in their likelihood of experiencing a traumatic reporting assignment—in other words, men and women were equally likely to have such an experience. In cases where non-compulsory questions did not yield statistically significant responses, the survey data were analysed using a chi-square analysis (Hanna & Dempster 2012; McCormick, Salcedo & Poh 2015) to reveal tendencies (Wimmer & Dominick 2013) expressed in percentages and to facilitate description of correlations and indication of trends.

The survey was structured in three sections:

1 demographic data (about you)

2 perceptions of traumatic experiences (your experience)

3 professional experience (professional experience).

### *4.2.1 Section A: Demographic data (about you)*

Section A was designed to elicit basic demographic data from participants, to obtain a "snapshot" of the current journalism cohort in Australia using a "reverse funnel" format (Weerakkody 2015). This format structures demographic questions at the beginning of a survey, and is recommended when sensitive or controversial topics, such as trauma, are included (Weerakkody 2015, p. 127). This section provided the following results:

#### 4.2.1.1 Survey questions A01–A04: Age, gender, role

From the responses, 44 people or 60 per cent of respondents were female. This compares with Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data that shows 56 per cent of Australian journalists are female (Australian Government 2022). A majority of respondents were in the "middle age" bracket or 31 years and older, which is consistent with ABS data showing the average age of Australian journalists was 39 years (Australian Government 2022) and findings by Hanusch (2008). More than half of respondents to the survey or 56 per cent self-identified as reporters; however, those who selected more senior roles such as chief-of-staff and news director, were also likely to have been reporters earlier in their careers, so some of those experiences are likely to be reflected here. It is also possible that some respondents who selected the role of sub-editor or producer were also former reporters. Most of the participants were mid-career or veteran journalists, or those with 11 or more years of experience.

#### 4.2.1.2 Survey questions A05–A051: industry experience

Respondents to the survey component were asked to provide details of themselves and their experience in order to identify patterns of trauma exposure in two ways: age and career longevity. Previous Australian research (Green, McLellan & McMahon 2005; McMahon 2001), supported research from the United States that reports an association between reduction in career longevity and increased intrusive thoughts after a catastrophic event (Dworznik 2006). First, question A05 asked about the length of time the respondent had been at their current role with their employer and question A051 asked how long they had been working as a journalist (career longevity). This information indicates level of experience and also provides greater richness of data from which to gauge length of career prior to industry exit for those participants who had left the profession or moved into different roles. These questions were phrased differently to eliminate confusion between career longevity (question A051) and length of service in current position (A05), enabling participants to change a response if required. Responses to A05 indicated that few journalists stay in the same position for a considerable length of time, with over half spending five years or less in the same role. As the age of the respondent could be determined, this was compared with the primary research question B01: "Have you covered or witnessed a traumatic event as part of your job? (That is, an event that you found traumatic, as opposed to whether someone else would have found it traumatic or whether it was considered traumatic generally)".

**Table 14** Respondents' experience of a traumatic event at work compared with their age

Traumatic Event & Age

| Traumatic Event | 18-25 years | 26-30 years | 31-50 years | 51-65 years | 65+ years | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| YES | 2.7% | 11% | 31.5% | 28.8% | 8.2% | 82.2% |
| NO | 1.4% | 0% | 5.5% | 1.4% | 0% | 8.3% |
| No Answer | 1.4% | 0% | 4.1% | 2.7% | 1.4% | 9.6% |
| TOTAL | **5.5%** | **11%** | **41.1%** | **32.9%** | **9.6%** | **100%** |

This demonstrates that age appears to have no significant effect on whether respondents will experience traumatic reporting assignments, as respondents in each age category overwhelmingly said they had experienced a traumatic event at work.

Similarly, those who had worked in the industry for more than 25 years reported covering a story they found traumatic in the greatest numbers, indicating that time in the industry—or career longevity—has little or no effect on the likelihood of being involved in a traumatic reporting assignment, as newcomers through to veteran reporters said they had had at least one such experience.

**Table 15** Respondents' experience of a traumatic event at work when compared with the number of years they have worked in journalism (career longevity)

Years in Journalism & trauma

| | Experienced trauma Yes | Experienced trauma No | No Answer | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Career length 0-2 years | 2.7% | 0% | 1.4% | 4.1% |
| Career length 3-5 years | 5.5% | 4.1% | 0% | 9.6% |
| Career length 6-10 years | 8.2% | 1.4% | 2.7% | 12.1% |
| Career length 11-25 years | 27.4% | 1.4% | 2.7% | 31.5% |
| Career length 25+ years | 38.4% | 1.4% | 2.7% | 42.5% |
| Career length TOTAL | **82.2%** | **8.3%** | **9.5%** | **100%** |

Non compulsory question

These results are consistent with other findings of this research that trauma is widespread for Australian journalists, as well as previous research by Seely (2017) that found exposure to trauma in journalism was routine.

#### 4.2.1.3 Survey questions A06–A07: Location and type

Participants responded from every Australian state and territory, in roughly proportionate numbers when compared with population data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics. The highest number of responses were from New South Wales (N = 20, or 27.4 per cent of respondents, compared with 31.8 per cent of the nation's population) (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2021b). The lowest numbers of responses were from the two territories and Tasmania. The exception was a disproportionately high number of responses from South Australia, which is the researcher's home state (N = 11, or 15 per cent of respondents, as compared with 7 per cent of Australia's population) (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2021b). This may be explained by a higher level of recognition of both the University of South Australia in that state and the researcher's professional profile there. The majority (N = 54, or 74 per

cent) of respondents were from metropolitan rather than regional locations, reflecting the geographic distribution of journalists in Australia.

#### 4.2.1.4 Survey question A08: Media type

Participants nominated which type of media they were primarily employed in, from newspaper, magazine, online only, radio, television and other. The greatest number of responses were from those who worked in newspapers and television (41 per cent and 23 per cent respectively). This is consistent with research from Hanusch (2016), which found a response of 38.3 per cent for Australian journalist from daily newspapers, although his responses from television journalists were lower, at 14.5 per cent. However, Hanusch noted in his research that cross-platform journalism was not included in his assessment. In this research, this section proved problematic for some respondents, as almost all who selected "other" indicated that they routinely worked across more than one media platform. The outlier response may indicate an error on the part of the participant, as they nominated their employment status (freelance), rather than the media platform in answer to that question.

#### 4.2.1.5 Survey question A09: Employment status

The final demographic question was on employment status—full-time, part-time or casual/freelance. Approximately two-thirds of respondents were employed on a full-time basis. Almost a quarter, or 23 per cent, were freelance or casually employed journalists, which exceeds those who are employed part time at 10 per cent. This reflects Census data compiled by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, which shows 68 per cent of Australian journalists are employed full-time (Australian Government 2022).

### *4.2.2 Section B: Perceptions of traumatic assignments (your experience)*

A second section of the survey (Your Experience) elicited further information about participants' careers and their perceptions of traumatic assignments. It yielded the following results:

#### 4.2.2.1 Survey questions B01–B08: Trauma at work

Using simple language, the first set of three questions asked journalists whether they had covered a story that caused them to experience trauma.

#### 4.2.2.2 Questions B01, B02: Trauma at work

The first question (B01) is the main survey question, relating directly to RQ1: How many times can a journalist expect to cover certain types of news stories during their career? To establish

whether journalists had experienced trauma at all, question B01 asked “Have you covered or witnessed a traumatic event as part of your job? (That is, an event that you found traumatic, as opposed to whether someone else would have found it traumatic or whether it was considered traumatic generally)?” This question was self-defining to allow respondents to answer according to their personal perceptions, as opposed to how an audience or medical professionals might consider such an event. The number of affirmative responses to this question was significant, with 82 per cent of those responding saying they had covered or witnessed a traumatic event. This should be interpreted in light of previous research, which found “the possibility that journalists might have a tendency to under-report exposure given the stoicism traditionally associated with the profession” (MacDonald, Hodgins & Saliba 2017, p. 10). As previous research has also found that women were more likely to report symptoms of stress and burnout (MacDonald et al. 2016), be at greater risk of exposure to trauma (Creamer et al. 2001) or be more likely to report harassment (Martin & Murrell 2020), the variable of gender was compared with responses to this question. A General Linear Model (GLM) test indicated that there was not a strong correlation between the respondents’ gender and their experience of trauma because of their work and this result was confirmed by a two-sided chi-square test.

**Table 16** Question B01 (trauma experience) when compared with the variable of gender

Gender & traumatic event

| | Traumatic event at work **YES** | Traumatic event at work **NO** | Traumatic event at work **No Answer** | **Total** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| MALE | 30.1% | 5.5% | 4.1% | 39.7% |
| FEMALE | 52.1% | 2.7% | 5.5% | 60.3% |
| TOTAL | **82.3%** | **8.2%** | **9.5%** | **100%** |

Non compulsory question N=66

Question B02 was supplementary to Question B01: “What type of event was it? Please describe.” This field allowed for brief written responses. Answers included murders, drownings, acts of war or armed conflict, “death knocks”, and court hearings involving child sexual abuse. These responses have been classified in the Story Category Matrix (Appendix C)

to compare the risk and impact of trauma over a career, and are discussed in detail in sections 3.4 and 3.5, and section 4.1.

Questions B01 and B02 were mandatory and therefore attracted a sufficient response rate to enable a statistically significant result at the conventional 0.05 level of significance (Kim & Choi 2021). Subsequent questions in the survey were not mandatory, so did not provide results above the statistically significant level of significance. They do, however, provide sufficient information to reveal tendencies and facilitate description of correlations, according to Wimmer and Dominick (2013).

#### 4.2.2.3 Question B03: Estimation of trauma exposure at work

In the third part of section B (Question B03), participants were asked to select from a numerical range to gauge their exposure to traumatic stories: 0, 1–5, 6–10 and 10+ times. This question was directly related to RQ1: How many times can a journalist expect to cover certain types of news stories during their career? The responses are shown in Table 15.

**Table 17** Responses to Question B03

Question B03

How many times have you witnessed or covered a traumatic event over the course of your career?

| | 0 | 1-5 | 6-10 | 10+ | No answer | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| RESPONSES | 5.5% | 50.7% | 19.2% | 12.3% | 12.3% | 100% |

Non compulsory question

The number of raw responses to this survey were too few to provide statistical reliability so while the small cohort indicates trends only, a significant number of respondents estimated they had covered at least five traumatic events. This response is consistent with previous research from the United States by Smith, Newman, and Drevo (2017), which estimated that 80–100 per cent of journalists responded to the scene of a traumatic event during their career.

As the number of raw responses did not provide statistical reliability in most cases, analysis was conducted using a contingency table (Hanna & Dempster 2012; McCormick, Salcedo & Poh 2015) including the cohort's professional experience. This is first expressed in terms of career longevity, or years in journalism, compared with experience of a traumatic event in journalism (see Table 16).

**Table 18** Respondents' career longevity when compared with their professional experience of trauma

## Years in Journalism & trauma

| | Experienced trauma Yes | Experienced trauma No | No Answer | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Career length 0-2 years | 2.7% | 0% | 1.4% | 4.1% |
| Career length 3-5 years | 5.5% | 4.1% | 0% | 9.6% |
| Career length 6-10 years | 8.2% | 1.4% | 2.7% | 12.1% |
| Career length 11-25 years | 27.4% | 1.4% | 2.7% | 31.5% |
| Career length 25+ years | 38.4% | 1.4% | 2.7% | 42.5% |
| Career length TOTAL | **82.2%** | **8.3%** | **9.5%** | **100%** |

Non compulsory question

Second, professional experience is expressed in length of current role measured in years, compared with the experience of a traumatic event in journalism (see Table 19).

**Table 19** Respondents' length of time in their current role compared with their professional experience of trauma

## Years in current role & trauma

| | Experienced trauma Yes | Experienced trauma No | No Answer | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Current role 0-2 years | 16.4% | 4.1% | 2.7% | 23.2% |
| Current role 3-5 years | 23.3% | 1.4% | 4.1% | 28.8% |
| Current role 6-10 years | 16.4% | 1.4% | 0% | 17.8% |
| Current role 11-25 years | 20.5% | 0% | 1.4% | 21.9% |
| Current role 25+ years | 5.5% | 1.4% | 1.4% | 8.3% |
| TOTAL | **82.1%** | **8.3%** | **9.6%** | **100%** |

Non compulsory question

Correlating the two variables indicates a spread of the experience of trauma across age groups and seniority, although when comparing career longevity and experience of trauma there is a tendency for older, more seasoned professionals to be more likely to report having experienced trauma than newer or younger news employees. This is consistent with findings in

the United States by Dworznik-Hoak, while Simpson, Coté and Scherer (2006, p. 41) found that "the longer people had worked as journalists, the more likely they were to report trauma symptoms". It should also be noted in Table 15 that two respondents who had been working for fewer than two years reported having covered a traumatic story, while a further four had been working for less than five years. This finding is consistent with previous US research by Dworznik and Grubb (2007) that reporters commonly encounter trauma within the first five years of their careers. Moreover, this finding supports other research (Dale 2019; Embelton et al. 2003; McMahon 2001; Teegen & Grotwinkel 2001) that found younger journalists, especially those commencing their careers, were also likely to report symptoms of trauma.

Further to the main survey question (B01), question B04 asked, "If you answered yes to the previous question (have you witnessed or covered a traumatic event as part of your job), what impact has this had on you personally, or on your family? Please describe." This question was intended to seek data associated with Research Questions 1, 2 and 4:

> RQ1: How many times can a journalist expect to cover certain types of news stories during the course of their career?
>
> RQ2: What impact has that had upon them personally?
>
> RQ4: Test if a previously developed Story Category Matrix (see Appendix C) has some relationship to the previous question, in other words, does the Story Category Matrix have some relationship to these values in a way that will be useful to journalists?

Question B04 allowed for brief written responses. Examples include:

> I think the trauma never leaves you, it just hides discretely in the years afterwards. I found my relationships with friends and family suffered because having reported death and destruction on the scale I did, I did not want to discuss what I had seen with my close ones. I wanted to shut it out and shut it down. But in the years since, I have found ways to write about it and put it into perspective for myself and my family. (Participant 27)
>
> I felt very anxious and it became stressful to go to work, knowing there might be another tragedy to cover. (Participant 66)
>
> Over the years I've covered a few stories that have had a big effect on me emotionally. Most recently a murder involving a father killing his family, which I

> didn't even have to cover directly (but had to write about in the broader context of family murders). I wouldn't say any of these things have scarred me for life but they have made me feel very drained and emotionally exhausted for days at a time when I'm writing about them. (Participant 86)

> I have been moved to tears only a couple of times in the courtroom or when covering a story. I always found it easy to report on anything, including the Child Sex Abuse Royal Commission, until I got too close to families who had been devastated by one paedophile … (Participant 117)

Responses to this question, and questions C04 and C05 which asked respondents to describe any impact this had on their ability to recover from the event and perform their duties respectively, were coded into themes and a frequency count was performed in NVivo to obtain summary statistics. The four most common themes were:

1. sadness and distress
2. anxiety
3. impact on relationships and
4. affected sleep or dreams; (equal 4th with) unsure.

These themes were then used to populate the "impact" column of the Story Category Matrix, as discussed in sections 3.2.7 and 4.1.

#### 4.2.2.4 Survey questions B05, B06 and B08: Trauma outside of work

Other questions in this section asked respondents about their experiences of trauma outside of work, its effect upon them and how often they had had such experiences. This was to determine whether respondents were any more vulnerable to trauma at work due to exposure in their personal lives (Backholm & Björkqvist 2012b; Newman, Simpson & Handschuh 2003; Pyevich, Newman & Daleiden 2003; Weidmann, Fehm & Fydrich 2008). These two variables were compared using a chi-square analysis (see Table 20).

**Table 20** Respondents' experience of covering a traumatic at work when compared with their personal experiences of trauma

## Traumatic event & Non-work traumatic event

| | Work traumatic event Yes | Work traumatic event No | No Answer | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Non-work traumatic event Yes | 38.4% | 32.9% | 11% | 82.3% |
| Non-work traumatic event No | 5.5% | 0% | 2.7% | 8.2% |
| No Answer | 0% | 0% | 9.6% | 9.6% |
| TOTAL | **43.9%** | **32.9%** | **23.3%** | **100%** |

Non compulsory question
N=73

It is useful to consider the number of respondents who had experienced trauma at work with those who had experienced trauma in their personal lives, as Backholm and Björkqvist (2012b) found journalists who had experienced more personal trauma were more likely to display stronger symptoms of trauma. This research found that of the 60 respondents who had a traumatic experience while reporting, almost half (28, or 46.67 per cent) had also experienced a traumatic event outside of work. The data gathered do not reveal whether or what effect this experience of trauma might have had on subsequent reporting, but respondents were asked to briefly state the effect it had on them. Those effects are illustrated by comments from respondents such as:

> I have witnessed and experienced sexual assault, workplace bullying and the death of an elderly man who collapsed in my arms on the street. (Participant 127)

This combination of personal and professional traumatic experiences demonstrates that further research is necessary to better understand the interaction between journalists' experiences of trauma, both professionally and outside the newsroom.

### 4.2.2.5 Question B07: The story you can't forget

A further question relating to career information was constructed to test the validity of the previous set, which asked how many times a journalist had covered a traumatic story. This question (B07) asked journalists whether they had covered an assignment that affected them emotionally, or one they couldn't forget. While not necessarily an indication of trauma, this question sought to determine whether the enduring memory of a story might reflect the cumulative nature of trauma, as there are people and events over a career that "leave their

mark" on those who cover them. Seventy-seven per cent of respondents answered this question affirmatively. While this was lower than for the previous group of questions in questions B01, B02 and B03, it is approximate to the findings of Smith, Newman and Drevo (2017) in their research on US journalists at risk of developing PTSD. As also mentioned above, Smith, Newman and Drevo found 80 per cent of respondents had responded to the scene of a traumatic incident.

### *4.2.3 Section C: Perceptions across a career (professional experience)*

The third and final section of the survey considered the types of stories assigned to journalists over the course of their career, the personal impact of covering those stories, any professional impact and the general working conditions of Australian journalists. This section included questions on whether the participant had experienced bullying or harassment (online or physical) and perceptions of employer support.

#### 4.2.3.1 Survey Question C01: Exposure to story categories 1, 2, 3 and 4

One purpose of this section was to determine the exposure to certain types of traumatic stories by estimating the number of times a journalist had covered each of them over their career. Questions on this subject were arranged in four categories, consistent with the definitions used in the Story Category Matrix (Appendix C). While these story categories may appear similar to the work-related potentially traumatic events used by psychologists and various authors, including MacDonald, Hodgins and Saliba (2017), this research employed a practice theory model appropriate for this type of research.

The next group of questions in the self-administered survey related to the story categories in the Story Category Matrix (Smith 2016). The central query for this section was designed to elicit more detailed data related to RQ1: "How many times can a journalist expect to cover certain types of news stories during their career?" and RQ4: "Test if a previously developed Story Category Matrix (see Appendix C) has some relationship to the previous question, in other words, does the Story Category Matrix have some relationship to these values in a way that will be useful to journalists?"

#### 4.2.3.2 Survey question C01: Exposure to crashes, fires and violence

Responses to question C01 ("How many times over the course of your career have you covered the following") were arranged in a grid and participants were asked to select from a numerical range: 0, 1–5, 6–10, 11–20 and 20+. The findings for each range and story type in Story Category 1 are shown in Table 21.

**Table 21** Responses to Category 1 stories from Question C01

## Responses to Story Category 1

Question C01 How many times over the course of your career have you covered the following:

| | 0 | 1-5 | 6-10 | 11-20 | 20+ | No Answer |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Car Accidents | 19.2% | 20.5% | 9.6% | 5.5% | 26% | 80.8% |
| House & Building fires | 19.2% | 24.7% | 9.6% | 6.8% | 20.5% | 80.8% |
| Violence | 15.1% | 15.1% | 8.2% | 16.4% | 26% | 80.8% |
| **TOTAL** | **79.5%** | **60.3%** | **27.4%** | **28.7%** | **72.5%** | **80.8%** |

Non compulsory question (more than one response allowed)

This is consistent with findings by Geronazzo-Alman and colleagues (2017), which assert cumulative exposure to work-related trauma provides a foreseeable risk of psychiatric disorders in other first responders. Tyson and Wild (2021) also found journalists who repeatedly covered stories involving human suffering were more likely to suffer higher rates of PTSD. Therefore, the large number of responses in the 20+ column indicates further research may be warranted to determine the highest range possible for this experience. Although these types of stories are routinely covered for Australian newspapers and broadcast bulletins, some participants did not report having covered these types of stories during their careers. This may be indicative of the number of respondents who worked in media outlets and roles not directly related to such reporting.

When asked to describe the kinds of events they had covered (Question C02)—as distinct from the impact it had on them personally (Question C021)—responses provided data on the nature of trauma and its effects on journalists on the road. One participant (Participant 5) wrote that after covering "car accident, house fire, bashing" stories for 11–25 years, they were "now on medication". Another wrote:

> I have done several 'death knocks', where you go to the family of someone who has been killed to ask if they want to be interviewed, and quite a few of them were very hard. I feel silly saying that because it was no doubt far worse for them but nonetheless, it affected me. (Participant 66)

Other respondents described events across their careers:

> I have covered news and events that have been about trauma or that have had personal triggers for me, for example politicians [I know] … and corrupt officials,

but also road accidents and stories about sexual slavery victims. I covered the memorial service for a refugee as well. (Participant 74)

I have covered numerous such events: from car accidents, murders, the Port Arthur Massacre, an earthquake in Kashmir where 70,000 people died, child sex abuse … (Participant 81)

The types of stories considered routine, such as Category 1 road accidents were mentioned by Australian journalists in their responses to this survey in a similar manner to more "serious" stories of both Categories 2 and 4. This suggests the nature of the story subject matter is not an indicator of its potential to cause a journalist to experience trauma. Further, US research by Seely (2019) found domestic reporting (as opposed to that in conflict zones) can also be traumatic for journalists.

#### 4.2.3.3 Survey question C01: Exposure to extreme violence, natural disasters

The findings for stories of a violent, extreme, or distressing nature, such as serious court stories, victim accounts, and natural disasters (or story Category 2) are shown in Table 22.

**Table 22** Responses to Category 2 stories from Question C01

Responses to Story Category 2

Question C01 How many times over the course of your career have you covered the following:

| | 0 | 1-5 | 6-10 | 11-20 | 20+ | No Answer | TOTAL |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Violent/ Distressing | 6.8% | 19.2% | 5.5% | 2.7% | 46.6% | 19.2% | 100% |
| Natural disasters | 8.2% | 26% | 12.3% | 11% | 23.3% | 19.2% | 100% |

Non compulsory question

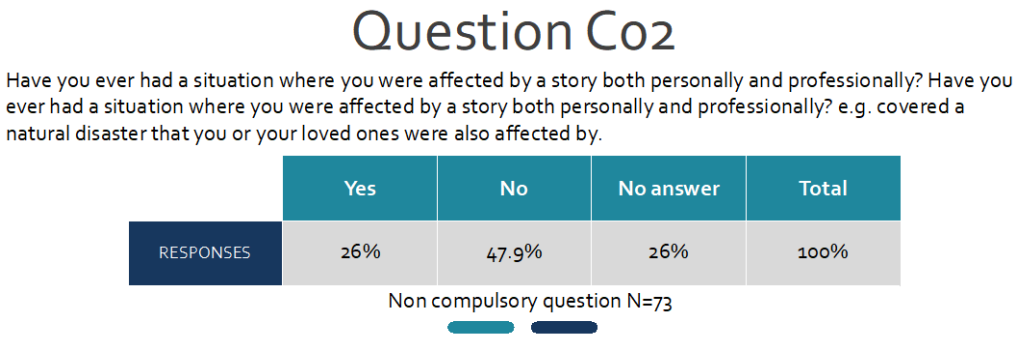
In this Story Category, the highest response in all estimates was for coverage of natural disasters—19 participants said they had done so between six and 10 times over the course of their career, while 34 selected the highest range of more than 20 times in a career.

#### 4.2.3.4 Questions C02–C03: Stories affecting the journalist personally

These questions were designed to determine the extent, if possible, to which Australian journalists are directly affected by the stories they cover. Question C02 required a yes/no response: "Have you ever had a situation where you were affected by a story both personally and professionally? (For example covered a natural disaster that you or your loved ones were

also affected by.)" This question included an example to assist journalists in deciding the types of stories that might qualify for this answer. Of those who answered this question, 19 respondents, or 35 per cent, responded in the affirmative. The results are shown in Table 23.

**Table 23** Responses to Category 3 stories from Question C02




Question C021 asked respondents to describe the event if relevant. This was designed to elicit data on RQ1: How many times can a journalist expect to cover certain types of news stories during their career? and RQ2: What impact has that had upon them personally? Responses include:

> I covered a child abuse case in which the evidence presented included documents about clergy I knew, who had protected known paedophile clergy. As a result, I discovered that my husband had been a victim of child sexual abuse by a member of the clergy. (Participant 31)
>
> Bushfire threatening home. (Participant 47)
>
> We had to flee our house during the 2011 Brisbane floods. (Participant 67)
>
> There was the case of a woman murdered. I did the story [but] only later did I learn it was someone I'd known quite well in school (her name had changed). I was saddened not only at her death, but that I'd been so close without realising. Also, with regard to COVID-19, as I covered each day's latest, keeping up meant watching every development, as well as the general concern felt by everyone. [The effect on me] did seem to build up early on. (Participant 112)
>
> The murder of my producer while we worked together in Mogadishu. She was shot in the back in a drive-by attack. (Participant 122)

Question C03 asked participants to estimate their exposure from a range of numerical values. Results for these Story Category 3 responses are listed in Table 24.

**Table 24** Responses to estimates of Category 3 stories from Question C04

## Responses to Story Category 3

Question C04 How many times have you have been affected by a story both personally and professionally?

| | 0 | 1-5 | 6-10 | 10+ | No Answer | TOTAL |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Story that affects journalist personally | 28.8% | 19.2% | 5.5% | 13.7% | 32.9% | 100% |

Non compulsory question

While 21 respondents had not had this experience, 10 said they had been affected by a story they were writing personally and professionally more than 10 times in their career. A veteran reporter who selected the maximum value for this Story Category wrote:

> My personality changed extremely, I think. (Participant 124)

### 4.2.3.5 Survey question C01: Megastories

Respondents were asked to estimate their exposure to stories of the greatest Consequence, such as terrorism and war, or natural disasters affecting entire geo-political regions. These "megastories" (Green, McLellan & McMahon 2005) relate to Category 4. The results for this non-compulsory category are shown in Table 25.

**Table 25** Responses to Category 4 stories from Question C01

## Responses to Story Category 4

Question C01 How many times over the course of your career have you covered the following:

| | 0 | 1-5 | 6-10 | 11-20 | 20+ | No Answer |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Catastrophic or highly unusual | 30.1% | 21.9% | 19.2% | 2.7% | 6.8% | 19.2% |

Non compulsory question N=73

Five people, or 8 per cent of those who answered, said they had covered stories of this nature more than 20 times over the course of their careers. A further 16 people, or 27 per cent of those who answered this question, indicated that they had covered these types of stories up

to five times in their career, while another 14 people, or 23 per cent, estimated that they had done so up to 10 times. These results will be discussed further in section 5.2.10.

Overall, when considered as a group, the results for this section of the survey did not conform to an overall pattern, either in terms of decreasing exposure from Category 1 to 4, or in increasing impact from Category 1 to 4. In other words, Australian journalists reported being traumatised by the more "common" or ubiquitous stories and being exposed to traumatic stories of greater significance in high numbers. One journalist reported the maximum response across all fields but one (Category 4), for example. This is likely to reflect the role or "round" (known as a "beat" in the United States) that the journalist specialised in—in this case, a veteran television reporter of more than 40 years in the crime and emergency services round. He wrote:

> I was exported to many horrific incidents ranging from homicides to plane crashes and other incidents such a cliff collapsed that killed several children and being held at gunpoint by Police as the Hoddle Street Massacre unfolded and dealing with families and survivors of the Port Arthur Massacre. (Participant 124)

#### 4.2.3.6 Questions C04–C05: Exposure and effect on journalists and their work

These questions were follow-up questions to Question C03, which asked respondents whether they had been affected by a story both professionally and personally. Question C04 asked "What impact (if any) did this have on your ability to recover from the event? Please describe." Respondents who selected the maximum value for the number of times they had personally been affected by a story wrote:

> I no longer write on these issues as I find the emotional toll it has on me is too great—and often find it stops me from being able to work as productively as I should. (Participant 62)

> I am unsure [what impact (if any) it had on my ability to recover from the event] as I haven't thought about it. (Participant 74)

> You become very circumspect about life and chance. And learn that nothing much separates us all. (Participant 29)

> The stories I cover are often about traumatic events in people's lives. I think it is important that you are empathetic to the victims. A little bit of that stays with you every time you do one of those stories. (Participant 81)

Question C05 asked, “What impact (if any) did this have on your ability to continue to perform your duties? Please describe.” Some of those who selected the maximum value for the number of times they had been affected by a story wrote:

> I am no longer in a frontline production position but at the time I have described I felt I had to persist as an example to my team and colleagues. I felt that it was my job to keep on going. I no longer think that. (Participant 13)
>
> I kept going. (Participant 27)
>
> None. I would sometimes have to use judgement about what to write as people say a lot more than they intended when they are vulnerable. (Participant 29)
>
> I'd like to say none but I’m sure it showed at times. (Participant 48)

Comments from those who had not been affected by their stories as many times were just as troubling:

> I found it very hard to write my stories on the subjects. I felt overly invested in the outcomes of my writing. (Participant 25)
>
> I was editing a newspaper and asked not to come in on the day following the event, but was often editing subsequent stories. (Participant 68)
>
> It took me considerable time to regain my focus. (Participant 71)
>
> I did what I needed to do to get the stories done and meet those deadlines, but there was an emotional toll to that. I’m still reporting on the fires but at least now I'm aware of the impact that it has on me emotionally, and I'm more prepared for it. (Participant 73)
>
> I took a week off, after Port Arthur, and at times I’ve been terribly sad, but I can’t say it has affected my ability to perform my duties. (Participant 81)

Responses to questions C04 and C05 and question B04 (described above) were coded using qualitative analysis software NVivo and a frequency count was performed to obtain summary statistics. The four most common themes were:

1 sadness and distress
2 anxiety
3 impact on relationships, and
4 affected sleep or dreams; (equal 4$^{th}$ with) unsure.

These data were then used to populate the “impact” column of the Story Category Matrix discussed in sections 3.2.7 and 4.1.

#### 4.2.3.7 Questions C06–C07: Trauma and employer support

The next two questions in the survey sought to gauge the type and level of employer support received while journalists were balancing the personal and professional consequences of a story. Question C06 required a simple yes/no response: “Was the support you received from your employer adequate during this time?” Almost one-third, or 31 per cent, of respondents did not consider the support they received from their employer adequate. While not statistically significant due to the number of responses to this non compulsory question, Table 26 compares perception of adequate employer support with the age of the respondent. Although not useable to determine generalisability of results, this comparison is nonetheless useful to add to the understanding of participants' experiences (Johnson 2009).

**Table 26** Perception of employer support when compared with age of respondent

Adequate employer support & Age

| | 18-25 years | 26-30 years | 31-50 years | 51-65 years | 65+ years | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Adequate employer support YES | 1.4% | 0% | 6.8% | 4.1% | 2.7% | 15% |
| Adequate employer support NO | 1.4% | 0% | 8.2% | 6.8% | 4.1% | 21% |
| No Answer | 2.7% | 11% | 26% | 21.9% | 2.7% | 64% |
| TOTAL | **5.5%** | **11%** | **41%** | **32.8%** | **9.5%** | **100%** |

Non compulsory question
N=73

The following question, C07, requested a brief description: “What kind of support did you receive from your employer or the newsroom generally during this time? Please describe.” Responses included:

> None. Only talking with other staff members. (Participant 5)

> Those that had done it before understood. I went to the work counsellor a few times. She said I should stop writing about this stuff. I didn't think that was useful but that's what I did in the end, so she was right. (Participant 29)

> I didn’t seek any support, but it would’ve been provided if I asked. So, this is why I say it was adequate. (Participant 57)

> None. I did access an employee assistance line a few times. One counsellor suggested I might be suffering some PTSD. I told a news editor and she told me I should have a rum with lunch every day to help loosen me up. (Participant 48)

> I'm freelance, so I am my own support. I have sought counselling, I attended an online seminar from the Dart Centre about trauma and bushfires—which helped a lot—and I have support from family and friends (all of whom are also dealing with bushfire-related stress, but at least we're dealing with it together). (Participant 73)

#### 4.2.3.8 Survey question C: Questions C08–C15

The remaining seven questions in the survey related to conditions in the workplace, both inside and outside the newsroom, and awareness of the risks of reporting in Australia. These included whether respondents had been physically threatened, subject to bullying, harassment, or trolling, and whether they had been warned that newsgathering could be hazardous to their physical or mental health. Three-quarters of the women (N = 24) and half of the men (N=8) who responded to the survey question said they had been bullied, threatened, or harassed at work either physically or online (see Table 29).

Respondents were asked to estimate the number of threats to their physical health or safety at work, and the number of times they had been threatened, harassed, or bullied at work, including sexual harassment and online bullying or trolling. One-third of those who responded to this question (C10) reported being harassed or bullied at work. As Posetti, Harrison and Waisbord (2020) and Ferrier (2019) argue, misogyny and online violence in particular, threaten women’s participation in journalism and public communication. This response was further analysed in terms of gender. Women represent 60 per cent of the total cohort and half of those who responded to this question report being bullied or harassed at work. Men represent 40 per cent of the total cohort and one-third of those who responded to this question report being bullied or harassed at work. The following table (Table 27) compares those results to respondents’ gender:

**Table 27** Respondents' gender when compared with experiences of being bullied, threatened or harassed at work when compared with gender

## Gender & Bullied at work

| | Bullied at work YES | Bullied at work NO | Bullied at work No Answer | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| MALE | 21.9% | 6.8% | 11% | 39.7% |
| FEMALE | 43.8% | 5.5% | 11% | 60.3% |
| TOTAL | **65.7%** | **12.3%** | **22%** | **100%** |

Non compulsory question N=48

The question following (C11) asked respondents to estimate how many times they had been harassed or bullied at or in the course of their work, both physically and online. Two people estimated they had been harassed physically and online 100 times each.

Finally, questions C09–C14 were designed to determine whether journalists would expect to encounter some risk in the execution of their assignments. Firstly, C09 asked participants had been warned newsgathering could be hazardous to their physical health. Question C12 asked respondents to nominate from whom such a warning had been given. Question C13 asked respondents if they had been warned about risks to their mental health, and (C14) if so by whom. A comparative table of these results is included in Table 28.

**Table 28** Comparison of responses to questions C12 and C14 relating to warnings to physical and mental health

## Warnings comparison

Questions C12, C14 Have you ever been warned that newsgathering could be hazardous to your physical/mental health?

| | YES | NO | No Answer | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Have you ever been warned that newsgathering could be hazardous to your **physical** health? | 43.8% | 28.8% | 27.4% | 100% |
| Have you ever been warned that newsgathering could be hazardous to your **mental** health? | 38.4% | 32.9% | 28.8% | 100% |

Non compulsory question

Warnings of the risk of the job came mostly from employers (52 per cent of those who answered this question) and peers (29 per cent), with Other and University attracting the least responses (14 per cent and 5 per cent respectively). The final question (C15) asked respondents whether they were willing to be interviewed for this research.

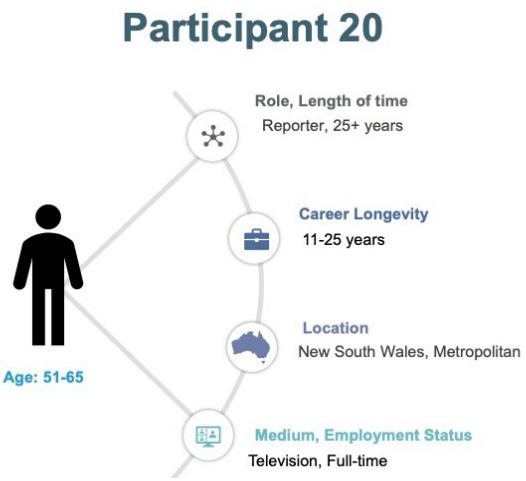
### *4.2.4 Summary*

This survey's results demonstrate a need for further research into the extent to which Australian journalists experience trauma in the course of their work. It also demonstrates that a significant number of Australian journalists (35 per cent of those who responded to this non-compulsory question) are simultaneously victims and news-bearers of the same stories.

## 4.3 Journalism trauma in Australia: Interviews

There is an adage in news that a journalist should never be the story (Harrington et al. 2007; Richards & Rees 2011). Australian journalists are strongly disposed towards the ideal of objectivity and detachment, preferring to stay at arm's length from events on which they report (Hanusch 2008). However, early Australian research put journalists in the spotlight by rhetorically asking "Who cares for the wounded journalist?" (Castle, 2002). This research set out to investigate the frequency of such "unseen lesions on the psyche" (McMahon 2010, p. 40) and how the journalists affected have responded. While empirical data have demonstrated the extent to which Australian journalists experience symptoms of trauma on the road, qualitative data were necessary to provide more detail and enable a more thorough understanding of the phenomenon. This was achieved through a series of semi-structured interviews. From the 73 complete responses to the online survey, 12 volunteers were selected—seven males and five females—from every mainland state and all media formats, as well as regional and metropolitan locations. The findings of each interview are discussed below.

### *4.3.1 Interview 1: It can be a very, very stressful game*




## STORY CATEGORY MATRIX

Participant 20

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | REGULARLY COVER | 0 times | Car crashes, house or building fires | Affecting 1-5 people | |
| 2 | COVER AT LEAST ONCE | 11-20 times | Disasters, violent, extreme or distressing subject | Affecting segments of/entire community | |
| 3 | COVER & PERSONALLY AFFECTED | 0 times | As above and personally affected | As above | |
| 4 | RARELY IF EVER COVER | 1-5 times | Numerous... an old woman in Ukraine taking me through the bombed out ruins of her home in distress, and a priest telling me how pro-Russian separatists took his two brothers and two sons and murdered them, then going to the shallow grave where they were found to film. Also interviewing the family of a man who killed himself after losing his retirement savings in dodgy mortgage and debenture funds we were investigating. Being chased through the streets by thugs trying to beat me up when I investigated corruption in the building industry. Having the distressed wife of someone I had helped expose for corruption accost me in tears screaming that I was killing her husband. | Affecting entire state/nation(s) | It's hard to say. I suffer the odd bout of depression and anxiety but it's difficult to say if it is related to trauma. I do a lot of investigative journalism... I think it gradually grinds you down. |

The first interview took place at an outdoor cafe. Participant 20 is a journalist with more than 33 years' experience who has worked mostly in broadcast media, including in war zones and highly stressful environments.

> Often times you're rubbing up against power—powerful institutions, corporations, politicians and sometimes some really bad people—and that is difficult enough. Then you're dealing with the lives of people who've been

> affected in the stories you're telling. Then you're dealing with the deadlines and stress in the process and that's all manageable. But if things go badly at home—if a child is ill, if your relationship's on the rocks — that's when it gets really, really, really difficult.

He insisted we start the interview by playing on his mobile phone the clip of a story broadcast seven years ago, which had affected him profoundly. He was tense to start with, while at the same time being open and relaxed as a person. But as we talked about his "one story"— the one he can't forget—his physical responses became more evident. His facial wrinkles deepened, becoming more pronounced. His hand trembled as he lifted his coffee cup. His bottom lip trembled at one point.

His story begins by introducing his subjects. We get to know them as people—real, live human beings, not just victims of a heartless and immoral fraudster. One of these people is the widow of a victim who died by suicide.

> That's sort of fairly typical of work I've done over many, many years—that suicide is rare—but detailed case studies on people who have lost their life savings and suffered horrendously as a result. I still get very upset when I watch that.

Participant 20's trust and preparedness to talk openly with me was both striking and humbling. It was a stark contrast to others who had contacted me, wary of being vulnerable in any way to the extent that they wouldn't complete the survey if they had to supply a name. We had previously discussed that this was not a therapeutic environment, but it seemed to make Participant 20 even more keen—even eager—to speak. Though clearly affected by the toll his journalism career has taken on him, he struggled with whether his work as a financial journalist would even be worth contributing:

> Journalism and trauma and dealing with trauma is usually associated with journalists who are covering wars or natural disasters. And I've been in a war zone and that was pretty bad, but … I just don't do that kind of journalism [now.] I don't do natural disasters and all that sort of stuff, and so the kind of journalism I do, I just didn't feel like a lot of it fitted into that.

This kind of response typifies the stoicism evident in journalism culture (Green & Sykes 2005; MacDonald, Hodgins & Saliba 2017; Newman, Davis & Kennedy 2006) that is most closely associated with the ideal of objectivity and detachment according to Dworznik (2006) and

McCaffrey (2019). This participant said people in high places with a vested interest in his story had lobbied his bosses to have him sacked. He had also faced legal action and reported from a war zone, but still loves his profession.

> I love calling the powerful to account but it's like combat, when you're doing that all the time—if you're not doing press release journalism. You're digging up dirt on powerful people and powerful institutions and holding them to account. They want to wreck you, they want to destroy you, they want to stop you doing what you're doing and you're dealing with that all the time.

He says he is not sure what is worse—being immersed in others' suffering or seeing it over and over in the edit suite:

> It's often when you're through the process—or when I'm going through the process—of putting the story together and you're listening intently and over again and selecting material and then selecting pictures and constructing the narrative that I sometimes feel it really hits me.
>
> This guy I know has said to me: 'everyone's got a different sized cup, but you get to the point where your cup is full, and you can't take any more'. And he's someone that did a lot of death knocks, all that sort of stuff.

For this participant, separating the personal and professional or the story or its consequences can be difficult when it comes to what causes him the most stress.

> It's hard to know what's making you feel the way you do—to what extent it's dealing with power; to what extent it's rubbing up against powerful institutions; to what extent it's that you're dealing with people whose lives have been ruined and hearing their stories and empathising with them and then the process of telling their stories. I kind of think of friends who've been out under fire in war zones and that kind of thing, and it seems almost trivial to be talking about doing financial journalism in comparison to that, but when I look at the lives of those people, it kind of confirms to me that, you know, it's just, it's tough stuff [takes a long pause; has difficulty speaking] that they've gone through, and you're kind of like a witness to that.

There have been times when he has woken in the night worrying about whether he got something right in a story and others when he did not sleep for weeks. He insists he is not

traumatised, however, and that colleagues have it worse. I wondered what it would take for him to do so.

What he does know for sure is that humour is important:

> That's the kind of the coping mechanism that you use on the road and you use it a lot: black humour. And there is a compartmentalisation that really is "we know what we've got to get done; we've got to do this". It's only later that you allow yourself to feel.

This man had clearly suffered, yet found worth in his profession when there was some kind of justice for those who had been wronged. He seemed to find it hardest to deal with the stories where there was no justice—when there was nothing he could do to help the people in those situations, thus embodying a commitment to the "fundamental" journalism ideal of truth (Deuze 2005). He had somehow managed to stay sensitive and compassionate despite a long career and admitting that he had had to harden himself to get the job done at times. Like many good journalists, he struggled with balancing ethics and the need to produce a good story when interviewing.

> Literally when you're doing that there's a part of you in your mind [thinking] this is going to be great television, but there's another part of you that's going: 'You're leading these people back to these dark places for what you're doing'. So, there's always that kind of tug, ethically.

The biggest challenge facing journalism, as he sees it, is how it manages its people:

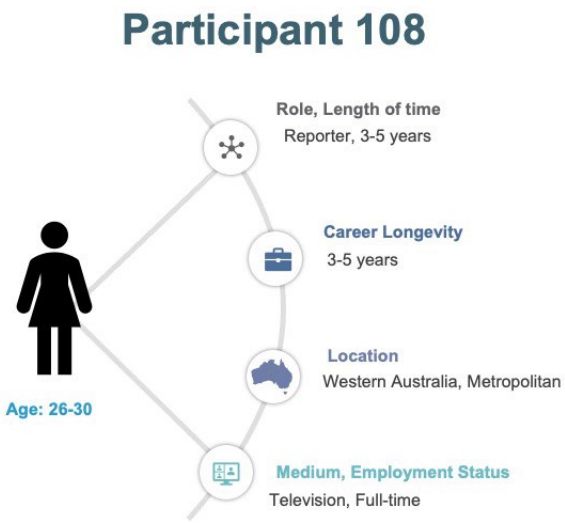
> The nature of this work is so stressful that if you're dealing with things on multiple fronts—if things are off-kilter in your domestic life—then I think it's really very hard.
>
> And journalism is very much like that; it's on to the next story. And if I was to say anything about the way it's managed—[it's that] often managers don't actually pick up that journalists are getting exhausted by this process.

Like many journalists, speaking for himself is a challenge, though speaking for others comes easily:

> I know so many journalists who have suffered and their lives have been deeply affected. I don't know if I want to the public to understand, but it's nice to feel that at least some people understand that this is a bloody tough gig and that

people put their heart and soul into it and care about what they do. It can be a very, very stressful game.

### *4.3.2 Interview 2: I'd rather cover courts than COVID-19*




STORY CATEGORY MATRIX

Participant 108

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | REGULARLY COVER | 20+ times | Car crashes, house or building fires | Affecting 1-5 people | |
| 2 | COVER AT LEAST ONCE | 20+ times | Disasters, violent, extreme or distressing subject | Affecting segments of/entire community | I went home and cried and struggled to sleep… Some of the details have appeared in dream and I find myself getting upset by minor things outside of work. |
| 3 | COVER & PERSONALLY AFFECTED | 1 times | As above and personally affected | As above | Asked to be put back on the Courts round rather than continue to write more stories on COVID-19 |
| 4 | RARELY IF EVER COVER | 0 times | Catastrophic/Unprecedented | Affecting entire state/nation(s) | |

The interval between the first and second interviews was marked by the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Although history will judge whether it was an exaggeration to say the pandemic was a rupture in world events, it framed the strain and stress of everyday interaction and limited personal communication as this interview began. From this point in data collection, interviews took

place via Zoom, which limited the opportunity to observe participants' non-verbal responses (Wimmer & Dominick 2013).

Participant 108 spoke from her loungeroom on her day off for about an hour, and began by describing four jobs that had significantly affected her: "probably the country's worst ever child sex offender"; an inquest into a series of child suicides; the Claremont serial killer trial into the disappearance and deaths of three women in Perth in the late 1990s;[4] and a particularly gory stabbing:

> We heard a kid inside the house where the stabbing had happened. This was … later on after the police had left. And we went up to see what was going on because apparently there was this kid in the house and we looked through the front door and there was more blood than I've ever seen in my life, and this two- or three-year-old kid running around with his empty bottle. And I think he was hungry, and his parents were just drug-fucked in the background or something. That was really messed up. I had some dreams about that because it was really horrible. Sorry. I feel like I just unloaded.

At times her eyes welled with tears as she spoke, and her face reddened with emotion. Yet she remained eager to keep talking and at times seemed apologetic for doing so.

> I've just ended up being really upset, and I've ended up polishing off half a bottle of wine when I got home and things like that. The Claremont one; I've had dreams. I've had a dream that one of the girls (victims) was a ghost coming to me asking "Who killed me?" I had another dream about that where I was on the side of Stirling Highway and this car was coming to pick me up because of what did happen to the girls. And it's a weird one as well, because I'm 28 and the oldest victim was 27 and they were all fair [participant is blonde] and going out to these places that I used to go out to a lot when I was younger … I also had a dream about that little boy in that house. I was really upset about that. I ended up talking about that to police and child services to try and figure out what was

[4] Three women aged 18, 23 and 27 disappeared from the popular nightspot suburb of Claremont in Perth in 1996 and 1997; in 2016 a man was arrested and charged with their murders, after "the biggest, longest running and most expensive investigation" https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Claremont_serial_killings. After a seven-month hearing in 2020, the man was found guilty of two of the murders.

> going on [with the boy]. The "kids" thing really upsets me. You think about these tiny kids who've just got no start in life.

She described the strain of sitting in court for eight hours a day, hearing details of such evidence, but asking to be returned to the courts round as that was still preferable to covering COVID-19:

> In the beginning I just started thinking 'God, things are never going to be the same again' and come home and thinking about that and walking down the empty streets. Then we'd send a cameraman out to film because they were just so empty. You definitely go: 'This is taking over my life right now …" It can get really, really overwhelming.

This participant believes the job has not affected her relationship, and it was easier to talk openly to friends who are also journalists than to those outside the industry, especially about stories involving violence or human suffering:

> There will be times when I think you can kind of get a bit blasé about what you do. I think there'll be times when I'll be telling Mum about something, and my Mum will be just like "Oh my God!" and I've just said [something about a horrific story] offhand "Oh that's just what I did on Thursday." My partner's a journalist as well so he gets it, but definitely when you talk to people who aren't in the industry, they're quite shocked.

She considers her workplace to be supportive, as the news editor or "the HR guy" would "check in" on her from time to time. She has also accessed her workplace Employee Assistance Program:

> Claremont was getting to me a bit and I'd just finished that horrible child abuse sentencing so I just thought I may as well. It was good to talk about it and I had some good recommendations, but the thing is, since then I haven't really been able to put much of it into practice because COVID came and has thrown everything into disarray.
>
> I've had journos from other stations say to me: "You're too soft, you should be a fucking primary school teacher" kind of thing. [Or] "You can't handle this." But really, I think you're a bit messed up if you are handling it. Especially child abuse things and things like that. God, if you're not upset by that there's something very wrong with you.

Towards the end of the interview, Participant 108 mentioned that while she had not thought about it before, she realised that the repetition of some stories had affected her, because she now

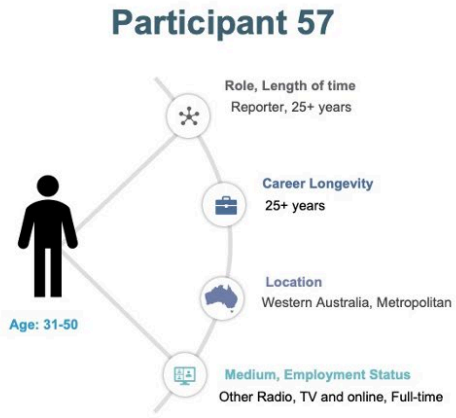
avoided driving when she could. She said this was because she had seen so many car accidents during her career and drove a small car.

> I think I've become more paranoid since I've started the job. More paranoid when I'm driving, and more paranoid when going out for dinner in Northbridge or something like that and walking home. I mean, I've never walked home by myself but with my partner I was very nervy about [him] getting king-hit or you know, someone being assaulted … just seeing those things over and over again, you do see how often it happens.

More than once she talked about loving the job and being a "lifer" because she "couldn't imagine" doing anything else:

> I just love that one day I'll be behind the scenes at the zoo and the next day I'll be in the incredible Supreme Court building and the next day I'll be at the top of a skyscraper doing an interview. It's the best job.

### *4.3.3 Interview 3: You are a recorder*




¶

## STORY CATEGORY MATRIX

Participant 57

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | REGULARLY COVER | 20+ times | Car crashes, house or building fires | Affecting 1-5 people | |
| 2 | COVER AT LEAST ONCE | 20+ times | Murders, car accidents, child abuse court hearings. Covering the sentencing hearing for Anthony Robert Harvey, who stabbed and clubbed his family to death. | Affecting segments of/entire community | Speaking about the sentencing of Harvey made me feel occasionally emotional. |
| 3 | COVER & PERSONALLY AFFECTED | 1-5 times | I have personally known murder victims whose killers were subjected to the justice system (and sentenced). I had no involvement in the actual coverage. | As above | None really except it did make me more aware of how families and friends deal with such issues. |
| 4 | RARELY IF EVER COVER | 20+ times | Covering the refugees from East Timor in 1999. Dealing with the survivors and relatives of the first Bali bombing. | Affecting entire state/nation(s) | A lingering feeling of sadness and concern about various incidents, and how the people impacted are coping. |

This interview was conducted online during the first national lockdown due to COVID-19, which made it profoundly challenging to conduct, due to the inherent uncertainty of the situation and sensitivity of the subject matter. This was a comparatively new experience for both the interviewee and researcher.

Participant 57 spoke via Zoom in the evening on his way home from work. He seemed stressed, and at times distracted, as though grappling with being “on the other side” of an interview while also being interviewed online. It also seemed as if the detachment associated

with journalistic objectivity had been applied not just to the participant's professional identity, but to his personal communication as well.

With experience on the courts round for many years, Participant 57 strove for objectivity and "arm's length" narrative, even when describing the sentencing of the defendant in conversation:

> So, it was the worst of the worst. Because it involved children, and because it involved his complete abrogation of responsibility as a father—you're supposed to protect your kids, right? and here he is, murdering them in their sleep—and because of the youth of them, it does stay with me.

He said he consciously put his feelings aside while reporting because court reporters such as he were removed from the worst of what was aired in court:

> To be an observer is a kind of privilege … What you can't get past is these deep human stories … So, my way of coping with it is reminding myself that I'm not one of those police officers, I'm not one of those people who had to take the bodies away. I'm not one of the relatives.

Such actions constitute emotional labour on the part of the participant, due to the repeated and conscious emotional distance or detachment employed in the execution of his work (Huxford & Hopper 2020; Richards & Rees 2011). As with other interviewees, it was striking how eager he was to talk. Despite his apparent habitual objectivity, there was a sense that he had not had an opportunity to discuss these issues from his own perspective:

> I think the degree to which you are affected by a story—and this has been true since I started working as a reporter—is definitely influenced by what else is going on in your life. If everything at home is fine—you might have gone through a relationship breakup or a relative has died … You might cover a story that might touch off that emotion that was already there. It might have needed a release.

He found talking with his partner, who is a journalist at the same organisation, helpful:

> Sometimes people could get emotionally upset about something relatively innocuous, because they covered a serial killer case two months before. And I think the idea of counselling is to prevent those moments from arising at inopportune moments: you're about to do a piece to camera, you're about to read the news or

> something, and then all of a sudden you get a flashback to this. I'm just talking about these things because they're things that I know of that that can happen. It's probably better to deal with something as soon as it's done, but you tend to speak to your colleagues.

This anecdote indicates another form of emotional labour called deferral of emotion, where the practice of emotional labour delays emotional expression, which may later return unbidden (Huxford & Hopper 2020; Kotisova 2019).

A year later, after the long-running Claremont serial killer court case had concluded, a follow-up interview provided an enormous contrast to the first. Participant 57's face looked fuller and had more colour, while his demeanour was more animated, as though he had ceased operating on sheer willpower alone. He was strikingly less stressed. He agreed with the observation, noting he had dealt with challenging personal issues at the same time as working on the Claremont case and the COVID-19 pandemic. However, he believed the consistency of working from the court building every day during the first wave of COVID-19 provided focus:

> There was a lot of uncertainty associated with COVID, obviously, that everybody was going through. Because we were there covering what was a really important case, and … It was actually the only case in Australia that probably wasn't [interrupted by COVID-19]. The judge wouldn't allow it to be interrupted, so determined [to finish the case] was he.

What was more challenging for him was working on stories such as a ship stranded off the Western Australian coast due to an outbreak of the virus in its crew:

> That was more stressful in a sense, because I'd finish work at eight or nine at night and I had to be up at four in the morning or three in the morning to do a cross to *News Breakfast* at four in the morning—something like that. And then go back down to the port and do some more crosses. I actually didn't sleep. In fact, there was a period of time there I didn't sleep for about three days and three nights. And that was between the Claremont hearings. So in fact … my sleep patterns were better during Claremont.

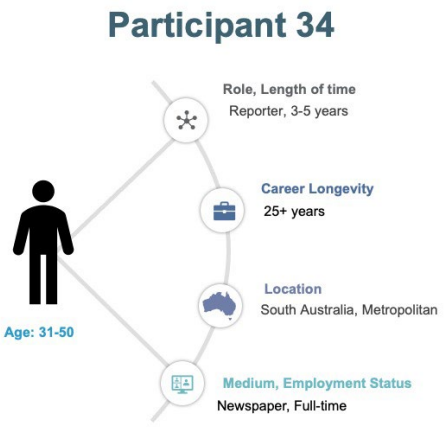
Participant 57 still strongly held to the journalistic ideal of objectivity and impartiality as part of his professional identity, and consciously employed this ideal to reassure himself in times of high stress (McCaffrey 2019). He described the use of detachment as a means of making sure "the facts do the talking, not the reporter's own preconceived notions" (Mindich 2000):

> I think the best way to deal with it is to remember that as a reporter, that's all you are. You are a recorder. You're interpreting events to hand the facts over for people to digest and for them to take a message away and hopefully they will one day participate to help somebody who's in need.

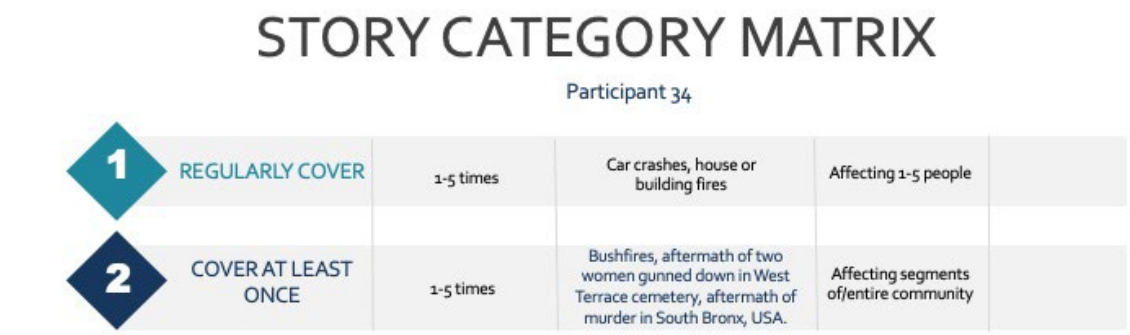
Only once did the veneer of his professional identity threaten to crack during the Claremont trial, showing evidence of the "internal conflict" (Richards & Rees 2011, p. 859) the performance of emotional labour can create:

> There was one person presenting an afternoon program and it wasn't long after the verdict and I came out and spoke to them. I did a cross. She actually asked on air, she said, "Well how are you going?" It was the only time that anybody … she caught me on the hop. I said "I'm just working; I've got to get through it …"

### *4.3.4 Interview 4: Weak psychological armour can wreck you*




| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 3 | COVER & PERSONALLY AFFECTED | 1-5 times | My mother's cousin died in the Wanilla/Wangary bushfires of 2005. I grew up in that area. My grandfather was a soldier settler. I was more affected by the destruction of the land and lives. I did not know my mother's cousin but got to know his family in the aftermath. *During the interview, Participant 34 mentioned he was friends with a prominent survivor of the Bali bombings and could have been a victim of a multiple shooting incident he was covering. | As above | To be honest, I think I manage to detach myself from the event—sort of a professional isolation from the trauma/personal emotion. |
| 4 | RARELY IF EVER COVER | 6-10 times | Catastrophic/Unprecedented | Affecting entire state/nation(s) | |




This interview also took place on Zoom soon after the national lockdown began, on the participant's day off. His interview was punctuated by phone calls from his editor, which paused our recording and eventually caused the interview to end. Participant 34 is a veteran reporter who handles senior political assignments for the mastheads in his company. As we talked, a smile rarely left his face. His affability and even temper at times belied the seriousness of some of his experiences. He described one that would sit more comfortably in a work of fiction than fact.

Participant 34 covered a story where a man had shot his ex-wife and mother-in-law while they were visiting a major cemetery. The participant was sent to cover its aftermath. He went to the home of the son and grandson of the victims, who was unaware of the murders.

> And so I had the task of, well, I fell in to telling him … He went crazy—absolutely crazy. He pulls out this pistol and he says he knows who's done it and he's going to go and kill the bloke. I'm thinking 'Jesus, I'd better get out of here' … Then all of a sudden you hear this police chopper going overhead. I was thinking "I've gotta get out of here. This is crazy." So I just drive in the car; get away.

Years later, he was chief-of-staff when the case went to trial.

In a follow-up interview, Participant 34 said the court reporter told him the shooter had mistaken him for a policeman he was preparing to shoot.

> I was wearing a blue shirt and pants. I probably looked like a cop. I didn't realise [the shooter] was waiting to go and kill the guy [I had just interviewed]. As he arrived he saw me walking out and heard cop cars and kept going. I don't know if he literally had a gun pointed at me ready to shoot but metaphorically he did. [I suspect the family must have known because] I was the only journo the brother-in-law would let come to the funeral. He had armed guards at the funeral because the shooter was still on the run at that stage.

He described his "brush with death" as being traumatic and discussed his own use of "black humour" as a coping mechanism—simultaneously "terrible" and "funny". Other things he felt had helped him cope with the job included growing up on a farm, his mother being a nurse and a chance conversation with a mental health professional as a young adult:

> She said, "What do you do for a job?" I told her and she went, "Oh my God! How do you cope with stress?" I said I run, I exercise, you know; those sort of things. She said, "That's really good, because in your profession you can manage stress either constructively, like you do, or destructively, through drugs, alcohol or sex addiction." I thought, "Sex addiction sounds pretty good!", you know, as a 22-, 23-year-old bloke [laughs]. I've never been a massive drinker, apart from socially. I've never taken drugs, I like exercise, I like routine —I get up early, I always have—I like to be self-disciplined, so I like to manage my time ruthlessly. All those things. So those are definitely my coping strategies.

This kind of self-discipline has been both a form of protection that he describes as "psychological armour" and a release:

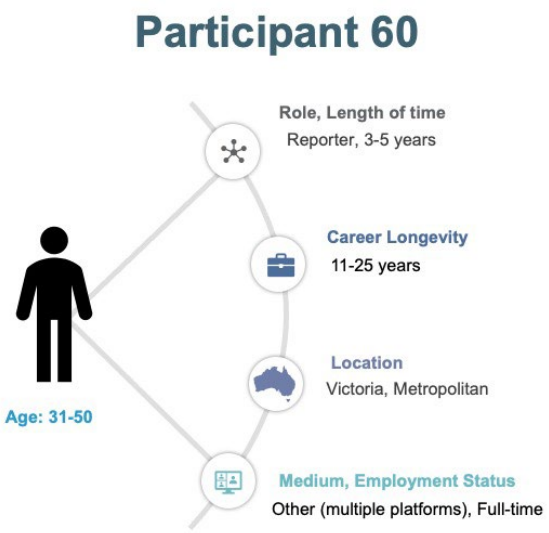
> So, if someone is vulnerable and doesn't have those protection mechanisms in place, then it's a bit like the [COVID-19] virus—it will find a weak spot and expose them. And possibly wreck them.

Life outside of work is important—his wife is not a journalist, which he believes provides a useful perspective. He believes his loving, stable family life has formed a "critical" foundation for both his personal and professional life. As a newsroom veteran, he has also had the opportunity to observe those around him:

> I sit near the police reporters. The chances of them—particularly now [due to COVID-19]—going on a tsunami or something like that, or overseas—are very,

very slim indeed. But they are exposed day after day after day after day to murder and mayhem and all that sort of thing. And they tend to cope with it through black humour and supporting one another through that. I suspect it's—in terms of volume, in terms of cumulative effect … after a time, there's a greater risk of people's guard falling down and their support mechanisms being eroded.

### *4.3.5 Interview 5: There needs to be a reckoning*




STORY CATEGORY MATRIX

Participant 60

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | REGULARLY COVER | 20+ times | Car accidents | Affecting 1-5 people | |
| 2 | COVER AT LEAST ONCE | 20+ times | Disasters, violent, extreme or distressing subject | Affecting segments of/entire community | A lingering feeling of sadness and concern about various incidents, and how the people impacted are coping. |
| 3 | COVER & PERSONALLY AFFECTED | 0 times | As above and personally affected | As above | |
| 4 | RARELY IF EVER COVER | 6-10 times | Catastrophic/Unprecedented | Affecting entire state/nation(s) | |

The fifth interview was conducted via Zoom in the evening after the participant had finished work. He appeared relaxed and at ease, dressed in a winter hoodie from his loungeroom. Participant 60 describes himself as "mid-career", with about 15 years' experience in both broadcast and print in both regional and metropolitan media. He described his work as being mostly crime and/or justice-related, although having attained seniority in his newsroom, he was mostly able to select his own stories. He spoke openly and frankly, and initiated discussion

on the subjects previous interviews had covered through questioning. It seemed this participant had already been thinking about these issues:

> Work, already, as a journalist, can become fairly all-encompassing, but when it's been a particularly difficult story to cover, I find I can't shake that for days or weeks, or months ... And then there's ones that you don't know why they stay in your head for any particular reason … It can be very difficult to know which are the stories that are going to impact you the worst.

Participant 60 showed a reluctance to talk about his own responses to stories for fear of inadvertently identifying his interviewees, thus breaching their privacy. He was thoughtful and self-aware:

> All journalism is stressful, but I think writing about people having what can be the worst day of their life is a particular type of stress … I don't want to overstate it, because it's not as if we're in a profession like being a paramedic—where the burnout is huge and where it's impossible to separate that career from severe mental health issues—but you are aware that there can be a cumulative effect of working on this stuff.

Able to compare the demands of both working in broadcast and print, he described what he thought was a generational divide in the newsrooms in which he had worked. This was especially between "the editors" or management and reporting staff—particularly in their attitudes towards social media:

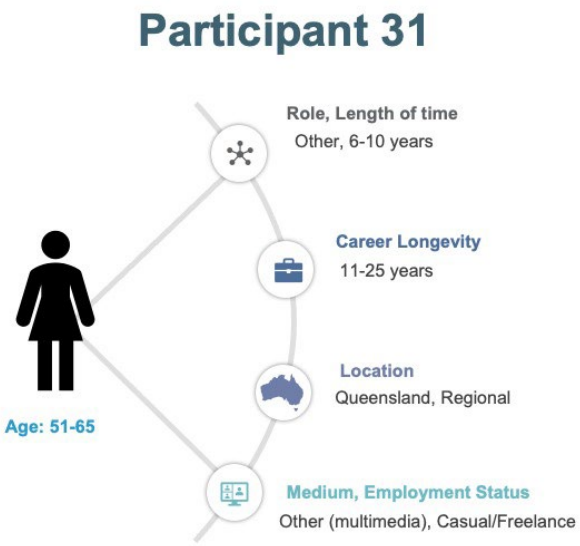
> It can just be difficult to get away from because you might be sort of chasing engagement that way, which again I feel is detrimental to a lot of people's [mental] health and I think newsrooms probably should take more leadership on actually educating their staff about how to use social media in a way that doesn't negatively impact their emotional wellbeing.

He was highly critical of how staff had been treated at his previous workplace, and lamented the fact so many of his previous colleagues had left journalism due to the way they were treated:

> I think there does need to be a bit of a reckoning within newsrooms about how they deal with their people. I don't feel that our audiences or our readers need to have more sympathy or feel sorry for journalists or anything like that. I don't think

that that is necessarily up to them, but I feel that editors in particular need to be better at understanding the importance of the emotional wellbeing of their staff … There's so many people I've met in my career from every place that I've worked who are mentally damaged by the job.

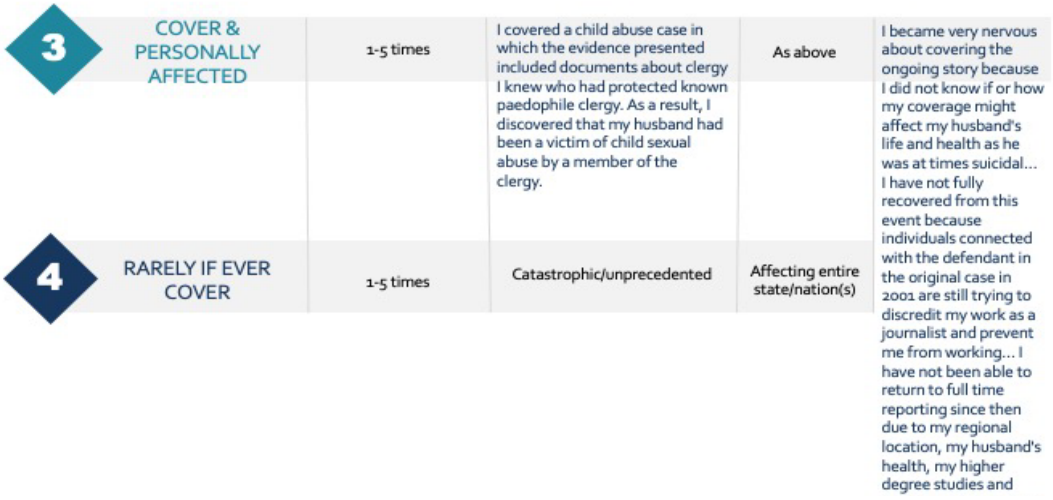
### *4.3.6 Interview 6: Confrontation with death*




## STORY CATEGORY MATRIX

Participant 31

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | REGULARLY COVER | 20+ times | I have covered many fatalities including murders; attempted murders; manslaughter; fatal car, motorbike, truck and plane crashes; accidental deaths including deaths of children by a parent; and suicides. | Affecting 1-5 people |
| 2 | COVER AT LEAST ONCE | 20+ times | Natural disaster fatalities including flood and bushfire deaths; flash flood disaster with 23 fatalities including children and babies, 138 houses destroyed, severe damage to infrastructure in eight communities. | Affecting segments of/entire community |



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|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 3 | COVER & PERSONALLY AFFECTED | 1-5 times | I covered a child abuse case in which the evidence presented included documents about clergy I knew who had protected known paedophile clergy. As a result, I discovered that my husband had been a victim of child sexual abuse by a member of the clergy. | As above | I became very nervous about covering the ongoing story because I did not know if or how my coverage might affect my husband's life and health as he was at times suicidal... I have not fully recovered from this event because individuals connected with the defendant in the original case in 2001 are still trying to discredit my work as a journalist and prevent me from working... I have not been able to return to full time reporting since then due to my regional location, my husband's health, my higher degree studies and |
| 4 | RARELY IF EVER COVER | 1-5 times | Catastrophic/unprecedented | Affecting entire state/nation(s) | |

This interview took place mid-week during the day, via Zoom from the participant's home office. She is a long-term work-from-home employee, having juggled a reporting career for 30 years and raising four children. Her work as a regional reporter enabled her to work remotely due to the advent of fax machines and the internet, covering "many, many jobs I can't forget". Her career is punctuated by stories of tragedy and human suffering, beginning in outback Queensland. She has covered almost every type of natural disaster: "fires, floods, cyclones—you name it—droughts and plagues."

Participant 31's narrative was similar to those of participants 57 and 60, who regularly shifted from personal responses to the objective discussion of a story. While speaking, she displayed traits of stoicism described by MacDonald and colleagues (2017) and Newman, Davis and Kennedy (2006):

> I've laid awake at night thinking about stories. Often times that has happened though, when I have come against emotions and situations that were completely new to me, or things that I couldn't understand. Or when someone who was a news source or a contact or connected with a news story in some way was trying to attack me for doing my job. That was very confronting.

Some of what she had to say was challenging to listen to; not only when she talked about herself, but also the circumstances surrounding some of the stories she covered. She described four significant moments in her career, beginning with the "death-knock" of a woman whose son had been the latest in a spate of high-speed car crashes:

> the fifth one, now dying. And I reported that as fact. It is fact. I reported it as fact. But it wasn't until I became a mother and understood the depth of the grief that she must have suffered, that I realised I had no idea what I was doing when I was doing it, even though I was doing my very best.

Second was discovering that another "death-knock" interview she needed to conduct was with someone she knew socially:

> So doing that story, for the first time in my journalistic career, of a death knock where the person was a friend of mine, was entirely different – entirely different. I was frankly a mess. They ended up sitting me down, giving me a strong cup of sweet tea, taking my notebook and my pen from me [and] mopping up my tears.

Third was being asked to cover the deaths of three toddlers who had been run over in the driveways of their homes.

> We had three in a week. Now that was distressing … Trauma science will talk about your bucket of trauma filling up. Three babies in a week being killed by their parents was too full for my bucket. My bucket overflowed. That was too sad. Unnecessary deaths of innocent little children—that shouldn't happen.

This incident was one of several she described that constitute repeated exposure to the same trauma stressors (Huxford & Hopper 2020; Monteiro & Marques Pinto 2017; Pyevich, Newman & Daleiden 2003). The developing trend of youths dying in high-speed crashes and toddlers being run over in their driveways also demonstrates the news value of Currency (Conley & Lamble 2006) to a strong degree. At one point, she was required to see a counsellor:

> I was shoe-horned into counselling after a particular fortnight where I covered 10 deaths and 10 funerals, including some close to me. They talk about your bucket being full to running over; well, that fortnight did it for me … And it was the combination of my family and the work, which was too much.

The fourth significant story of her career, however, would test her in a way that few would ever have to endure. She wrote in her survey response:

> I covered a child abuse case in which the evidence presented included documents about clergy I knew who had protected known paedophile clergy. As a result, I

> discovered that my husband had been a victim of child sexual abuse by a member of the clergy.

Covering the case was "the most confronting, emotional and ethical conflict" she had ever had to deal with.

> As I was sitting in court, what impacted me was that this young woman who was the whistleblower, her life had been a train wreck. And when I looked at the symptoms that she had, I was mentally ticking off, thinking of my husband's life … There's a fragile victim of abuse to whom I was married for 25 years, but did not know he was a victim.

He had reported the crime to police and became suicidal at times, but it took another two years before the participant's husband was able to speak to her directly about what had happened. She recalls one Christmas Day during this period where she was called to cover a story 150 kilometres (two hours' drive) from her home. Going to a scene of professional trauma while leaving her own traumatised family increased her own anxiety, as the "emotional elastic" stretched taut between them:

> If you've got three boys and a girl in a house on a hot day and nobody knows how to cook a Christmas chook, it's not going to be fun. I had to go to a house fire where a mother had lost her baby and I was driving out of town on Christmas Day to this job that I'd been called to.

She described in detail the story of this devastated woman, who had managed to rescue two of her children from their burning house but had not managed to rescue the third—a baby. She talked of the need to console the woman, who was traumatised and alone on Christmas Day.

> I had to then go home—and I still remember stopping at some servo [service station] buying this disgusting tomato and cheese sandwich for my Christmas lunch and wondering if my family would be alive when I got back.

Participant 31 wept at several points as she spoke during the interview, but declined the offer to stop each time. She was adamant she wanted to keep speaking about her husband's ordeal:

> An admission of moral responsibility took 18 years. For any victim to stick with it for 18 years is not possible. The only reason we got there was that I was there beside him

> and I was never going to let these bastards get away with it. If it took me the rest of my life I would still be fighting.

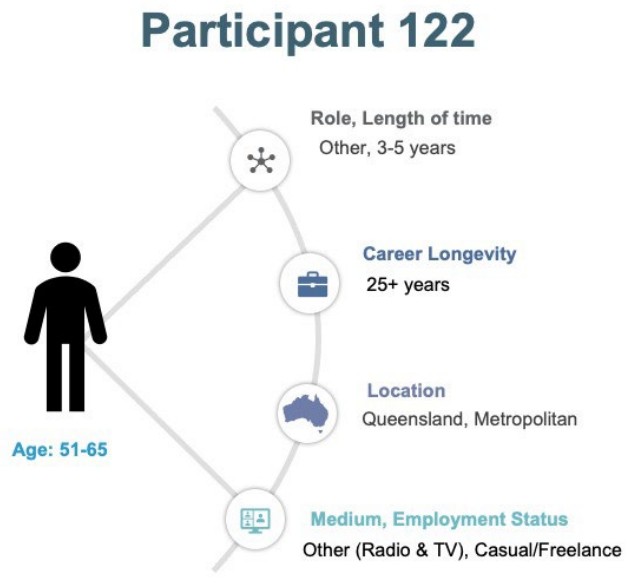
She used this experience to develop her own form of reporting now known as "advocacy journalism", or what Charles (2021, p. 262) describes as a journalism of attachment, which is counter to the prevailing journalistic norm of objectivity. This brand of journalism advocacy (including "exit interviews") was forged after she death-knocked her friend about the death of that friend's son:

> What it did for me as a journalist was entirely change the way I did every death-knock from that day forward [to make sure loved ones were given the chance to speak] … because often times people around them, or authorities around them, protected them from the "nasty journalists" and they were not given the opportunity to talk [even] if they wanted to … They've let me into their life at a time of their life which was very fragile and in whatever way it's happened, the work I've done as a journalist has been cathartic to them … So that's why I love journalism—it matters. I do stories that matter because I can.

Trauma-informed reporting does, however, require mentally healthy journalists:

> Helping to understand the trauma that journalists go through is absolutely vital. Because if we don't look after the journalists who do this work, then the work that they do can't continue.

### *4.3.7 Interview 7: It's not about me*




STORY CATEGORY MATRIX

Participant 122

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | REGULARLY COVER | 20+ times | Car crashes, house or building fires | Affecting 1-5 people | |
| 2 | COVER AT LEAST ONCE | 20+ times | Disasters, violent, extreme or distressing subject | Affecting segments of/entire community | |
| 3 | COVER & PERSONALLY AFFECTED | 1-5 times | The murder of my producer while we worked together in Mogadishu. She was shot in the back in a drive-by attack. | As above | I was given access to counselling services and time off. I also spent time with other veteran journalists who'd been through similar traumatic experiences, who helped me process the experience. |
| 4 | RARELY IF EVER COVER | 20+ times | The bombing of a market in Kabul with mass casualties, including children. | Affecting entire state/nation(s) | |

This interview took place via Zoom from the participant's office at work, which was somewhat unusual as few people had returned to work at that time after COVID-19 lockdowns. He is internationally recognised for his professional experiences. Despite the professional setting, the candour and the detail of his responses were unexpected, given he had already written extensively on his experience of trauma. Careful thought was given to whether inclusion of this participant's work was valid for this research, as his work as a foreign correspondent took place overseas for a

foreign-owned news outlet. However, the recollection of his career and the 30-year-old story he still could not forget, which was in Australia, justified his inclusion.

As a foreign correspondent, Participant 122 had sought the support of peers after his producer was shot in front of him in Somalia.

> I remember precisely—in minute detail—what happened when [producer's name] was murdered; when she was shot. Every little bit of that is seared into my brain. But I don't feel as though I constantly revisit that … And I really struggled—and this might sound like a real paradox—but I really struggled with the idea of feeling guilty about not feeling guilty and wondered whether I was just such an awful person because I didn't feel personally responsible or guilty about what had happened. I was upset by the tragedy of losing a friend and colleague, but I wasn't blaming myself for it. I just felt that the only person to blame was the fucker that pulled the trigger.

Seeking peer support at this time was so helpful that Participant 122 has continued the practice during his career. This participant seemed comfortable talking about the difficult and tragic situations he faced on the job, and appeared to have resolved much of the psychological distress he had suffered. As a foreign correspondent, he had received hostile environment training that, while physical in nature, had caused him to think "a lot more deeply" about possible mental risks posed by his work:

> That's not to say I haven't been traumatised by it, but I don't see … any kind of lasting effects. I think that's more a question of good luck—a combination, perhaps, of my character and resilience and the processes that I've been through and some of the friends and support networks that I've had around me at the time. I don't think it's because I'm particularly stronger than anyone else, it's just that I've been lucky enough to have certain things come together which have made it easier to cope.

This participant believes "understanding the way that your own head can tie yourself in knots" is essential to good mental health. He recalled a pivotal moment in Egypt when he wrestled with being imprisoned for his work during what became known as the Arab Spring:

> Until I realised that, actually, it wasn't about us. It wasn't about me. The universe really didn't have anything to do with it. That we were in prison not because of anything that we had done, but because of what we represented. We were

> imprisoned because the [Egyptian] government wanted to make a point about press freedom.

For him, the act of writing—in this case a letter from the prison—was therapeutic:

> And the process of writing that down and thinking through and articulating the kind of conflict that I felt, really helped me process it and put it in a place that I could cope with.

While he had covered many traumatic events, Participant 122 practised a form of emotional detachment that aided his post traumatic growth. He refused to "own the trauma" or carry it with him. Instead, he deployed his strong sense of vocation:

> I worked with a lot of people who were in very serious conditions—very serious shit—but I always felt that my responsibility is to give them a voice. That's my power. I can't control what's happened to them and I can't control what's going to happen to them, but what I can do is use the tools at my disposal as a journalist to give them a voice. And that means I'm not powerless in that situation.

For this participant, being embedded in a situation overseas was easier than being "parachuted" into one at home:

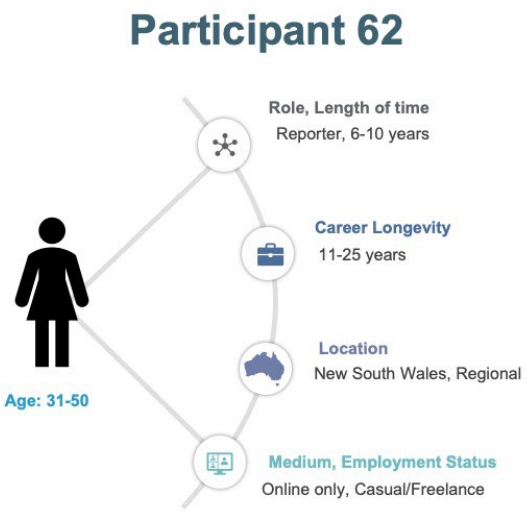
> I remember being very affected—I won't say traumatised—but affected by a story that I covered years ago in Adelaide, when I was a young reporter, about a girl who had been murdered. I got a glimpse of this girl's body and she looked a lot like my girlfriend at the time, and I found that very disturbing. That affected me a lot at that time, because it was completely out of context. I wasn't really mentally prepared for it at the time, and I wasn't— I won't say blind-sided, but it did hit me in a way that I didn't really expect.

Participant 122 used a sense of vocation and professional identity to provide purpose and meaning to his work, as well as a sense of perspective:

> I've always felt that my job as a journalist is not just to tell stories, but to try and explain—to place those stories in context. And by that, I mean apply meaning to those stories, to try and understand not just what happened, but the deeper issues around why and what it signifies—to draw out those elements. And I think that, trying to search for a deeper meaning... is a part of the process of processing those

traumatic events. I think it often comes from a sense of meaninglessness or powerlessness that people end up getting traumatised.

### *4.3.8 Interview 8: The cost was too great*




STORY CATEGORY MATRIX

Participant 62

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | REGULARLY COVER | 11-20 times | Car crashes, house or building fires | Affecting 1-5 people | |
| 2 | COVER AT LEAST ONCE | 20+ times | Disasters, violent, extreme or distressing subject | Affecting segments of/entire community | |
| 3 | COVER & PERSONALLY AFFECTED | 10+ times | Interviewed women about their experiences of domestic violence; interviewed mothers whose babies had died of cancer. | As above | It profoundly affected me emotionally—I felt helpless to help these people and was exposed to secondary trauma, I believe. I decided that the cost was too great. And I still to this day feel guilt about changing direction in my career to salvage myself, but if I hadn't, I don't know where I would be. |
| 4 | RARELY IF EVER COVER | 0 times | Bombings, wars, September 11 2001, Asian Tsunami, Snowtown serial killings | Affecting entire state/nation(s) | |

This interview took place via Zoom from the participant's kitchen. She seemed eager and highly motivated to talk. The interview was punctuated by several long pauses while the participant left the room to tend to a sick child. She came back to the interview each time unfazed by the interruptions, and resumed her narrative easily and without hesitation. There was a striking

disconnect between her demeanour and her words: her expression was full of energy and her tone rather vibrant, but the words she was speaking were stark.

She began by explaining a convention at her previous employer that involved "trauma writing", or a type of reporting that featured people who had suffered emotionally. She became known in her newsroom for her ability at writing these stories, which was quantified by a real-time web analytic tool called Chartbeat:

> They have these big screens all over the newsroom and you put a story online, you publish it, you promote it on Facebook and you can sit there and see how many people click on that story and how long it's been retained. So it's immediately quantifiable.

Participant 62 had felt the weight of an ethical and moral responsibility towards the people on whom she reported, and they would sometimes seek her support late at night:

> I wanted to help her, but I couldn't. There was no way I could. What could I do? I was a journalist. In my profession, I'm used to writing four articles a day, for example, for a newspaper. And by the next day I've completely forgotten what I've written. I don't want to think about it again. But a lot of these traumatic stories, you're almost haunted by them because these people, they need you. They made themselves vulnerable to you, therefore you owe them this. You owe them to be able to help and support them. And I want to as a person, I want to. I want to ensure that these people are okay, you know?

Despite appearing to have suffered a great deal because of the work she has done, she did not seek help from her employer:

> I don't think I would have got the support I needed. You don't show weakness in those situations.

Writing a story about treatment for a rare form of childhood cancer proved to be her breaking point:

> I spoke to parents who had lost their child despite doing this [treatment] and then I had to do a lot of research around the world of other people who had gone through these processes or demanded that they had alternative therapies offered to them. Having young children myself, that was it … I couldn't work for six months after this

story, because emotionally it really knocked me for six. Just the thought of losing a child was just too much for me to cope with as a young mother.

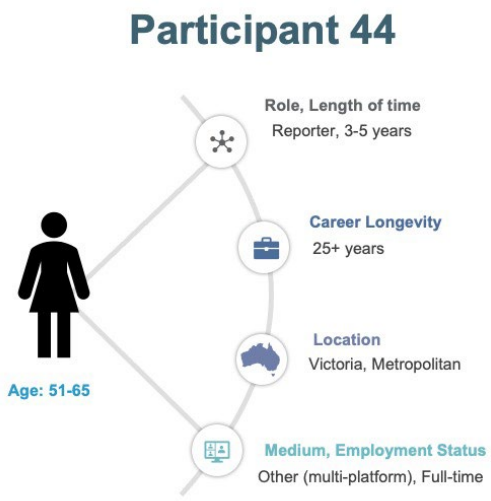
She accepted a job offer from a friend at a consumer magazine and has worked there since:

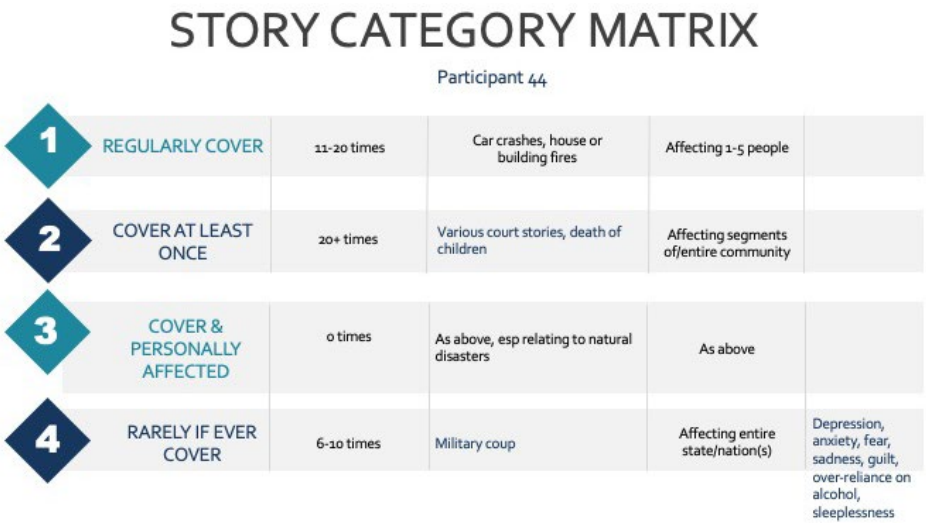
> I decided that the cost was too great. And I still to this day feel guilt about changing direction in my career to salvage myself, but if I hadn't, I don't know where I would be.

Now, as a freelancer, she considers she is her own boss:

> So, when you're your own boss, you're your own responsibility. As long as they pay the bill at the end of the day and the work keeps on flowing that's as far as their responsibility goes towards me. I need to set my own boundaries, my own workloads, my own schedules and they're just pretty much one small part of a much bigger operation, which is my operation.

### *4.3.9 Interview 9: We 'churn and burn' through journalists*






This interview took place via Zoom during the day mid-week at the participant's home. She has had a long career in journalism and is active in industry-related committees and boards. She was remarkably open in her descriptions of trauma and made distinctions between experiencing trauma and receiving a diagnosis of PTSD:

> I don't have PTSD—I've not been diagnosed, but I had clearly been subjected to trauma and pretty severe work-related stress.

She recounted a story she had covered 34 years earlier as a cadet:

> It was a Saturday afternoon. We got a call saying it was a young boy that they think had drowned in a stormwater drain in the northern suburbs of Adelaide. I head up there with a camera operator. I was 18. I'm pretty green. He was actually also not far from where I grew up. That little boy was about the same age as my brother. [Becomes emotional] It's still—it's weird to relive this.

Her boss at the time was not so understanding, however, and threatened to make a formal complaint that she was "unprofessional" and "not suited to this job" until the chief-of-staff intervened:

> So, I had this amazing group of people around me from a very early time. There were no formal psychological responses or anything like that. What we did in

> those days was just went out and got boozed, right? And debriefed that way. Probably still do, to some degree. So that was a very scarring experience, for a lot of reasons.

This participant also has the unique experience of journalism from two perspectives: as a foreign correspondent and "the wife" of one while on a posting in Russia:

> The trauma [there] was different. It was repeated. I could never rest. I never had time to myself. Gin was my best friend, literally. I'm not backward about that—I'll tell anybody. I wasn't a drunkard. I have a tee-totalling husband, so I would never have been a drunkard as such, but I self-medicated by gin. That was the easiest way to de-stress. That was the way we all did it; at the foreign correspondents club or others.

But coming home to Australia and interviewing a woman who witnessed her son's murder by his father, proved too much:

> That night I was out with some friends and went to a show, a live theatre show (when you could do such things) and as the curtains went down and halfway through the first act or whatever it was, I just started to cry. In the dark. Hopefully nobody noticed, but I just had not had time all day to process what I had seen and heard and suddenly I did. I wasn't crying for Luke [Batty], I wasn't crying for Rosie [Batty], I was crying for Greg [speech falters; becomes emotional], the father, the partner, who was so disconnected from society and expectations and help that he would take his own son's life. So the curtains come up. I do my best to pretend that I haven't had a meltdown during Bert Newton's part in *Grease* and I kind of rush home with my friends and collapse into the arms of my husband.

This anecdote is an example of the "psychological burden" (Dworznik-Hoak 2020a, pp. 12, 13) created by the deferral of emotion as a type of emotional labour (Kotisova 2019), only for it to later "bubble up" (Huxford & Hopper 2020, p. 48) unbidden. She sought support from her organisation's peer support program and had a "doona day" in bed, but her newsroom colleagues were shocked "that somebody as hardened as me and who had experienced as much as me could kind of fall apart in such a dramatic way":

> So, I've become a real proselytiser as a result of that about the ability to build resilience and [how] to continue to do the job that you love.

Nevertheless, a few years ago she started having "freeze-frame" dreams. After speaking to a colleague, she spoke with the organisation's Employee Assistance Program and, along with her GP, developed a mental health care plan:

> The counsellor at the EAP said, "Okay, I want you to list for me the kinds of stories you've been doing" and I went back through my diary and it was astonishing. I didn't even know. [I mean] I knew I was doing them, but when you add it all up, I'd done three drownings within a 10-day period.

This kind of repeated exposure to traumatic story content provides further evidence of its association with the news value of Currency (Conley & Lamble 2006), or a developing trend in a current issue. A psychologist also connected the cumulative trauma from her work to the emotional turmoil of seeing her mother admitted to a care facility with dementia:

> You can't un-mesh those things, right? They're all so interconnected. I've become very, very passionate about ensuring that people understand their resilience and it's okay to cry and it's okay to feel those things and it's important that you do. Not everybody responds to things in the same way.

She believes it was sometimes the "simple stuff" that could help ease a journalist's potential trauma, such as a day off:

> But I do think the way newsrooms and news organisations deal with trauma is really flawed and it's mostly "tick a box" stuff, and it's not coming from a trauma-informed approach; it's not coming from a really genuine approach. It's a "we know we've got a problem; what's the easiest, cheapest way to do it" [approach].

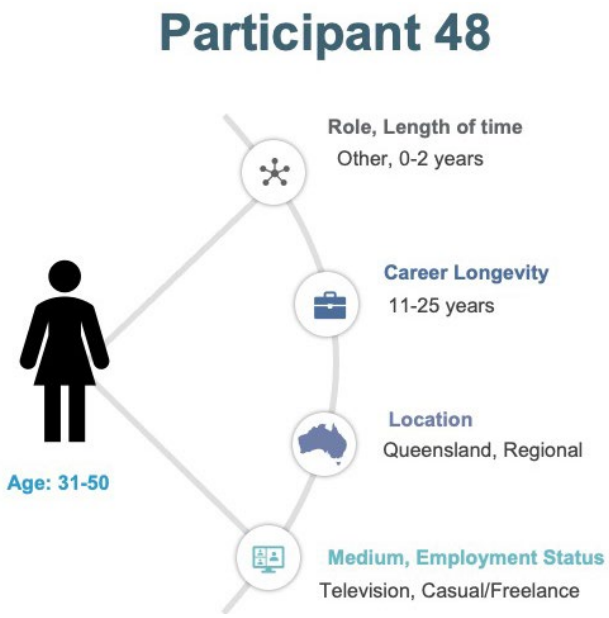
In the midst of her own frank emotional responses, Participant 44 steps out of her own narrative to express concern that I was receiving adequate psychological support while conducting this research, and encourages me to stop the interview if it has became too much for me. She expresses further concern that although Australian journalists had become more trauma-aware, workplace responses were not always in step:

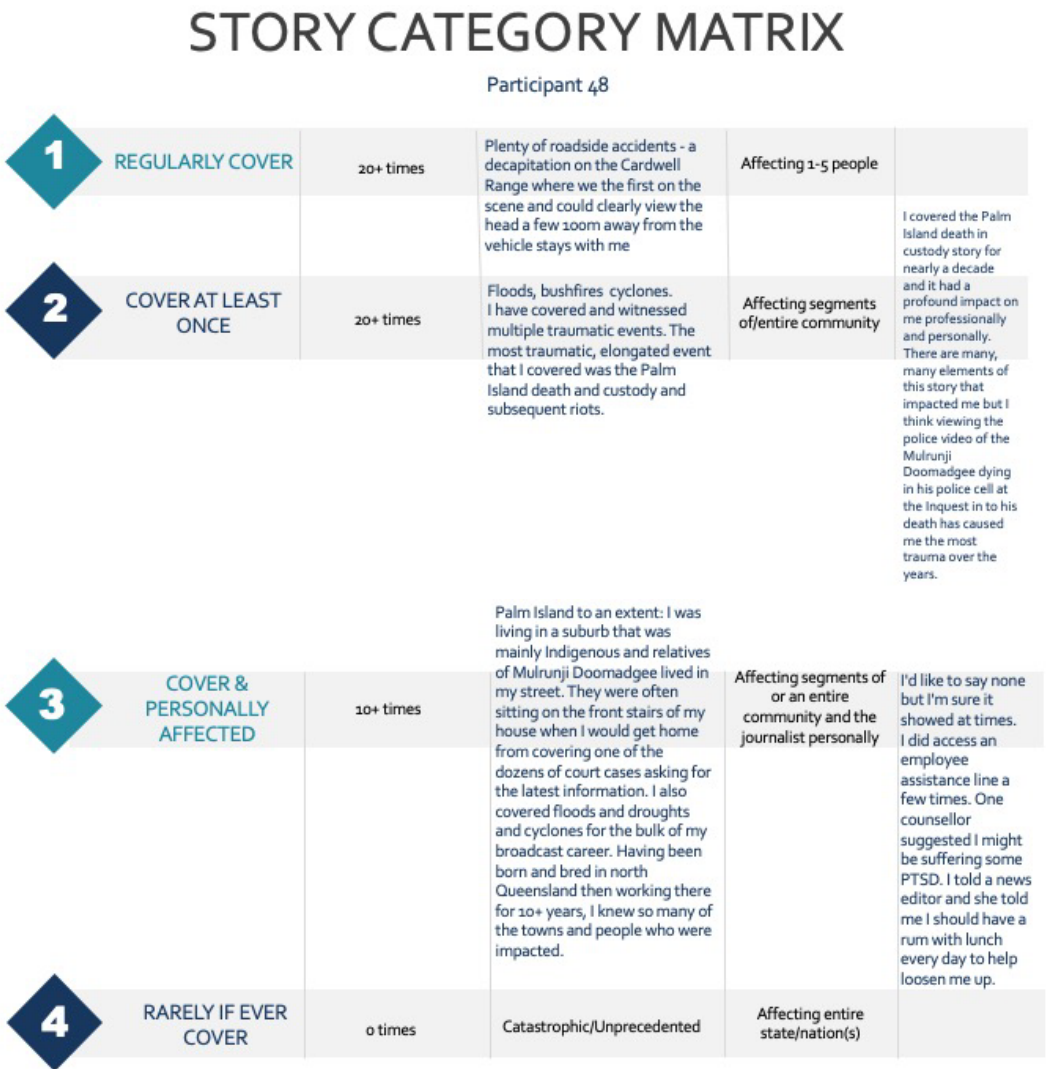
> Newsrooms are sparsely populated these days, [which] means that those who aren't specialist reporters or have specific roles are sent into the shitful stuff again, and again and again. And you can cope with one or two, but when it becomes three or four or five, it becomes really problematic … At the moment, we churn and burn through journalists. We don't care about their mental health. We don't care what

we do to them and we really don't care about what we're doing to the people they might be interviewing.

### *4.3.10 Interview 10: Disasters, dead bodies & dirt roads*

**Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are advised this report contains the name of someone who has died.**






This participant conducted her interview in her home office. She had been a regional television journalist in Queensland, and describes her career as being marked by three Ds: disasters, dead bodies and dirt roads.

She was 22 years old when she was the first on the scene with a cameraman at an accident involving a decapitated body. She described her horror at coming across the body, realising it was the car accident she and her cameraman had been sent to cover. They were also required to guide emergency services to the place where the man's head and body had come to rest:

> It was a very confronting situation for a young journalist but then, to sort of go back to the newsroom and say "this is what happened" and, like, "yeah, that's cool; this is the Dad's number—can you go and door-knock the father?" and move on. It was a Saturday [the newsroom attitude was], "Just go out and have a drink; you'll be fine. See you Monday." It's interesting, those sort of things that stick with you, nearly 20 years later.

While her expression and voice do not change as she recounts her experience, Participant 48's micro-expressions become more pronounced and the colour in her face increases. She says after this experience that if she was on "scanner duty" she would wait before alerting the chief-of-staff of a possible accident until she knew someone else had arrived at the scene. That way "anything too horrific" would be covered up by the time she and her colleague arrived.

> I guess you do just have an extra glass of wine and "hope for the best". That was the mentality. It changed within the last 10 years, I guess. The newsroom's changed, and it's changed a lot again since then. I look almost with envy at the support a lot of young journos get these days.

The most traumatic incident of her career was covering the 2004 Indigenous death in custody case of Cameron Doomadgee on Palm Island. This included having to witness the security video of his death being played in court:

> It was hours of watching him literally die in front of you. And it just never felt right to me that anyone should be [required] to watch another family member—watch a loved one—die in that setting. It was just so off, you know? I think it was the second or third time I had to sit through it is when I called our executive producer and said, "This is not sitting well with me, I'm not coping with this', and she said, "Oh, we've got a helpline."

Participant 48 was both immersed in and repeatedly exposed to a story she found traumatic in this case. Discussions with the counsellor indicated possible PTSD, which she reported to her boss:

> But at no stage did they say, "We should pull you off this immediately—this shouldn't be your yarn anymore." And a lot of the advice was, "Go and have a rum for lunch" or "Have a day off and go to the pub" and you know, as a 23-year-old, that was great advice! That's what we did and that was very much the culture within newsrooms and I'm sure there's an element of it that still exists, to a point. But not like it did, I would suggest, 20 years ago, where if something bad happened it was, "Have a bottle of wine instead of a glass of wine and away you go." So that was often the way to fix it: a schnitzel and a rum at lunch and go back and file the story.

A unique feature of the remoteness of the territory she covers means she is part of the community she is covering, and sometimes "runs into" the people whose stories she has covered while grocery shopping. In the Doomadgee case, the victim's relatives gather on the doorstep of her house in Townsville, waiting for her to alight from the plane from Palm Island so she can give them an account of the day's hearings.

> Those initial years it seemed almost quite exciting because it was a national, international story, so it was easy to get swept up into the fact that you were doing live crosses on something incredibly important on a global scale, and then all of a sudden you started to see the human impact of that when you were living in the same community where these stories are happening. There are so many other levels to it, because you're running into people when you are picking up your sausages at the end of the day at the local supermarket.

The case stretched for almost a decade and the longer her coverage of it went on, the more difficulty she had switching off from it. It became all she wanted to talk about outside of work—a way of offloading, while subconsciously seeking help. She still feels a great sense of responsibility that the story was covered adequately if she was not reporting it herself:

> With those kinds of stories, it becomes so entwined in your day-to-day life outside of work, the response and the effect that it has on you … It all gets jumbled up and I guess like a lot of trauma, it's not one thing, it's a culmination of things and it rears its head when you least expect it.

It was not until the end of year "award season" that she tallied the number of violent or traumatic stories she had covered for that year. The newsroom whiteboard used to allocate crews and jobs also kept a running tally in one corner:

> … and we would put under each journo's name and each cameraman's name a dash every time you went to a fatality … And I don't even know why I didn't think anything of it at the time—it was just like one of those things: "Well, they must be keeping count for some reason." Then at the Christmas drinks at the end of the year, the journo and the cameraman who had the most points—who had been to the most fatalities—got a bottle of wine.

She is not certain about the exact number the "winner" had covered that year, but each reporter would have had "at least five", while the weekend cameraman always scored the

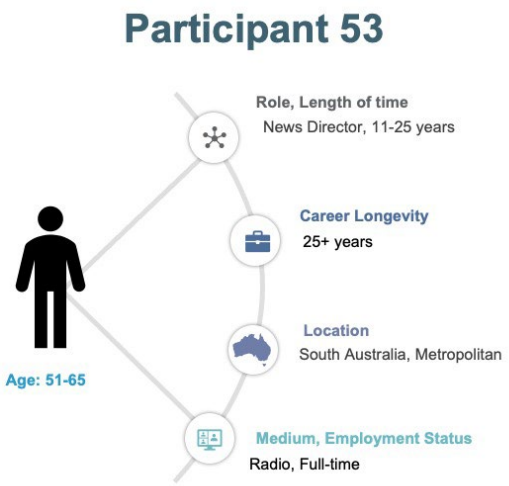
highest and “always seemed to cop the worst” crashes. He would “easily” have covered more than 20 in a year.

It was after one journalist had had difficulty coping with covering a “really horrific” fatality involving children that she began to question whether it was fair or acceptable to treat road fatality reporting as something to be rewarded. Until then,

> you were just conditioned so much to want the worst to happen and to be okay with the worst happening, because it’s a better story.

Participant 48 “escaped” to another form of storytelling and eventually set up her own public relations consultancy. Despite her own trauma, she said she would “never” warn someone not to be a journalist: “I don’t regret a single experience of it.”

### *4.3.11 Interview 11: We're all human*




STORY CATEGORY MATRIX

Participant 53

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | REGULARLY COVER | 20+ times | Fatal car crashes. | Affecting 1-5 people | Little effect but I haven't forgotten it. |
| 2 | COVER AT LEAST ONCE | 20+ times | Bushfires, cyclones, floods, sieges OR stories of a violent, extreme or distressing nature e.g. court stories, victim accounts. | Affecting segments of/entire community | |
| 3 | COVER & PERSONALLY AFFECTED | 0 times | As above, esp relating to natural disasters | As above | |
| 4 | RARELY IF EVER COVER | 6-10 times | Catastrophic/Unprecendented | Affecting entire state/nation(s) | |

This participant has covered the gamut of stories affecting South Australia over many years. He is unflappable on the road, on air and face to face, and took the call while a passenger in the car driven by his wife. The call was put on speaker so it was possible to hear the responses of both parties providing consent for the interview to continue. As the appointment time had been set by the participant, it was his preference for it to proceed at that time and manner. The interview went ahead at his insistence: as Weerakkody (2015) asserts, respondents will feel "more comfortable and empowered" (Weerakkody 2015, p. 192) if they are able to choose the time, day and location of their interview. While this location was unconventional, it provided a sense of informality to the interview that enhanced its comfort for the participant, who appeared even more relaxed than was his custom.

There appeared to be a marked contrast between the substance of what was discussed, particularly graphic details, and Participant 53's demeanour in describing them. This was similar to the behaviour of participants 62 and 34. Participant 53 was constantly cheerful. Yet, while he also

mentioned that he had wept over some stories, his own emotional response to some stories did not seem to bother him:

> I recall a couple of years ago going to a woman who'd had her car torched at Taperoo at the front of her house and she was just—she thought I was—I don't know who she thought I was actually, but I had a microphone, so it was pretty obvious, but she didn't recognise me as a reporter. She just broke down because it was her kids on ice [who were responsible for the fire]. This would have been nothing to anyone, but just her distress and the fact that she was powerless in this situation, you know, it's just—that stays with me too.

The story of a woman whose toddler fell into a river while strapped into a pram as she stopped to take a phone call also affected him:

> My oldest was about the same age at the time, so you kind of compare, you know? Like, what would happen, and what would your emotions be, and how would that affect everything? You empathise with people in that situation. I suppose as reporters you almost shouldn't get caught up in it, but I've been to things—fires or whatever—where … I find myself listening to some of these stories and I'll just feel a tear trickling down. It gets to you. We're all human at the end of the day.

The only time he really struggled with the job, as opposed to responding to individual stories, was in his early reporting years, with a new boss who was "an absolute bully". He considered being a roving reporter preferable to covering a round, such as courts:

> That's raw humans, right there, appearing before court. People who are victims, people who are perpetrators. It's people at their worst, for whatever reason. And to cover that day in, day out, as a [permanent] court reporter I reckon would be the most traumatic, worst job in the world. They're the people, I think, who would need trauma counselling. And as you know, a lot of it doesn't get reported because it's too graphic.

His believes the cumulative emotional effect of his career has been "negligible", and described a conscious use of detachment associated with the journalistic ideal of objectivity (Huxford & Hopper 2020; Richards & Rees 2011):

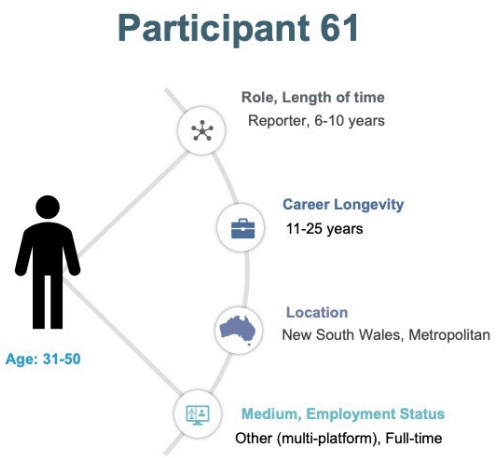
> I've been very good, through my life, at sort of compartmentalising situations. Just putting things behind locked doors. And I'll give you a real personal example. I lost my father in a housefire about six years ago … There's stuff that you park and you just

> open the doors occasionally. I don't have any problems going to sleep, if we're talking about how does it affect me. It kind of doesn't, unless I want it to, if that makes sense.

Throughout his conversation, his deep love for the job was evident, both explicitly and in his tone and expression. Similar to Participant 20, this man expressed a sense of vocation about his career, identifying strongly with Australian journalism identity and its commitment to truth and objectivity (Hanusch 2008, p. 103). He appreciated the sense of privilege journalism afforded him and said he insisted that because he enjoys it so much, it has never felt like "work":

> I just feel incredibly lucky to have done what I've done for as long as I have, and in radio. It's just been a wonderful journey. I wouldn't have swapped any of it. I'd do it all over again—even the bullying boss. It's been great.

### *4.3.12 Interview 12: The colour of the world drained away that day*




## STORY CATEGORY MATRIX

Participant 61

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | REGULARLY COVER | 20+ times | Car crashes, house or building fires | Affecting 1-5 people | |
| 2 | COVER AT LEAST ONCE | 20+ times | Disasters, violent, extreme or distressing subject | Affecting segments of/entire community | |
| 3 | COVER & PERSONALLY AFFECTED | 0 times | As above and personally affected. | As above | |
| 4 | RARELY IF EVER COVER | 20+ times | I've reported in Afghanistan, Syria and Sri Lanka, during conflicts there. I've witnessed various traumatic events relating to combat, terrorist attacks, disease, malnutrition and poverty. However, it's actually the material I've had to watch online—primarily videos and stills—that have affected me the most. | Affecting entire state/nation(s) | I will never forget that photo of Aiyesha, and the treatment she received from USFOR-A. I do feel like a little bit of the colour of the world drained away that day, never to be returned to me. |

This participant conducted his interview at home, where he and his partner were caring for a new baby. Although distracted at times, this participant was determined that the interview should proceed. He was articulate and at times troubled by his experiences, although keen to talk about them. Participant 61's experience included investigative journalism and working in war zones for about a year, which coloured his view of the industry and the profession. He described a distressing story, prompted by a photo of a disfigured child:

> She was so badly burnt on her face they had taken skin grafts (from memory) from her leg, and they'd gone over her face and nose entirely. There was a smooth patch of skin there. She had enough room to breathe, but it was really,

> really unpleasant to see. It was really infuriating. I've still got that photo, actually. We just moved house and I came across it in the process of moving. That still really bothers me.

His survey response indicates the depth of his feeling:

> I will never forget that photo of Aiyesha, and the treatment she received from USFOR-A. I do feel like a little bit of the colour of the world drained away that day, never to be returned to me.

It was compounded by a sense of guilt and frustration that the story was not published.

> Most of the time in journalism—and this is not just about conflict zones—most of the time in journalism you are frustrated and unable to tell the whole story and the bureaucracies of war, of peacetime, whatever; they are just machines that grind you up.

Like Participant 53, this participant expressed an awareness that he was often dealing with people "in their worst moments". He developed a coping strategy that included holding "some of himself" back in the same way a police officer or paramedic might practise detachment.

Also like previous participants, despite an initial enthusiasm and sense of excitement at the job, he chose to do something else:

> And after a year in Afghanistan and looking at people around me, I had second thoughts, to be honest. And today, I would still like to do it, but I'm much more hesitant. I would probably prefer to be able to do a job where I can come and go, because I'm not sure it's worth it. You're essentially sacrificing your life to some degree … I know people who have killed themselves. I know people who have died from substance abuse, directly and indirectly. I know people whose careers have collapsed because of the effects of their reporting. And not all of it was war reporting—some of it was reporting in Australia.

Participant 61 describes a "gaping hole" in Australian journalism:

> People's lives are being lost, careers are being ruined, families are being broken up because of a failure to adequately address this issue … Yes, peer networks are really important, but companies have a responsibility to these people, and I just

don't think— and this is really, honestly not pointing a finger at any particular company—I just think none of them are getting it right.

## 4.4 Summary

The responses to the survey and interviews for this research have contributed a greater understanding of the extent of traumatic assignments for Australian journalists, as 82 per cent of those who took part said they had covered a story they found traumatic. Further, the types of stories which led to their experiences of trauma were across the spectrum of seriousness, as measured by the news value of Consequence. The interviews also indicate the experience of trauma varies between journalists, as some have described their suffering during their career, while others have remained sanguine and untroubled. A significant number also estimated they had been exposed to stories involving trauma more than 10 times in their career, while supporting US findings by Dworznik (2006) and Simpson, Coté and Scherer (2006) that increased career longevity was associated with a higher likelihood of reporting symptoms of trauma. Australian journalists also report having been victims of the same story they have been reporting in greater numbers than estimated in overseas research (Dworznik-Hoak 2020a), and a third of them do not believe they have been adequately supported by their employer after experiencing trauma. Finally, a series of themes emerged to provide greater understanding of the context of the risk and impact of these assignments on Australian journalists. These themes will be discussed in Chapter 5.

# 5 Discussion: Trauma's impact and risk

## Introduction

This research has found that a majority of the Australian journalists surveyed have experienced trauma in the execution of their work. These journalists have described the impact of this on them, including sadness and distress, anxiety, disturbed sleep and dreams, and effects on their relationships. Others have said they simply do not know how these experiences have affected them. This research also determined the types of stories involved could be understood in terms of their news values and categorised through a Story Category Matrix to demonstrate the relationship to news values and responses to trauma. Further, a series of themes have emerged to provide greater understanding of the context of the risk and impact of these assignments on Australian journalists. The primary research problem of identifying the risk and impact of journalism in Australia and the extent to which it happens will be discussed through a series of themes divided into in three main sections:

1. Impact and risk: Emerging themes
2. Conflict, Consequence and Currency: A traumatic mix, and
3. Why context matters (and it's not what you think)

## Impact and risk: Emerging themes

These research findings show a set of emerging themes from Australian journalists' experiences of trauma on the road. These themes take the form of impact on journalists, attitudes and responses towards the job more generally, and attitudes towards newsroom leadership.

The 73 complete survey responses and 12 interviews were used to identify Australian journalists' most common reactions to the personal impact of their work. These responses were categorised and the four highest responses to traumatic stories respondents described were: sadness and distress; anxiety; impact on relationships; and affected sleep or dreams; there were also interviewees who were simply unsure of what impact their work may be having on them. In the interviews, journalists also outlined how personal concurrent issues can affect and are affected by their work, articulating that they needed a break from constantly working on intense or protracted stories. These responses also demonstrated a need for newsrooms to provide

greater support for staff, particularly in managing mental wellbeing. While increased organisational support would benefit journalists directly, it would also benefit their audiences indirectly, as those who leave their round or the industry altogether due to the cumulative effects of trauma are lost, and to the community as a whole in a democratic society (Miller 2021, p. 8; Quinn 2021). A third group to benefit would include employers, as "improving mental health within [news] agencies will likely lead to more creative and prolific work and productive teams" (Dadouch & Lilly 2021, p. 969), although this was not raised by survey or interview participants.

A series of themes emerged from the quantitative and qualitative research, particularly in terms of the risks posed to journalists who cover traumatic stories. These themes, dealing with impact, are outlined in three areas:

1. impact on journalists
2. industry attitudes and responses, and
3. newsroom leadership

Each theme is explored through the lens of the impact it has on the journalist and the attendant risk posed by this impact.

## 5.1 Impact on journalists

The previous chapter identified the impact of traumatic stories on Australian journalists. To better understand this impact, the following section now identifies and examines the themes underlying such impact and their associated risks.

The themes that developed from Australian journalists' responses to the impact their work has had on them include:

- Experience of trauma is widespread
- Never being 'off duty'
- Concurrent personal issues
- COVID-19
- What trauma looks like.

### *5.1.2 Themes and their risks*

Themes and their attendant risks included:

- Any story can cause trauma
- Repetition versus immersion
- Trauma comes home
- Stories involving children, and
- Collision course with catastrophe.

### *5.1.3 Impact: Experience of trauma is widespread*

The online survey of Australian journalists received 124 responses with 73 complete responses to 35 questions (see Appendix E), including several relating to journalists' experience of trauma. The main survey question relating to trauma (B01) was quantitative in nature: "Have you covered or witnessed a traumatic event as part of your job? (That is, an event that you found traumatic, as opposed to whether someone else would have found it traumatic or whether it was considered traumatic generally)?" Of those (N = 60), 82 per cent responded yes. Only six people, or 8 per cent, responded "No", while seven, or 9.5 per cent, did not answer. This indicates that the experience of covering a traumatic story is widespread for these Australian journalists, demonstrated through the effects of sadness and distress, anxiety, impact on relationships and affected sleep or dreams, as discussed in Chapter 4.

### *5.1.4 Risk: Any story can cause trauma*

Respondents were asked to nominate what kinds of stories had caused them to experience trauma. It is believed this is the first time Australian journalists have been asked this question outside of psychology research, as the result was reached by first asking the journalists to indicate whether they had been traumatised and second asking them to identify the kinds of stories where the experience had occurred. Analysis of the types of stories Australian journalists considered traumatic found they did not conform to a straightforward pattern, leading to the conclusion that the experience of trauma is highly individual. Many respondents specified that they had experienced trauma while covering the most common and routine Category 1 stories classified by the Story Category Matrix (as discussed in the previous chapters). These stories may involve some degree of violence or threat to human life or property. Examples include car crashes and house or building fires, demonstrating that

ubiquity or commonality of story subject is no protection against trauma. This finding builds on previous research, which found that covering events at home compared with those in high-impact zones was not necessarily less challenging (Dworznik 2006). In addition, frequent exposure to life-threatening events in one's own "backyard" may provide the benefit of social support, but it may also increase stress (Levaot, Sinyor & Feinstein 2013). Further, "fewer studies have explored the everyday traumas encountered by journalists on the domestic beat who witness violence and tragedy routinely and are tasked with interviewing victims of trauma and their grieving loved ones" (Seely 2017). One interview participant observed in those members of his newsroom who covered this round, "There's a greater risk of people's guard falling down, and their support mechanisms eroded" (Participant 34).

### *5.1.5 Impact: Never being "off duty"*

While this research aims to investigate the risk and impact of traumatic assignments on journalists in Australia, themes emerging from the semi-structured interviews indicate that the line between "on the road" and the daily work of journalism is not a rigid one. The advent of COVID-19 (mentioned in more detail in section 5.2.7) meant many journalists were "on the road" even though they were working from home (Dobbie 2021; Messer 2021). Regardless of their physical location, several survey respondents nominated a lack of sufficient recovery time as an exacerbating feature in their responses to a traumatic assignment. Relevant comments on this problem from both the survey and interviews include:

> If they realised that you'd worked eight days straight a red flag went and "you must have two days off immediately because, physically, you must be very tired". But, in contrast, you could be out for two hours, see a horrific fatality, you file that story and you moved on. You filed the story, went home, had dinner and came back the next day like nothing had happened. (Participant 48)

> Usually in news, there is no opportunity to take time out to recover … When a story is breaking and rolling, the opportunity to stop and regroup is very limited. I found it difficult to keep going on many an occasion but did so, because this was the expectation. (Participant 13)

> The workloads are ridiculous. It's like: you're doing a breaking story, you're writing for online, you're doing radio news, you might have to do a live cross. That's an intensification thing. There was a light plane that went down in Essendon near the factory outlet where a couple of American golfers and a pilot

> died. One of our reporters did 17 crosses in one day from the scene. That's going to fuck with your head. (Participant 44)

This participant noted that her colleague was asked to cover the event again the next day; others intervened on her behalf so she could recover instead. Other participants noted the impact of social media in terms of both its content and workload:

> I think if you consider the fact that a lot of these Editors (when they were reporters) did not, for example, carry little computers in their pockets every day that meant that they were always contactable, they would always be looking at their work emails, they could always be looking at social media—that could be attacking them for the way they're covering their stories, it could be spitting out the stories they feel they should be on… It can just be difficult to get away from. (Participant 60)

This is consistent with findings from Miller (2021), who found "the pressure to be on social media is high, but so is the abuse" (Miller 2021, p. 11). This is echoed by Nee and Chacòn (2021), while Snowden & Green (2007) argue the need to be constantly contactable and intensification of work practices, combined with competency in multimedia reporting, places journalists under increasing pressure, resulting in increased stress and anxiety. This was exemplified by the work of reporters covering Australia's Black Summer bushfires (Tichner et al. 2020).

Other participants noted that once they had been asked to cover a certain type of story, they were asked to cover another if a "spate" or "run" of similar stories occurred. One described covering the deaths of three toddlers in one week, while another (Participant 44) was asked to cover three drownings in a week:

> …You can't walk away from it … Sometimes you just go "Oh God!" [gestures despair]. And the repetition of doing exactly the same story and being asked exactly the same stupid questions [on air] that you can't answer. (Participant 44)

Participant 44 also described frustration at being subject to what she perceived as unrealistic or unreasonable demands from newsroom managers and during live crosses indicates the kinds of task-related organisational stressors usually associated with major critical incidents (Herbert 2005). Herbert (2005, p. 79) found poor management support in such situations can exacerbate trauma.

The comments relating to a "spate" or run of stories indicate the presence of the news value of Currency, which could be a useful tool to identify this phenomenon and potential trauma risk to journalism students. Other potential risk factors such as stories involving children, and repetition versus immersion will be outlined in section 5.2.6.

### *5.1.6 Risk: Repetition versus immersion*

The key purpose of this research is to investigate the effects of covering certain types of stories that Australian journalists cover over a career, and the extent to which this happens. Further understanding of journalists' traumatic experiences can be gained by comparing the effects of working on one story for an extended period with the effects or impact of repeated exposure to a particular type of story. An example would be an investigative assignment that stretches for weeks or months, compared with covering a large number of car accidents, house fires or building fires. This approach to understanding trauma builds on research by Seely (2019) and Dworznik (2006). Seely argues that immersion in a story can be more troubling for some reporters (Seely 2019, p. 249), even in "everyday trauma" settings, while Dworznik was among the first to research the effects of repeated exposure to trauma in domestic reporting, which forms the bulk of a local journalist's work (Dworznik 2006, p. 535). When interview participants were asked whether immersive or repetitive exposure was more difficult to deal with on the road, many could not separate the two conditions and nominated both. This inability to separate the two types of reporting could also reflect that some stories and rounds required both types of reporting on an event simultaneously. For example, a protracted court case would require immersion in the detail aired in court, while the need to recap salient features each time the story is updated causes an effect akin to "constant mental erosion" (Participant 34):

> There's the cumulative impact of the things that are considered more traumatic like crime and all that… And then the second side is just the constant pressures of a daily deadline. Having to do it day after day after day after day and the self-discipline and mental management involved in doing that. (Participant 34)

Repetition of story incidents therefore constitutes a risk to journalists due to the cumulative nature of trauma (Geronazzo-Alman et al. 2017; Seely 2019; Tyson & Wild 2021). Participants 13, 14 and 19 also specifically noted the cumulative impact of trauma, as opposed to a single event. Another described it thus:

> The stresses of this job are [like] the tap dripping into the bucket. (Participant 60)

In such cases, best practice recommends a reprieve from the assignment (Dworznik-Hoak 2020b, 2020a) in consultation with reporters to reduce and manage stress. As outlined above, several respondents to the survey noted that they would have appreciated some form of rotation or break after a traumatic assignment, as they were expected to come back to work the next day "like nothing had happened" (Participant 48).

> And at the end of it, I was just stuffed, and I found it really hard to pick up and get productive again, but you're just onto the next story. (Participant 9)

While there is no "one size fits all" solution, McMahon (2016, 2019) found being able to take a break from reporting even for a short while within an assignment not only helped to lessen trauma exposure, but the reflection it afforded was a factor in post-traumatic growth. Meanwhile, Williams and Cartwright (2021) also advocated for providing reporters with the opportunity for reflection with their peers and management.

### *5.1.7 Impact: COVID-19*

Assessing the impact on the journalist of covering a story they were also personally affected by is a key focus of this research. While data collection was directly affected by and conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, journalists who took part in this research displayed examples of almost every challenge identified such as the use of emotional labour, immersion and repetition of story subject and being directly affected by a story. Yet only one survey respondent themselves identified reporting on the pandemic as an example of a story they were personally affected by:

> Also, with regard to COVID, as I covered each day's latest, keeping up meant watching every development, as well as the general concern felt by everyone, [the trauma] did seem to build up early on. (Participant 112)

This "early build up" echoes the "constant mental erosion" described by Participant 34 in the previous section, in stories where there is no break or reprieve from a story. In this case, however, journalists were as afraid about the risks of COVID-19 as anyone else, so even the usual "break" provided by being at home was no guarantee of reprieve. Two interviewees were so eager for such a reprieve, they said they would rather cover a notorious serial killer trial than continue working on COVID-19 stories. This experience is consistent with research emerging internationally, as Tyson and Wild (2021) found "journalists repeatedly reporting on the COVID-19 pandemic and its associated consequences had higher levels of PTSD symptoms

and psychological distress than journalists who were working during the pandemic yet covering stories other than COVID-19". Messner's (2021) acknowledgement that covering COVID-19 is, by its nature, trauma reporting, is demonstrated in a tweet from an Australian journalist who was not a research participant. While reporting on the spread of the Omicron strain across regional New South Wales, she wrote:

> Pushed down emotion for five TV crosses but voice finally cracked on radio.
>
> The stress and fear in Dubbo is palpable, streets silent, thousands tested, three shocking days. Especially our most vulnerable. Desperately hoping staying at home now will be enough. West needs all help possible. (Thackray 2021)

Further, coverage of the pandemic also required the practice of emotional labour necessitated by both repetition and immersion in the story. The reporter's stated effort to suppress her emotions to complete her assignment exemplifies Huxford and Hopper's (2020) connection between the professional norm of detachment and the journalistic ideal of objectivity. Her admission that this was not entirely successful is supported by McCaffrey (2021), who calls detachment a "magical belief system" that is supposed to inoculate journalists against trauma (2021, p. 11). Findings by Lee, Ha and Pae (2018) and Dworznik-Hoak (2020b) provide further indication of the emotional dissonance caused by the internal conflict caused by a strong (though proportionate) emotional response to the story (Dworznik-Hoak 2020a). This type of emotional labour requires significant effort and causes "significant mental and emotional strain in the long run" (Dworznik-Hoak 2020a, p. 8). Huxford and Hopper (2020, p. 46) acknowledge that both immersion and repetition exacerbate this strain.

Other responses to the pandemic during semi-structured interviews were mixed, with one reporter commenting that while he had been affected, it "wasn't too bad" and two even said it was "interesting". A fourth said she had had to stop working full-time during the pandemic due to the risk to her own health while being in the category of those deemed "vulnerable" to the virus. Overall, these responses support previous findings that the "prolonged and ever-changing nature of the pandemic has resulted in journalists being forced to deal with stories related to human suffering over and over again" (Tyson & Wild 2021). This increases the risk of trauma, as frequency of exposure is listed as one of the risk factors on a trauma risk exposure scale developed for journalists and updated by Browne, Evangeli and Greenberg (2012). Dworznik-Hoak (2020a) also notes that repetition and immersion are exacerbating factors in

trauma exposure, as “the greater the exposure, the greater the symptoms” (Dworznik-Hoak 2020b, p. 89).

### *5.1.8 Risk: Trauma comes home*

This research has found that Australian journalists are personally affected by a story they are also required to cover in significantly greater numbers than anticipated when the research proposal for this thesis was drafted. It was previously thought that this phenomenon was rare (Dworznik-Hoak 2020a), although no known studies were available to determine how rare this phenomenon might be. Assignments that fall into this type of situation are categorised and quantified under Category 3 in the Story Category Matrix (see Appendix C). This category deals with stories about events most people may experience at least one or more times in their lives or that every journalist may expect to cover at least once in their career, but where the journalist is also affected personally. Responses to the online survey questions relating to Category 3 of the Story Category Matrix (Appendix C) indicate that 20 per cent of respondents estimated they had covered stories of this nature more than 10 times in their career. This response is much greater than expected, and may even understate the scale of the phenomenon.

Similarly, it was clear from interview responses that journalists with concurrent personal issues may find reporting challenging stories even more difficult. Eight of the 12 journalists interviewed for this research mentioned a clash of the personal and professional, either from experience or observation:

> I think the degree to which you are affected by a story—and this has been true since I started working as a reporter—is definitely influenced by what else is going on in your life. (Participant 57)

Another (Participant 34) described a “cascading effect”, when work and home lives both went awry “and they can’t stop it”. A third observed covering intensely challenging stories such as those involving death was not possible while a journalist was facing the same experience as “you are still processing what is going on for you”. (Participant 31)

The emotional labour required to meet the challenge of striving to meet the professional norm of maintaining an “objective” professional identity (Dworznik-Hoak 2020b, 2020a; Ricchiardi 1999; Seely 2019) is difficult at the best of times, but when a journalist is experiencing personal hardship, the ability to maintain professional objectivity becomes more difficult or even “unfeasible” (Backholm & Björkqvist 2012a; Dworznik-Hoak 2020a; Kotisova 2019, p. 6;

Tandoc & Takahashi 2018). Both Dworznik-Hoak (2020a, pp. 14, 15) and Huxford and Hopper (2020, p. 42) found that attempting to do so can cause harm to journalists, contributing to long-term mental health issues.

### *5.1.9 Risk: Stories involving children*

One of the most frequent themes emerging from both the qualitative and quantitative components of this research was the impact on Australian journalists of working on stories involving children. This impact was demonstrated by a themed content analysis that showed the five most frequently used words in the online survey were: family (41), covering (37), events (37), death (36) and stories (36), while child/children was the sixth most frequently used word (33). Survey participants reported feeling sad and finding them "the most traumatic" to cover (Participant 34), "particularly when it's a young person" (Participant 112):

> I always found it easy to report on anything, including the Child Sex Abuse Royal Commission, until I got too close to families who had been devastated by one paedophile [person's name]. (Participant 117)

> Over the years, I've covered a few stories that have had a big effect on me emotionally. Most recently a murder involving a father killing his family… I wouldn't say any of these things have scarred me for life, but they have made me feel very drained and emotionally exhausted for days at a time when I'm writing about them. (Participant 86)

Another said the guilt of interviewing a grieving mother had "never left" her (Participant 90), while Australia's worst massacre in modern history more than 25 years ago still haunted one respondent, who had been a younger reporter at the Sydney Morning Herald:

> I was out at Port Arthur reporting on the carnage when the bodies were still on the ground. I saw where the gunman had killed a little girl behind a tree. Now, years later, whenever I talk about it, I become emotional. It is not an overwhelming sadness, and it is hard to gauge exactly what effect it has had on my family, but it is a sadness that lives within me. (Participant 81)

These comments were supported by results from the semi-structured interviews, where eight of the 12 participants mentioned stories involving children, particularly in relation to child deaths or abuse. These comments were across the demographic spread in terms of gender, age, career longevity and media format. One participant said "anything to do with the abuse of

children" was difficult to cover (Participant 60), while another (Participant 57) described the story of a child murdered in their sleep by their father as "the worst of the worst" because "you're supposed to protect your kids, right?". Simpson, Coté and Scherer (2006, p. 45) argue that the "deep feelings" aroused by stories about children are an example of the psychological effect of identification. These responses are consistent with previous research (Kotisova 2019; Lee, Ha & Pae 2018; Seely 2019; Smith, Drevo & Newman 2017), which found that stories involving children were particularly challenging for journalists. This challenge is considered so significant, it is included as one of the factors on the Journalist Trauma Exposure Scale used by psychologists to measure work-related trauma (Browne, Evangeli & Greenberg 2012).

### *5.1.10 Risk: Collision course with catastrophe*

A primary purpose for this research was to establish the extent to which Australian journalists are required to cover stories involving events of a catastrophic, highly charged or extreme nature. These are identified in the Story Category Matrix as Category 4 stories, which satisfy the news values of Consequence and Conflict to the highest degree, often in an unprecedented or rarely seen manner. These stories may also satisfy the news value of Unusualness for this reason, while other news values are likely to apply to some extent. These values are not used to indicate the inherent worth of an event being covered, but to assist in describing them in the context of journalistic decision-making. In response to the self-administered survey question about this type of story described as a "mega story" (Green, McLellan & McMahon 2005), five people, or 8 per cent, estimated they had covered stories of this nature more than 20 times over the course of their careers, while 16 people, or 27 per cent of those who answered this question, indicated that they had covered these types of stories up to five times in their career and a further 14 people, or 23 per cent, estimated they had done so up to 10 times. It was to be expected that some respondents had never covered such an event, given its relative rarity as an assignment (Duncan 2012), though it had not been anticipated that any respondents would select the maximum value of more than 20 times in their career. This may be explained by the seniority of those respondents in terms of their career longevity; all but one had worked in the industry for more than 25 years. The exception had worked as a journalist for 11–25 years, including in high-risk conflict zones.

### *5.1.11 Impact: what trauma looks like*

This research has found that the work of an Australian journalist affects their emotions, relationships and sleep. This finding builds on the seminal works of Simpson and Boggs (1999) and Newman, Simpson and Handschuh (2003), as well as South African researchers Marais and Stuart (2005) and more recent research by Hill, Luther and Slocum (2020). As outlined in

Chapter 4, respondents to the self-administered survey were asked to respond to the issue of trauma both quantitatively and qualitatively. First, question B01 asked, “Have you covered or witnessed a traumatic event as part of your job? (That is, an event that you found traumatic, as opposed to whether someone else would have found it traumatic or whether it was considered traumatic generally)?” Second, question B04 asked, “If you answered yes to the previous question, what impact has this had on you personally, or on your family? Please describe.” More than one answer per person was permitted. These responses were coded using qualitative analysis software NVivo into categories or “codes”. The most commonly occurring themes were then compiled, including:

- Sadness and distress, including weeping (70 per cent of responses)
- Anxiety, including expressions of fear and avoidance (44 per cent)
- Impact on relationships (35 per cent)
- Sleep or dreams, including nightmares and difficulty sleeping (17 per cent)
- Unsure (17 per cent).

The results are consistent with findings from US research, which found that crying was the most common negative response of reporters who covered Hurricane Harvey (Dworznik-Hoak 2020b). Dworznik-Hoak (2020b) found this response required the use of emotional labour, as it was “something to be suppressed” as a sign of weakness (Dworznik-Hoak p. 98) or improper behaviour (Huxford & Hopper 2020) when displayed on the road. Conversely, crying off-duty—such as in a car after an interview (Dworznik-Hoak 2020a)—was not seen as improper, due to the emotional labour of what Huxford and Hopper (2020) call “deferment” of emotion.

### *5.1.12 Summary*

Australian journalists who took part in this research reported that their experience of trauma on the road is widespread. Their experience of trauma did not fit a particular pattern conforming with the story “seriousness”, indicating that any story could potentially cause them trauma. The challenge of reporting during the COVID-19 pandemic provided an example of the lack of recovery time between challenging stories and sometimes unrealistic or unreasonable demands from newsroom managers. It also provided an example of the twin stressors of being immersed in and experiencing repeated exposure to traumatic stories. Australian journalists also reported being required to work on stories that personally affect them in greater numbers than anticipated, proving the experience is more than “rare”. Stories involving children and extreme “megastories”

were also identified as risks. Finally, they reported being affected primarily through sadness and distress, anxiety, affected relationships and affected sleep, or were simply unsure about what effect their work had had on their personal lives.

## 5.2 Industry attitudes and responses

This research has found that Australian journalists are similar to their overseas counterparts in responding to the effects of traumatic stories in ways such as changing roles or rounds, or leaving the industry altogether. They also exhibit empathy with interview subjects and may pay an emotional price in terms of trauma for identifying with their sources.

### *5.2.1 Themes of industry attitudes and responses*

The themes that developed from Australian journalists' attitudes and responses as a professional group include:

- Love it, but leave it
- No strong journalists, no strong journalism
- Schnitzel, rum and file
- Emotions behind locked doors
- If you're not affected, you're not human
- Last person standing or new kid on the block.

### *5.2.2 Impact: Love it, but leave it*

In response to traumatic experiences on the road, some journalists change roles or leave the industry (Huxford & Hopper 2020; Specht & Tsilman 2018; Young 2011), while others may consider doing so due to burnout (Monteiro, Marques Pinto & Roberto 2016; Reinardy 2011). Three of the 12 interview participants for this research changed their role or career direction in response to experiences of trauma, while others knew of colleagues who had. One said:

> I no longer write on these issues as I find the emotional toll it has on me is too great. (Participant 62)

The second said they would like to continue in the same role, but "I'm not sure it's worth it; you're essentially sacrificing your life to some degree" (Participant 61). A third identified a

cohort of former colleagues in their early 30s who had left journalism altogether, or were going to:

> I think a big part of that is just burnout. (Participant 60)

These comments reflect the need for some sort of reprieve from the conditions experienced on the road (as mentioned in sections 5.1.5, 5.16 and 5.1.7 above), and journalists' willingness to find it by leaving the industry, if necessary.

One survey respondent who had covered the police/emergency round for many years said he had asked for a different round, "as I could see it was starting to impact me" (Participant 29). Another wrote:

> I've covered many traumatic events as a young news reporter, but a number still make me flinch when I recall them today. The impact of what I'd seen and heard as during the course of my early reporting days resulted in regular nightmares for years. I was a very young journalist starting out in my career. We were told we had to be tough. Showing emotion or being vulnerable was not an acceptable trait as a young journalist if I wanted to "make it" in the industry. The nightmares lessened over the years, but I knew if I stayed long enough doing the work that, for the most part, I loved, I would end a basket case, so I shifted gears completely and left news reporting to be a magazine feature writer. (Participant 127)

Participant 127's comment reflects several features of journalism phenomenology, culture and practice. First, this reporter's traumatic experiences occurred early in their career, which is consistent with Hill's (2022, p. 4) findings that early exposure "may produce the most vivid memories". This means those emotional scars may be carried for decades (Huxford & Hopper 2020).

Second, the sleep disturbance described here is significant as it is an indicator of hyperarousal, which is one of the four main indicators of PTSD (Dworznik-Hoak 2020b; Seely 2019).

Third, the pressure experienced to conform to journalism culture by suppressing emotions indicates a form of emotional labour that was inculcated according to professional norms (Huxford & Hopper 2020; Lee, Ha & Pae 2018; McCaffrey 2019). As one of the unwritten rules of journalism (Dworznik-Hoak 2020a; McCaffrey 2021; Simpson & Boggs 1999; Suiter 2001), this attitude was an indicator of the "blokey" or "macho" culture that prevails in many newsrooms

(Anderson 2017; Dworznik-Hoak 2020a; Green & Sykes 2005; Lee, Ha & Pae 2018; McCaffrey 2019; Rizzi 2020; Suiter 2001).

Finally, Participant 127 stated a desire to preserve their mental health as the reason for changing rounds and roles in the industry. This kind of attitude was evidenced during the COVID-19 pandemic, which has been cited as a catalyst for journalists leaving the industry or taking breaks from it (Hao 2021; Kunova 2021; Messer 2021). Huxford and Hopper (2020) link this with the "difficulties" of emotional labour, which will be discussed in further detail below, while Simunjak (2022) asserts that employers need to take the consequences of emotional labour into account in a post-pandemic climate, particularly for journalists working outside the newsroom. Both he and Hill (2022, p. 5) advocate greater workplace support to mitigate trauma in an effort to retain staff amidst a worldwide trend towards leaving a workplace seeking greater job satisfaction known as "the Great Resignation" (Simunjak 2022, p. 333).

### *5.2.3 Risk: No strong journalists, no strong journalism*

These examples indicate that Australian journalists act in response to the cumulative impact of trauma and burnout, including changing roles or leaving the industry. One participant also directly linked the need for mentally strong and healthy journalists and strong journalism:

> If we don't have journalism woven around the democracy thread, then the people don't have a voice … There have been times when … very, very good journalists have done tough, tough stories and they cannot continue. And I think that is a tragedy. (Participant 31)

This was echoed in Anderson's (2017) research into Australian news photographers, which found "psychological pressures" may have been responsible for many leaving the industry (Anderson 2017, p. 1618). Similarly, interview respondents echoed UK research by Nel (2010) which revealed industry changes also have ramifications for those who are left:

> It's getting more brutal. And I kind of feel for the journalists coming through—the young ones. It's a very, very different world to the one I entered as a young journalist. There's not as much work around, particularly for the juniors. It's [also] very poorly paid for the younger ones. (Participant 62)

Such concern appears to be justified by Australian research from MacDonald and Fox (2018), which found that after newsroom redundancies, younger, less-experienced workers were

required to do more work with fewer resources, while at the same time being less protected from stressful experiences through the removal of veteran colleagues.

### *5.2.4 Schnitzel, rum and file your story*

Australian journalists who took part in this research described the use of alcohol as a coping mechanism in response to trauma. This is consistent with previous Australian research by MacDonald, Saliba and Hodgins (2016) and Vine (2006), which found alcohol consumption historically played a central role in journalism culture, while Suiter (2001) noted its use as an accepted trauma response in this culture, particularly in social settings. Anderson (2017) went further to describe a vivid "drinking culture" in her research into Australian news photographers. This consistent use of alcohol in Australian journalism culture indicates an enduring issue for the industry. Two survey respondents mentioned the use of alcohol as a coping mechanism when asked about the impact of covering a traumatic story, while a third was a self-described "recovering alcoholic". Several participants mentioned its use:

> I said, "How do you do it? How do you put yourself in the firing line and make yourself vulnerable like this all the time?" And she said, "Alcohol helps." She said: "[Participant's name], I'm a complete alcoholic". Then she laughed and her face clouded over as if to say, "Well, actually, I am". (Participant 62)

> I did access an employee assistance line a few times. One counsellor suggested I might be suffering some PTSD. I told a news editor and she told me I should have a rum with lunch every day to help loosen me up. (Participant 48)

Repeating her survey response (above) in an interview, the same participant recalled the advice was not a one-off:

> So that was often the way to fix it: a schnitzel and a rum at lunch and go back and file the story. (Participant 48)

This is an example of what Monteiro, Marques Pinto and Roberto (2016) describe as the operation of socialisation or "schooling" in journalism culture. In this case, it applies to alcohol as a "culturally accepted" means of dealing with extreme stress (Monteiro, Marques Pinto & Roberto 2016, p. 769). Vine (2021, p. 139) argues that the use of alcohol is firmly rooted in Australian journalism culture, even to the extent of its use in the newsroom itself. In their review of literature on journalists' substance abuse, MacDonald, Saliba and Hodgins (2016, pp. 402, 408) also found alcohol was historically central to journalism culture, and journalists used it as a coping

mechanism, including “to forget”. They note, however, that no specific research has been conducted into journalists’ motives for consuming alcohol. Another participant mentioned an informal peer-support network at his previous employer, which specifically did not include alcohol use:

> At [previous employer’s name] I had a better group of people around me who understood the need to talk about that stuff without talking about that stuff, if you know what I’m saying? We just had a good—because we had a tight group of people who were working on crime all the time, there was a better, unofficial, sort of way of debriefing about that stuff without—which didn’t necessarily involve going and having pints or anything like that but was just sort of, you were able to kind of talk through [things]. That helped me bounce back a little bit. (Participant 60)

These comments indicate the socialisation of younger Australian journalists involves strategies for dealing with trauma that includes the use of alcohol as a coping mechanism. Feinstein, Owen and Blair (2002) note the “excessive” use of alcohol by journalists reporting in domestic settings compared with those engaged in war reporting (2002, p. 1573) and Willis (2003) notes its use as a trauma-coping mechanism in journalism culture.

### *5.2.5 Impact: Emotions behind locked doors*

Journalism is an inherently emotional practice, according to Simunjak (2022). Wahl-Jorgensen (2020) believes this has always been the case, as journalists’ emotions and therefore their experiences of trauma are managed and shaped by their professional culture, norms and practices (Wahl-Jorgensen 2019), rather than as individuals. Together with Pantti, (2021) Wahl-Jorgensen uses a simple definition for the commoditisation of emotion in the workplace:

> Employees perform emotional labor when they suppress, overplay, postpone or silence their emotions for organizational profit and social norms of feeling in a specific situation. In other words, they manage their emotions for the wage in the workplace. (Pantti & Wahl-Jorgensen 2021, p. 1567)

Dworznik-Hoak (2020a) describes empathy and “being human” (2020a, p. 9) in this context as “deep acting” emotional labour:

> This type of deep acting seemed to serve as a powerful way to change how participants were feeling about the encounters with victims, as well as see the emotional toll as a worthwhile consequence. (Dworznik-Hoak 2020a, p. 9)

An anecdote from one interview participant provided an example of this kind of emotional labour in covering a nationally significant and highly traumatic story that she was proud of for its sensitive handling:

> But that night I was out with some friends and went to a show, a live theatre show (when you could do such things) and as the curtains went down and halfway through the first act or whatever it was, I just started to cry. In the dark. Hopefully nobody noticed, but I just had not had time all day to process what I had seen and heard and suddenly I did … So, the curtains come up, [and] I do my best to pretend that I haven't had a meltdown [during the performance]. (Participant 44)

This anecdote displays several features of the use of emotional labour in journalism practice. First, it involves the tension between the journalistic norm of objectivity and its associated state of detachment, and the protection this provides against empathy (McCaffrey 2019, p. 225):

> Professional norms of detached objectivity are set against journalists' own awareness that they are emotionally affected by the situations they report on, and against their empathy for the individuals involved in the story. (Richards & Rees 2011, p. 864)

However, Richards and Rees (2011, p. 859) assert that dealing with this tension can create an "internal conflict" due to what Dworznik-Hoak (2020a) refers to as the disconnect between the emotions being felt and those expressed. But Dworznik-Hoak also argues that detachment allows a form of dissociation necessary to do the work required without emotions "getting in the way" (Dworznik-Hoak 2020a, p. 4). Third, this journalist's experience displays what Huxford and Hopper (2020, p. 56) describe as a deferral of emotion, along with its unbidden reappearance "bubbling through once the job at hand was accomplished". Another interview participant described this experience:

> Sometimes people could get emotionally upset about something relatively innocuous, because they covered a serial killer case two months before. And I think the idea of counselling is to prevent those moments from arising at

> inopportune moments: you're about to do a piece to camera, you're about to read the news or something, and then all of a sudden you get a flashback to this … It's the personal and professional are intertwined, because you have to maintain your objectivity, even though you might feel a certain thing. (Participant 57)

Another interview participant for this research said he had actively practised a form of emotional labour known as detachment, which Buchanan and Keats (2011) call "compartmentalising":

> I've been very good, through my life, at sort of compartmentalising situations; just putting things behind locked doors … There's stuff that you park and you just open the doors occasionally. I don't have any problems going to sleep, if we're talking about how does it affect me. It kind of doesn't, unless I want it to, if that makes sense. (Participant 53)

Other interview subjects also provided further evidence of experiences of emotional labour, as three interview subjects out of 12 spontaneously mentioned maintaining some form of contact with interview subjects after their story was published or aired. Such contact is not unusual in journalism, while it can even be considered "a betrayal" not to do so (Muller 2010, p. 7). However, Huxford and Hopper also argue the challenge of doing so grew "more acute" with prolonged contact (Huxford & Hopper 2020, p. 46):

> I covered a particular coronial inquest detail over several years and became close with the family of the deceased. A few months after the inquest finished, I visited family in the town where the person had died and broke down on the plane flying in. My family were supportive and took me to buy flowers so I could pay my respects. (Participant 62)

> For the most part, the people that I've dealt with on the most traumatic stories have become lifelong friends. (Participant 31)

> So that's one of the things I say is actually really important about that trauma-informed approach: what you do after the fact, and making sure that somebody is okay. You're not responsible for their mental health, but you have a duty of care to satisfy yourself that you haven't done harm. (Participant 44)

Pantti and Wahl-Jorgensen (2021), Huxford and Hopper (2020) and (Wahl-Jorgensen 2020) all assert that, in professional practice, journalists direct significant emotional labour towards

managing sources, not just their own emotions. Survey participants also expressed empathy and concern for those they have interviewed, in what Glück (2016, p. 901) describes as an "indispensable though 'invisible' part of journalistic work":

> The situations dealing with families in a state of grief are often very difficult. Particularly young people are involved I can find myself empathising with their grief and attempting to cast myself in their situation, but still having to proceed with the story. I suppose the strongest one was after a fatal shark attack on the West Coast. I made contact with the father, who then poured out his pain over several hours on the phone. I did feel I wasn't the person he should be turning to, but he insisted. (Participant 112)

> I have been distressed and concerned for the person I interviewed (Participant 68)

> The stories I cover are often about traumatic events in people's lives. I think it is important that you are empathetic to the victims. A little bit of that stays with you every time you do one of those stories. (Participant 44)

> The little boy who drowned strapped to the pram because the mother turned away (on the Torrens) to answer a phone call: I didn't go to that, but reported on it and I had—my oldest was about the same age at the time, so you kind of compare, you know? Like, what would happen, and what would your emotions be? And how would that affect everything? You empathise with people in that situation. I suppose as reporters you almost shouldn't get caught up in it, but I've been to things, fires or whatever, where I've just—I've got to put it into context: I cried in *Finding Nemo*—but I find myself listening to some of these stories and I'll just feel a tear trickling down. It gets to you. We're all human at the end of the day. (Participant 53)

While professionally necessary, such empathy can also pose a clear risk of trauma to journalists. Pearson and colleagues (2021) found empathy for sources can contribute to trauma, while McMahon (2016) found "being personally connected to the place or people where the event occurred causing a feeling of affinity to the victim group" may be as significant in predicting traumatic response as witnessing "horrific events" (McMahon 2016, p. 45).

Empathy for a story subject was also expressed in terms of an extension of ethical considerations towards them, long after a story is published or broadcast. One interview respondent was happy to be named in this research, but couched his responses in deliberate and careful terms in order not to identify the subjects of his stories. In other words, while describing his own responses in terms of journalism trauma, his concern for those he had written about remained paramount. This use of deep-acting emotional labour through empathy explains why other interview respondents were keen not to be seen as "vultures" (Participant 108), "nasty" (Participant 31) or "piranhas" (McMahon 2001):

> We have seen that journalists are not emotionless and sensation-hungry human beings who simply run from one tragedy to another, completely detached from what is going on around them. (Hanusch 2010, p. 97)

This research demonstrates such detachment is practised concurrently with deferral of emotion and in the context of managing stories, behind closed doors.

### *5.2.6 Impact: If you're not affected, you're not human*

Australian journalists can identify with the subjects of their stories and, according to Dworznik-Hoak (2020a, p. 9), that can be to their detriment. As previously described, Australian journalists—consciously or otherwise—empathise with or "relate" to those they interview (Simpson, Coté & Scherer 2006, p. 45). One interview participant described having nightmares after realising she was the same complexion and age as the targets of what was known as the Claremont serial killer, who was active in Western Australia during the late 1990s. As previously mentioned, sleep disturbance (such as nightmares) is a key indicator of trauma, according to Seely (2019) and Dworznik-Hoak (2020b). Another described his response to a story he had covered 30 years earlier, which further supports the idea of long-term emotional harm described by Huxford and Hopper (2020, p. 57). For others, the association with a story or source was more general:

> There's one [story] that I think about a lot, for example, because the person who died that I was writing about was quite similar to me at that time of my life, and I found that quite difficult. It can be very difficult to know which are the stories that are going to impact you the worst. (Participant 60)

Others described the effect such experiences had on their careers, such as the emotional exhaustion caused by "excessive demands" (Huxford & Hopper 2020, p. 42) on their emotional labour:

> But I couldn't work for six months after this story, because emotionally, it really knocked me for six. Just the thought of losing a child was just too much for me to cope with as a young mother. (Participant 62)

Glück (2016) argues responses such as these are complex, involving both intersubjectivity (through the emotional influence the interview subject is having on the journalist) and the journalistic norm of objectivity; it is therefore simultaneously cognitive in function and emotional in labour. The difficulty of managing the journalistic ideal of detached, dispassionate objectivity in highly charged or traumatic situations can itself be damaging, according to Dworznik-Hoak (2020a), who argues that the normative practice of objectivity dictates which emotions a journalist ought to display at various times. Further, Glück (2016, p. 895) points out that as this process is required for the purpose of work rather than "occurring naturally", it can be emotionally draining for the journalist due to a dissonance caused by "alienation from one's own (authentic) emotions", while Dworznik-Hoak (2020a, pp. 12, 13) warns that delay or deferral of emotional expression and the suppression of emotion required to do so can create a "psychological burden" on the journalist. Half the interview participants in this research described events where they identified with the victim of a violent or distressing story, or with the victim's loved ones. This is significant considering McMahon's (2016, p. 45) finding that a personal connection or affinity with interview subjects can be an indicator of traumatic risk equal to "visual exposure of traumatic events".

> So, when someone lost a child, I understood that. I was able to report it better. (Participant 31)

This response matches the phenomenon described in earlier studies by Glück (2016), who argues that "empathy cannot be left out in sensitive journalistic interviews where people face varying degrees of distress" (2016, p. 895). In contrast, a veteran reporter described their observations of colleagues over the years where reporters have failed to "guard themselves against becoming too sympathetic to their subjects and, ultimately, to themselves" (McCaffrey 2019, p. 241):

> I think the people who do suffer trauma and do suffer stress invest too much of themselves personally in a story and thinking that every story is going to make or break their entire career. (Participant 34)

This observation refers to the tension between the detachment dictated by the professional norm of objectivity as described above, and the management of authentic responses through emotional labour. In this case, the balance is away from objectivity and what Wahl-Jorgensen (2020, p. 181) refers to as the shielding function of detachment, towards a "visceral, empathic often instinctive affective dimension of practice". The latter was also strongly evident in survey responses. Many respondents expressed a desire for meaning in traumatic events:

> I think if you are not affected by a story, you are not human. We share stories to understand each other but some actions are beyond all understanding. (Participant 13)

> I attended a murder scene, where a mother, her 15-year-old daughter and eight-year-old son had been killed by a family member. I had to interview friends who were of a similar age to my own cousins and young family members. (Participant 107)

> Where covering large events keeps you in a state of exhaustion and excitement for some time, you have to keep thinking over the meanings of it: in what way does it affect others, where do I come into it, e.g. as a witness? (Participant 76)

> Even though it doesn't affect you personally, it's hard not to put yourself in their shoes and have empathy. There but for the grace of God. (Participant 29)

These responses reflect Australian journalists' attempts to manage their own authentic responses to stories they cover, when they leave the "shield" of objectivity and identify with story subjects.

### *5.2.7 Risk: Last person standing or new kid on the block*

This research found career longevity appears to have little or no effect on the likelihood of Australian journalists experiencing trauma as part of their work—that is, journalists from all stages in their career reported experiencing trauma on the road. While this may appear to be self-evident, it is nonetheless revealing, for two reasons: it reflects previous international research that trauma can occur very early in a journalist's career (Dworznik and Grubb 2007, Hill 2022, Simpson & Boggs 1999), and that affected individuals are vulnerable to repeated

exposure to trauma while they keep working. As a significant number of respondents to this research estimated that they had covered as many as five traumatic events in their career and others had covered more than 10, this suggests the desire to leave or change roles is associated with the cumulative impact of trauma rather than a single experience. The suggestion that the desire to leave or change roles does not stem from a single incident but rather the cumulative impact of trauma is further supported by examination of the negative response to this question. The number of people who said they had not experienced a traumatic event at work became lower as age categories increased, until all those aged over 51 who answered the question reported having such an experience. The single exception to this was a participant who did not respond to the question. More detail on these responses was provided during the interviews:

> I probably had my first real exposure to trauma—I was a cadet… It was a Saturday afternoon. We got a call saying it was a young boy that they think had drowned in a stormwater drain in the northern suburbs of Adelaide. I head up there with a camera operator. I was 18. I'm pretty green. He was actually also not far from where I grew up. That little boy was about the same age as my brother. (Participant 44)

These comments are consistent with findings by Dworznik and Grubb (2007) that a traumatic experience is likely to occur as early as a journalist's first violent assignment, and support Barnes' (2015) recommendation for specific training for early-career journalists, particularly while at university.

### *5.2.8 Summary*

As a professional group, Australian journalists reveal their attitudes and responses to their industry in several ways, such as thinking of leaving an assignment or job they love due to the experience of trauma. This takes place in an industry already dealing with the net loss of experienced journalists, which threatens democracy and diminishes protection for younger reporters, placing them under further pressure. However, the use of alcohol as a coping mechanism remains a feature of Australian journalism culture, which is also characterised by acts of emotional labour such as keeping their emotions "behind locked doors" and expressions of empathy and a desire for meaning. While survey respondents reported experiencing trauma on the road across the board in terms of age and career longevity, their in-depth interviews reveal this is likely to have occurred early in their careers.

## 5.3 Newsroom leadership

This research has found journalists have identified several factors associated with trauma they have experienced on the road, which are related to or can be mitigated at newsroom management level.

### *5.3.1 Themes of newsroom leadership*

The themes that developed relating to newsroom organisational support include:

- support and wellbeing
- on the road, under attack
- frustration.

### *5.3.2 Impact: Support and wellbeing*

Participants identified several factors associated with trauma that they experienced on the road, including occupational stressors such as feeling they were never off duty and threats of harm they faced due to their work, as well as editorial factors such as stories involving children. When asked about their perceptions of employer support, more than half of the Australian journalists who said they had experienced trauma at work did not answer the question about whether the support they received from their employer at the time they experienced trauma was adequate. Krosnick (1999) asserts non-responses may be received because respondents lack the ability to formulate informed opinion. Of those who did respond, a quarter (25 per cent) said employer support was inadequate and less than a fifth (18 per cent) considered the support they received was adequate. Respondents were also asked to describe the support they received during their coverage of a traumatic story. Their responses included:

> None, but in fairness I didn't know that I was experiencing vicarious trauma at the time. It is known now that self-care is very important and something media management and a lot of workplaces were not good at in the past. (Participant 13)
>
> Very little, particularly early in my career it was nil and told to get back to work and not dwell on it. The only real support I received was from a now deceased detective specialist forensic investigator who gave me some hints on how to deal with photographing corpses or portions of them. This proved very valuable for

> me, and I remember him fondly whenever I have had to deal with these situations. (Participant 19)
>
> General concern from senior staff and colleagues. (Participant 34)
>
> Not sure. (Participant 45)
>
> Bugger all. (Participant 81)
>
> I have never asked for help. I certainly would never ask an employer because I don't believe it would remain confidential. (Participant 117)

While some of these responses identify the need for self-care, resilience training and peer support, they are also consistent with research from Nee and Chacòn (2021) that found an association between organisational support and journalists' mental wellbeing. Despite the somewhat low expectations of employer support expressed above, Australian workplaces nonetheless have a duty of care towards their staff. Lyall (2012) argues the use of other methods does not abrogate the responsibility of employers to provide healthy workplaces. Further, Dworznik-Hoak (2020b, p. 100) issues a reminder that while different people are affected by organisational stressors in different ways, "little is known about specific occupational stressors, emotional responses, and the psychological impact of covering trauma in journalists".

### *5.3.3 Risk: On the road, under attack*

A strong theme of both survey and interview responses was that of being under siege by constant attacks from outside the industry. More than 70 per cent of the women and half of the men who responded to the survey question said they had been bullied, threatened, or harassed at work, either physically or online. One survey respondent estimated he had been subjected to more than 100 online and 100 physical events of these types of events at work. Participant 15 described the "constant" harassment he received as being "like psychological warfare", which led him to lead a reclusive lifestyle, which had in turn affected his work as a freelancer. Another wrote that his personality changed "extremely", listing a catalogue of extremely violent or disturbing Category 2 stories over a 40-year career:

> I was often the subject of threats of violence from outlaw motorcycle gangs (OMCGs) and in 1986 was placed in intensive care in hospital, after gang members ran me off the road. (Participant 124)

These experiences illustrate findings by Williams and Cartwright (2021) that being threatened, attacked or injured on the road constituted a work-related trauma. Participant 124's response

also satisfies Smith, Drevo and Newman's (2015, 2017) assertion that journalists who experience frequent exposure to work-related stressors appear to be at greater risk of experiencing PTSD symptoms.

These attacks are consistent with Ferrier's (2019) warning that such threats are constant and from Australia and beyond, as well as being both digital and physical. Worse, they bleed into a journalist's life away from work and are often gendered in nature, constituting a "clear workplace health and safety issue" (Dobbie, 2021).

### *5.3.4 Impact: Frustration*

Spontaneous comments from interview participants on the issue of employer support indicate frustration at a perceived lack of awareness or understanding of the demands of their work from those in newsroom leadership. This is despite the participation of some survey respondents occupying senior editorial roles, indicating reporting experience and newsroom leadership are not synonymous. The frustration expressed in this research included a conflict between perceptions of what trauma-informed reporting should be—sensitive, empathetic and "human", according to Dworznik-Hoak (2020a)—and the prevailing newsroom culture in Australia:

> At the moment we churn and burn through journalists. We don't care about their mental health. We don't care what we do to them, and we really don't care about what we're doing to the people they might be interviewing. (Participant 44)

> Some of them are really good people—some of them are really good journalists that news organisations should be thinking 'they are going to be part of this [newsroom] until they are in our positions [of seniority]; until they're senior editors'. But they burn out because it's a pretty unrelenting job and editors are concerned about the next story, not whether their staff are going to be okay after they file. (Participant 60)

> Journalism is very much like that; it's on to the next story. And if I was to say anything about the way it's managed, often managers don't actually pick up that journalists are getting exhausted by this process. When you're in that process—and I really don't think I'm Robinson Crusoe there—that managers are just looking at the fact that they don't think you're doing enough or not producing enough, rather than thinking about what you've done. (Participant 20)

These comments demonstrate Raemy's (2021, p. 844) observation of a disconnect between "journalists' role perception and their practised role performance". Such frustration exists due to a tension between their perception of ethics in practice and management directives, and can lead to instances of moral injury in some cases (Pearson et al. 2021, p. 1656), as well as exacerbate feelings of guilt associated with traumatic assignments (Browne, Evangeli & Greenberg 2012; Knight 2020).

Recent US research that indicates this disconnect is intensified by "tendencies by editors to focus on the work still to be done, without processing completed assignments and the impact they may have had" (Dadouch & Lilly 2021). McMahon (2016) notes that such workload demands on journalists exacerbate the cumulative effect of trauma on journalists. This culture prevails in Australian journalism, despite a 30-year-old recommendation from Gaba (1991) for reporters to keep a logbook of stories supervised by a senior journalist to monitor and minimise trauma exposure, although no further research building on this recommendation could be found. A possible explanation is provided by Hill (2022), who suggests that newsroom managers are ill-prepared for such leadership due to a lack of formal training, including in trauma. Nonetheless, research by Smith, Newman and Drevo (Smith 2008; Smith, Newman & Drevo 2015; Smith, Drevo & Newman 2017) concluded that increased perceived organisational stress is a risk factor for trauma long-term psychological problems, including PTSD. This is particularly significant for those on the road covering natural disasters, who "have to deal with the physical hardships associated with daily navigation of damage and destruction, whether they are working or not, which can contribute to long-term mental health issues" (Dworznik-Hoak 2020b, p. 89).

> The Aitape tsunami in PNG's West Sepik Province in 1998 in which at least 2,500 people died, was especially traumatic for me. I saw lots of dead bodies and went to a primary school that lost at least half of its students. It was exhausting work partly because of the necessity to get to and from the very remote location day after day. The only way to get TV stories out was to get back to the [employer's name] in Port Moresby where we had a satellite dish. I did not realise how traumatic until I burst into tears after doing a morning radio interview with the [employer's name] five days into the story and I cried solidly for five minutes after shutting down the microphone. (Participant 67)

This occupational stressor describes what Dworznik-Hoak (2020b, p. 91) refers to as task or operational stressors related to the practice of journalism. It is combined with another type of

occupational stressor related to journalism culture called an organisational stressor, in an interview for research by the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma. In this interview, a photographer recounted his experience covering an earthquake:

> Many of the people who send us to these locations have never done this sort of work themselves. We needed someone to be there for us and I reckon they would have treated us much differently if one of them had been there and seen what we had to go through just to do our work. (McLennan 2011)

As previously discussed, Australian journalists exhibit empathy and identify with their story subjects. While displays of empathy in journalistic practice might lead to more nuanced and sensitive reporting, they also carry a risk to the journalist of "draining out", according to Glück (2016, p. 895). In their seminal work on journalism trauma, Simpson and Boggs (1999) explicitly connect the consequences of more sensitive reporting and a need for greater employer duty of care:

> Newsworkers frequently are urged to be more sensitive to those they report about, to be "more clear-eyed and whole human beings". If the news business is to respond to a challenge to show more empathy, news organizations will need to break the silence about traumatic stress and find ways for journalists, like front-line workers in emergency and public-safety work, to recover from the wounds of their work. (Simpson & Boggs 1999, pp. 19–20)

Evidence that news employers are aware of their duty of care is demonstrated in responses to optional questions in the survey for this research, relating to risks of being a journalist. In separate questions, respondents were asked whether they had ever been warned that newsgathering could be hazardous to their physical and mental health. In each case, those who responded were asked to nominate who had provided such warnings, with 52 per cent of survey respondents nominating their employer had warned them of such risks. This was the highest figure in both cases, indicating there is knowledge at an organisational or corporate level about the potential harm associated with exposure to trauma in Australian journalism. However, Dadouch & Lilly (2021) found journalists felt "powerless" to change their cycle of trauma and could therefore suffer from a form of institutional betrayal, exacerbating their psychological distress:

> A journalist expecting their news organization to assist after a traumatic work assignment can experience betrayal when the organization sweeps it under the

> rug, or worse, when the journalist gets punished for raising such concerns. (Dadouch & Lilly 2021, p. 957)

In contrast, only 5 per cent of the survey participants who responded to this set of questions said they had been warned about the risks of reporting to their mental and physical health by their university. Dworznik and Garvey (2018, pp. 3, 5) argue that trauma training should be conducted at university level, as journalists are likely to encounter trauma early in their careers, and adequate preparation for the job would prevent some of the most talented from leaving journalism. Australian journalists are eager for change:

> I know people who have killed themselves. I know people who have died from substance abuse, directly and indirectly. I know people whose careers have collapsed because of the effects of their reporting. And not all of it was war reporting—some of it was reporting in Australia … it's just such a huge, gaping hole in our industry and I think people's lives are being lost, careers are being ruined, families are being broken up because of a failure to adequately address this issue. Both on the part of individuals and companies. (Participant 61)

> I think there does need to be a bit of a reckoning within newsrooms about how they deal with their people … I think there's just not been that reckoning yet, about how much the role has changed and what that actually means for people. Obviously, a lot of it is because of the way journalism has changed and media organisations kind of contracted over the past 20 or 30 years as well, but [I know] so many people that are leaving, particularly in their early thirties, really. It seems [like] there's so many people who are leaving the profession. I think a big part of that is just burnout … But they've not done everything they could to protect those people. (Participant 60)

These responses indicate a growing desire for greater awareness of the demands of Australian journalism by newsroom managers.

## Summary

This section has outlined a series of themes emerging from the quantitative and qualitative results of this research, particularly in terms of the risks posed to journalists when they cover traumatic stories. Australian journalists report being traumatised by stories they cover to an extent where such exposure is also widespread. They also report additional stressors of feeling

as though they are never “off duty”, while stories involving children, concurrent personal issues and working amid the COVID-19 pandemic have also proved challenging. Consistent with findings overseas, this research has found Australian journalists are also likely to have experienced trauma early in their careers. Further, industry responses to these challenges demonstrated the use of emotional labour through emphasis on journalists’ management of emotions in the workplace, emphasis on “humanity” and empathy in the context of the professional norm of objectivity, and the deferral of emotion. Finally, other themes in terms of newsroom leadership include their experiences of perceived occupational support when facing threats or attack, and frustration at existing journalistic practice in managing trauma amid a growing awareness of trauma-informed reporting.

## 5.4 Conflict, Consequence and Currency: A traumatic mix

The idea of what makes news or what makes an event newsworthy has long been a source of fascination and dispute, and while seldom consciously employed by journalists on the road (Meadows & Ewart 2001), academics employ a series of tests to help students determine what is newsworthy from any given set of facts. The tests are confined to the editorial or journalistic merit of a story, as distinct from ethical or other considerations. They developed from the influential work of researchers Galtung and Ruge (1965) who set out to determine how to define and categorise which events and stories become news. Despite the arguments of others outlining the shortcomings of employing a blend of cognitive psychology and signals theory (Tiffen 2020), its replacement to some extent by algorithms (Burns & Matthews 2002) and Galtung himself recanting from this theory (Haagerup 2019), it is yet to be replaced in terms of news theory. The concepts originally identified by Galtung and Ruge have, however, been adapted and developed considerably since their inception. News values can vary in terms of their names, but generally speaking they refer primarily to the following criteria (Conley & Lamble 2006, p. 83):

1. Impact, consequence or significance
2. Conflict
3. Timeliness
4. Proximity
5. Prominence
6. Currency
7. Human interest

8. The unusual.

Key research questions for this research sought to determine whether an identifiable news value or values may be associated with traumatic or stressful assignments. These included: RQ3 “Are stories with the news values of Consequence and Conflict more likely to be traumatic for the journalists covering them?” and RQ4: “Test if a previously developed Story Category Matrix (see Appendix C) has some relationship to the previous question, in other words, does the Story Category Matrix have some relationship to these values in a way that will be useful to journalists?”

The news value of Consequence is one of three considered in the analysis of stories involving trauma by Australian journalists. This news value can involve “how a change in any system affects those involved in its web and what effects those changes may have” (Burns & Matthews 2002, p. 66). Also known as Impact, Relevance and Significance, the term Consequence was favoured in this research over “Impact” to avoid confusion between the impact on the reader/listener/viewer and on the journalist, who is the subject and title of this research.

Conflict in news terms is often used beyond the literal sense of war, combat or even car accidents to involve stories such as those of sport or politics, where the conflict may be symbolic, stylised, rhetorical, or ideological. It also applies in a more general sense:

> Conflict is present in news that “afflicts the comfortable” by making them anxious or guilty. It is also what is meant by the tabloid dictum to “anchor every story to its emotional base”. (Burns & Matthews 2002, p. 67)

Currency can be described as being related to a trend, or how “hot” an issue is at a specific time, according to Conley and Lamble (2006, p. 95) and Burns and Matthews (2002, p. 67), and is applicable to the issues-based content arising from hard news. The fact that it describes the concept of a trend in news coverage indicates some repetition of subject matter, and when applied in the context of trauma would indicate heightened risk of a journalist’s exposure to traumatic stories. Both concepts of repetition and cumulative trauma were mentioned by survey and interview respondents:

> There’s the cumulative impact of the things that are considered more traumatic, like crime and all that. (Participant 34)

> In some respects, repeating things can embed the kind of trauma, can embed things or it can make you quite hardened to what you see. (Participant 122)

> There is a cumulative build-up of emotion relating to the events I have witnessed or been involved in. (Participant 19)

> I was shoe-horned into counselling after a particular fortnight where I covered 10 deaths and 10 funerals (Participant 31)

> When you add it all up, I'd done three drownings within a 10-day period. (Participant 44)

> It was probably then that the cameraman would be like, "Oh, so we did 16 fatalities and 16 of this and 20 of this", you know. (Participant 48)

> Over time I have developed more coping mechanisms and a better understanding of my emotional needs. And no longer working full-time I don't have to turn around and repeatedly be confronted by the trauma. (Participant 13)

This last quote provides an insight into the attendant conditions of a story featuring the news value of Currency; repeated exposure to trauma without adequate opportunity to prepare, reflect on the experience or recover. The speed with which some respondents reported being required to cover the same types of traumatic stories in a relatively short space of time, or witnessing their colleagues doing so suggests images of a revolving door, the barrel of a revolver handgun, or a milk churn. Little wonder, then, one interview participant described their workplace as "churning and burning" through journalists without regard for the effect such repeated exposure had on their mental health, and its resultant quality of reporting. This imagery was so powerful it forms the title for this research.

The news value of Unusualness, Novelty or the "oh gosh!" factor "contradicts current trends" (Conley & Lamble 2006, p. 97) and may be anything unexpected or out of the ordinary. But this categorisation does not answer the question of why two stories can both be assigned the same news values of conflict, prominence and the unusual, for example, but one ends up on the front page and the other as a two-paragraph brief on page 12. Conley and Lamble (2006, p. 78) argue that news, "like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder", indicating the inculcation of © through socialisation into journalism norms and culture, may provide an answer to this. Sheridan Burns (2006, p. 33) provides further insight: "Young journalists are encouraged to

hone their developing ‘news sense’ by testing the value of a news angle against the interests of a mythical citizen.”

As previously mentioned, the news value of proximity might initially appear to be relevant in stories where journalists are also affected by the phenomenon on which they are reporting, however this news value describes the distance between the event and the reader (Zhong & Newhagen 2009), as opposed to the event and the journalist. This research is concerned with the effect an event, or its coverage, has on the journalist.

Further categorisation might therefore be useful in eliminating some variance caused by the category definitions of the Story Category Matrix (see Appendix C), which adds to news values a means of describing and codifying stories in terms of scale. These are defined as:

Category 1: Affecting one to five people or one family

Category 2: Affecting segments of or an entire community

Category 3: Affecting segments of or an entire community, and where the journalist is personally affected

Category 4: Affecting an entire state or nation(s)

When considering the types of stories that would apply in terms of scale and their news values, based on their ubiquity, Category 1 stories were considered to involve primarily the news value of conflict. However, in response to both the survey and semi-structured interviews, Australian journalists often referred to the frequency with which they were required to cover these types of stories. Three of the 12 interview participants mentioned covering a “spate” of the same types of stories and referred to the toll on them of doing so. This concept of a “spate” or trend satisfies the news value of Currency. It also carries an attendant risk for the journalist, as repeated exposure to certain types of stories can lead to a greater risk of trauma, which can by its nature be cumulative. For example, stories involving children can constitute a high trauma risk for journalists (Lee, Ha & Pae 2018; Smith, Drevo & Newman 2017), but when these stories also contain a high Currency value, as described above, the risk of trauma can be even greater due to greater exposure (Smith, Drevo & Newman 2017).

When analysing the examples provided by respondents to the survey, the news value of Consequence was used to determine whether an example provided fitted a particular Story Matrix Category based on the scale of those affected (see Table 30). While considering the

news value of Conflict, the degree to which that impact may be felt was also considered. For example, one person may have been affected by a car accident though injury, which would have been considered a Category 1 story. However, if that consequence involved death, the story was almost always considered a Category 2 story and was considered a greater risk of trauma to the journalist. Therefore, when considered in terms of the risk of trauma for a journalist, the news values of Currency and Conflict can be applied to the Story Category Matrix in every category, while other news values may apply to Category 4 stories in particular.

**Table 29** Relevant news values applied to Story Category Matrix scale

| Story Category | Scale | Associated News Value |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | Affecting 1-5 people or one family | Conflict<br>Currency |
| 2 | Affecting segments of or an entire community | Conflict<br>Consequence<br>Currency |
| 3 | Affecting segments of or an entire community | Conflict<br>Consequence<br>Currency |
| 4 | Affecting an entire State or nation(s) | Consequence<br>Currency<br>The Unusual<br>Conflict<br>Timeliness<br>Proximity<br>Human Interest |

This research has used contemporary journalism theory, specifically the use of news values, to analyse Australian journalists' experiences of trauma in a way that is familiar to journalism students and practitioners alike, due to its being both a theoretical and occupational construct (Paulussen & Van Aelst, 2021). Though perhaps not consciously employed on the road or in newsrooms (Meadows & Ewart, 2001), it is nonetheless an important tool to determine the editorial merit of a story, as distinct from other intrinsic or ethical considerations. Further, this research asked whether the prevalence of the news values of Consequence and Conflict was more likely to lead Australian journalists to experience news reporting conditions that could lead to symptoms of trauma (RQ3). While this was demonstrated to an extent, the application of a third news value—Currency—may play an even greater role in indicating risk of trauma to Australian journalists due to its repetitive nature. It may therefore provide an immediate indicator of the risk of repeated (and therefore cumulative) exposure to journalism trauma.

## 5.5 Why context matters (and it's not what you think)

Those taking part in a series of semi-structured interviews identified several issues arising from their coverage of traumatic assignments. These included being "never off duty", repetition versus immersion, stories involving children, COVID-19 and concurrent personal issues. However, in attempting to explain why some stories affected them more deeply than others, several interview respondents discussed "context" and their work.

In journalism, context is usually used in a literal or editorial sense—that is, referring to the setting or background of a speech or interview from which quotes are extracted for a story, thus enabling the reader to interpret presented information. In professional practice, literal reporting of context aids in lending interpretation or meaning to a quote or news story. Randall (2016, p. 32) describes the opposite practice, or "judiciously selecting information that is then presented out of its true setting", which leads to inaccurate reporting and is considered unethical.

Journalists who took part in this research used the word in terms of their own trauma, as part of an explanation for its effect on them. The word "context" in these cases was not used in terms of media effects—that is, applied to the reader, listener or viewer—but for the journalists. When asked to describe a story they "couldn't forget", Australian journalists described a variety of stories in terms of their content, with more than one noting:

> It can be very difficult to know which are the stories that are going to impact you the worst. (Participant 60)

There were, however, similarities in the journalists themselves when speaking of these experiences. First, the journalists were often relatively young when the traumatic story occurred. Two described gruesome car accidents they had attended when they were in their late teens or early twenties, which is consistent with Hill, Luther and Slocum's (2020, p. 65) findings that "journalists can often recount in detail the first traumatic story they covered":

> I could relate to it on so many levels because it was a neighbourhood I knew, my baby brother was that age, and I wasn't psychologically—or in any way—expecting that this was going to happen. Nobody said to me, "This is what you might see; bear this in mind." It was just, "This is what you're sent out to do." (Participant 44)

> In a way I think trauma is more damaging [when it is] potentially out of context. In Africa, in the Middle East, in Somalia, in the front line you expect people to be hurt—to see people who are suffering, because that's why you're there … I think that trauma is something that anybody who works in this business is likely to come across and likely to encounter in ways that they don't really expect. Young reporters will cover fatal car accidents or natural disasters … They can be as traumatic as anything I might have experienced on a front line, perhaps even more so, because seeing someone shot in a battle zone is hardly a surprise. Seeing someone shot in suburban Brisbane, or Adelaide as it was back then, is traumatic because you just don't expect it. (Participant 122)

In both cases above, the journalists' expression also describes their inadequate preparation for what they were about to see, as it was not anticipated, or it occurred unexpectedly. This type of exposure can also occur if the journalist is diverted from another assignment (Lyall 2012, p. 29) or arrives at a scene before emergency services (Ricketson 2017, p. 179), such as those who arrived at the mass shooting of young children at a school in Dunblane, Scotland:

> News editors, lacking detailed knowledge of the event, were unable to brief staff. For example, less than half an hour after [gunman Thomas] Hamilton entered the school, the deputy editor of *The Scotsman*, a Scottish broadsheet, dispatched staff to 'go up to Dunblane and find out what's happening', following a 'tip off' about a shooting. (Berrington & Jemphrey 2003, pp. 230, 231)

Marais and Stuart (2005) discuss journalists' exposure to violence that was unexpected in the context of PTSD reactions. Those who displayed more mild reactions of PTSD perceived that they were "less exposed to trauma involving their colleagues, other people and unexpected violence" (Marais & Stuart 2005, p. 100) than those who were more severely affected.

In this research, while journalists of all levels of experience reported experiencing trauma, two participants had such an experience with less than two years on the road. Almost one-third, or 28 per cent, of those who responded said they had not been warned that journalism was hazardous to their physical health, while a slightly higher number (30 per cent) said they had not been warned of its risk to their mental health. Those who had received warnings said they came from employers (52 per cent) and peers (29 per cent), with Other and University attracting the least responses (14 per cent and 5 per cent respectively). While these numbers are indicative only due to a lack of statistical reliability, they provide insight into the lack of

trauma "context" Australian journalists experience, regardless of their age or experience. They are supported, however, by a 2022 survey by the union for Australian journalists, which found only 27.4 per cent of journalists surveyed believed their employer had provided adequate training or support for dangers faced on the road (Dobbie 2022). Despite the fact universities are the primary source of journalism education in Australia, few respondents nominated their university as the source of warnings of the risks of the job. This, coupled with the qualitative theme of being unprepared for traumatic stories these journalists had experienced on the road, meets the criteria established by Shay (2014, p. 183) for moral injury by an authority figure, or institutional betrayal, due to a failure to protect reporters and/or graduates. Dworznik and Garvey (2018) found that a lack of trauma preparation could expose journalists to "lasting psychological harm" and put their interview subjects at risk of harm, while Young (2011) warned that it could cause talented journalists to leave the industry. Failure to provide adequate organisational support in the form of preparation could be considered institutional betrayal, where a trusted entity such as an employer has failed to protect a worker, leading to greater risk of developing PTSD. Worse, the conditions created by such a failure can deter journalists from seeking help from their employer in future (Dadouch & Lilly 2021).

Moreover, inadequate preparation for what they were about to see left the journalists who responded with no means to fully understand what they had seen. Nor did they know how to process the images that became seared into their memory. One participant described this difficulty:

> Not to apply meaning but to draw meaning out of these kinds of situations. And that process of drawing meaning out is also a powerful coping mechanism. That it does mean that you have a tool—a way of comprehending and understanding—but you're also placing your own role in context. I think that's really important. (Participant 122)

Dworznik (2006, p. 551) argues that constructing narratives—in other words, reporters telling their own stories about their own trauma—can help them make sense of it, thus acting as a coping mechanism:

> This process put these traumatic experiences in a less malignant or less harmful light. As a result, these subjects were able to cope with their repeated exposure to traumatic incidents and return to work each day to tackle new traumatic experiences again and again.

As far back as 2005, Herbert (2005, p. 83) called for a change in journalism culture so journalists were better trained to handle "the effects of constant exposure to violence" and 17 years later, the Australian journalists' union has warned unpreparedness for dangerous situations can put journalists' lives at risk (Dobbie 2022). Commentators on the Court of Appeal finding in the first case of a journalist suing an employer for breach of duty of care have explicitly made the connection to effective trauma training:

> Complying with their duty of care appears to require that employers have meaningful training programs in place for employees and managers. (Mukherjee 2020)

Green and Sykes (2005, p. 9) articulate what is at stake:

> Journalists who are professionally prepared to deal with tragedy and horror are more likely to survive the experience—and to be able to continue to function as reporters—than those who are not. It is important that reporters be able to deal with tragedy and horror while continuing to function as reporters. The world needs to have these stories told accurately and certainly emotively—but not emotionally. Reports written emotively will evoke emotions in audience members, and that is important; reports written emotionally may transmit damage done to reporters onto their audience members, and that is dangerous.

While context matters for journalists in terms of the way they faithfully and accurately report salient information, Australian journalists who took part in this research also used this concept to indicate their perceived lack of preparedness for trauma experienced on the road.

## 5.6 Limitations

For the first time, this research has provided a way to measure the extent of trauma experienced by Australian journalists on the road and provided greater understanding of the impact trauma has on journalists, as well as some of the features those stories have in common. It is also the first to consider this phenomenon in connection with news values using a Story Category Matrix, in addition to the application of emotional labour concepts. Nonetheless, several limitations of this research exist, including the size of the sample analysed. Limited means of reaching the target cohort were available, as not all are members of the union, which functions as the only professional group for journalists in Australia. Second, not all the survey questions required a mandatory response, which resulted in a proportion of the survey responses not meeting levels of statistical reliability. At the time the

survey was designed, the reverse funnel format (Weerakkody 2015) was selected to prioritise the primary research question (B01) along with demographic data. Therefore, it is not possible to consider most of the findings representative of all Australian journalists. Future research would make all questions mandatory to ensure consistency of statistical reliability.

Another limitation of the survey was that it relied upon memory of career assignments, which could be flawed or subject to over- or under-estimation. Future research in this area could incorporate the use of diary or logbook entries, but as this type of record-keeping is not common among journalists, it may provide a deterrent to participation. Record-keeping by newsroom managers such as chiefs-of-staff, their deputies/assistants or administrative assistants might also prove useful in this regard, as discussed further in Section 6.2 below.

Further, regarding story categories, the maximum exposure to traumatic stories was limited to 20+ times in Categories 1, 2 and 4, and to 10+ times in the case of Category 3. This was due to the original nature of the research, in that no previous empirical data was located on which to base reasonable estimations of exposure. For example, exposure to Category 3 stories was previously considered “rare” (Dworznik-Hoak 2020a, p. 5), although no empirical data was available to quantify this or other categories. Future research would expand the range of possible exposure for all categories to more accurately gauge the extent of Australian journalists’ exposure to the experience of trauma over their careers.

Finally, this research did not ask questions about Australian journalists’ cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Future research would include this demographic data to ascertain how journalists from various groups of people, particularly those of Indigenous heritage, might be affected.

## 5.7 Summary

Through these findings, the extent of Australian journalists’ experience of trauma has been quantified for the first time in connection with journalistic theoretical concepts such as news values to provide a thorough understanding of the phenomenon. The results of this research indicate that the experience of trauma on the road in this cohort is widespread, and can be experienced through any story in terms of the news values of Consequence and Conflict. The news value of Currency may also play a greater role in indicating risk of trauma than first thought, as by its very nature, this value indicates repeated exposure to certain conditions, such as traumatic stressors.

This research also indicates that Australian journalists are called upon to report on stories where they are victims or subjects in much greater numbers than previously thought, proving that this experience is far from rare.

There is little evidence from the experiences of this cohort that Australian newsrooms have the expertise to adequately respond to their experiences of trauma. These journalists have reported a range of responses to experiences of trauma, such as needing more recovery time between challenging stories than they were allowed, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. The effects of this work are felt through experiences of sadness and distress, anxiety, affected relationships, affected sleep or an unknown impact on journalists' personal lives. In professional terms, Australian journalists have reported that they consider leaving an assignment or job they love due to these experiences. Further, the use of alcohol as a coping mechanism and putting their emotions "behind locked doors" are evidence of a prevailing journalism culture, which is at times at odds with demands for more sensitive, trauma-informed reporting. Finally, in this research Australian journalists report being the victims of bullying or threats because of their work, and express frustration at a perceived lack of organisational support and adequate management of workplace trauma, while at the same time feeling under-prepared for trauma they have experienced on the road. Chapter 6 explores the implications of these findings by discussing how these issues can be addressed.

# 6 Conclusion and recommendations

This research set out to determine which types of stories covered by journalists on the road in Australia would cause them trauma, and how journalists were affected by this experience, and the extent to which it happens. This information can help provide insights into the conditions under which Australian journalists experience a story they find traumatic, and how many times in a career they might do so. Knowing more about these key issues can help inform and assist journalism educators and the industry itself in how journalists are prepared for and managed in their work, as well as provide direction for further research.

This research employed a mixed methods design in data collection and analysis to determine what kinds of stories journalists consider traumatic (RQ1) and the effect this had on them (RQ2). It also asked journalists to estimate how often they cover these traumatic stories and how often they had been personally affected by stories they cover. To determine the impact of this work, journalists' responses in a total of 73 completed surveys and 12 interviews were analysed using both qualitative and quantitative methods. Specifically, this impact was analysed by categorising different types of news stories and their respective news values (RQ3), and using these categories to count and classify responses from the survey and interviews (RQ4). This research has determined that the experience of trauma is widespread among those who responded, while the experience of a journalist who is personally affected by the stories they cover is not as rare as previously thought. Journalism educators and the industry generally can benefit from greater insight into the conditions under which Australian journalists experience trauma and the effect this has upon them. This knowledge can inform and assist in the preparation and management of journalists for exposure to trauma, as well as provide direction for future research. The results of this thesis have been considered in four main themes:

- Impact on journalists
- Newsroom leadership
- Industry attitudes and responses
- Trauma risk: Who is more likely to experience trauma on the road?

### *6.1 Impact on journalists*

Although the issue of trauma has been of concern to Australian journalism researchers such as Place (1992), Suiter (2001), Castle (1999, 2002) and Green (2005, 2008, 2004, 2005), it remains a comparatively under-researched phenomenon. Psychology research from McMahon (2001, 2010, 2016, 2019) and MacDonald (2018, 2017, 2016) has also contributed to the understanding of journalism trauma in an Australian setting. Other developments in trauma awareness, including support from organisations such as Mindframe, Beyond Blue and the Dart Centre for Journalism and Trauma, have been welcomed, but journalists' desire for change remains strong. This research found the problem of journalism trauma remains acute, with 82 per cent of those who responded to the survey saying they had experienced trauma due to their work. This is consistent with experiences of their counterparts in other countries, where an estimated 80–100 per cent of US journalists have suffered trauma (Dworznik 2006; Feinstein, Owen & Blair 2002; Newman, Simpson & Handschuh 2003), with responses varying in terms of symptoms, severity and duration.

Further, covering domestic events (that is, assignments close to a journalist's home or in their country of origin) is also potentially traumatic for the journalists who responded to this survey, as evidenced by responses to more common "bread-and-butter" assignments involving car crashes and violence. This research demonstrates that ubiquity of story subject is no guarantee of immunity from trauma for these journalists.

This research has also found a significant number of Australian journalists who took part in this research (35 per cent of those who responded to this non-compulsory question) are simultaneously victims and news-bearers of the same stories (Embelton et al. 2003; Green, McLellan & McMahon 2005; Herbert 2005; Hollings 2005; Lu 2019; Muller 2010; Suiter 2001). A striking example of this phenomenon emerged late in 2022 from a housing shortage in regional Australia, which outlined the experiences of 10 young journalists who had difficulty finding somewhere to live in the country towns on which they reported. One reporter managed to secure a mortgage with her brother to support her parents, one of whom was terminally ill:

> But the challenges of keeping that up … mean I'm working a second job at the local pub pouring beers … I'm working 8.30 am to 5 pm all day and then 6 to 9 pm four days a week. I'm definitely feeling burnt out. (Tomazin, quoted in Whitfield 2022)

That this reporter has expressed feeling burnt out at such an early stage in her career is of concern, as female reporters with the fewest years of experience at small newspapers are most at risk of burnout (MacDonald et al. 2016). While research on journalism burnout has been conducted (MacDonald et al. 2016, Reinardy 2011), it is not possible to determine whether the phenomenon of reporters being simultaneously victims and news-bearers of the same event is an emerging or developing issue, as no known studies were available specifying how rare this phenomenon might be (Dworznik-Hoak 2020, p. 5). The finding of this research has major implications for the care and management of reporters by Australian news organisations. In the case of a journalist who discloses a personal connection to a story (e.g. self or family member/s affected, home town/suburb, similar experience) to management/supervisors, it is recommended that sensitive and careful supervision should be provided, including:

a. welfare checks from peers or other staff member nominated by the journalist

b. provision of time off or a pause in reporting on that story, if requested

c. adequate breaks during the assignment

d. alteration to the assignment, if requested.

Further, Australian journalists who took part in this research were required to cover events of a catastrophic, extreme, or highly charged nature more often over the course of their career than anticipated when this research was initially designed. Almost one-third of those who responded indicated they had covered these types of stories up to five times in their career, while just under one-third also estimated doing so up to 10 times. Five people, or 10 per cent of those who responded to the research, estimated that they had covered stories of this nature more than 20 times over the course of their career. These estimations ought to be of grave concern to newsroom managers, as the cumulative nature of trauma is well established (Backholm & Björkqvist 2010; Browne, Evangeli & Greenberg 2012; Dadouch & Lilly 2021; Dworznik-Hoak 2020a; Herbert 2005; Marais & Stuart 2005; McFarlane & Bryant 2007; Pyevich, Newman & Daleiden 2003). Close attention should therefore be given to assignments where journalists' exposure to a story's subject matter is frequently repeated. In these cases, best practice recommends reprieve from the assignment if the journalist considers it helpful (Dworznik-Hoak 2020a, p. 15) to help reporters reduce and manage stress. This reprieve may be obtained by assigning a story to a different reporter in consultation with the individual or allocating the journalist to a different round or even newsroom. Good management of journalists extends beyond the provision of an Employee Assistance Program to considerations of assignment

duration, assignment content repetitions and workload. It is recommended that support similar to that described in points a), b), c) and d) above should be offered to journalists on assignments requiring extended time on one traumatic story subject, or where the same information is repeated in the course of a traumatic assignment, e.g. follow up stories and/or successive broadcast bulletins. Specifically, journalists should not be required to report follow-up stories after a traumatic experience, unless they wish.

This research has also shown that covering a story or event that involves children in negative ways is likely to cause these Australian journalists distress and possibly trauma. Comments by survey respondents explicitly mentioned difficulty in dealing with stories involving children, particularly those about death, serious injury or abuse, while eight out of 12 interview subjects spontaneously mentioned this issue in semi-structured interviews. These findings support previous research from around the world that considered these stories among the most stressful for a journalist to cover (Kotisova 2019; Lee, Ha & Pae 2018; Seely 2019; Smith, Drevo & Newman 2017), while a psychometric scale to measure work-related trauma for journalists includes stories involving children as a factor in experiencing trauma. As this is an enduring issue for journalists, the welfare of journalists involved in the coverage of such stories should therefore be monitored closely.

Further research is needed into the impact of traumatic stories on the journalists who cover them. In particular, specific research is needed into the compounding effect of traumatic exposure, to determine whether journalists experience multiple traumatising experiences as they gather, report on and return to these stories in follow-up or multiple live cross assignments. Knowing more about the effects of such assignments would enable newsroom leadership and universities to more effectively prepare and manage journalists working in an already-stressful work environment.

### *6.2 Newsroom leadership*

The welfare of journalists at work has become an increasing focus for researchers in a digital age, but comparatively little research has been conducted in Australia on journalists' attitudes on the provision of workplace support since McMahon's (2001) pilot study into journalism trauma. McMahon found some journalists believed management should recognise the extent of trauma experienced by their employees (McMahon 2001, p. 54), while US research found management support was crucial in helping journalists recover from trauma (Beam & Spratt 2009). This research found more than half of the Australian journalists surveyed did not even answer when asked whether the support they received from their employer during a story by

which they were traumatised was adequate. Of those who did respond, a quarter said employer support was inadequate and less than one-fifth (18.3 per cent) thought the support they received was adequate. It is also evident from this research that Australian journalists' safety at work—regardless of whether or not they are on the road, and particularly for women—is primarily the responsibility of news organisations. While there has been adequate research to establish the need for greater protection for female journalists in particular (Ferrier 2019; Posetti, Harrison & Waisbord 2020), this research found that three-quarters of the women and half the men who responded to the survey question said they had been bullied, threatened or harassed at work, either physically or online. Such experiences indicate an acute problem for Australian journalists and therefore, for their employers. Considering these findings, greater organisational support is needed for Australian journalists. As several survey comments included the use of an existing counselling service, or an Employee Assistance Program, the proportion of those indicating inadequate employer support suggests this should extend to other measures. Responses to trauma are highly individual (McMahon 2016, 2019), so is recommended that newsrooms consult their employees at regular intervals on the adequacy and efficacy of existing workplace support. Secondly, it is recommended that records of each journalist's assignments be kept in an assignment diary or logbook, to monitor individuals' potential exposure to trauma as part of the employer's duty of care to their staff in keeping with Gaba's (1991) recommendations. Copies of this record should be made available to the staff member concerned if requested, as well as union and/or mental health professionals nominated by the journalist, and reviewed every three months to identify risk of trauma exposure, and obviate risk of moral injury through institutional or management betrayal. Widespread and consistent use of logbooks by both journalists and their employers would also enable future research to elicit data based on actual, rather than estimated, trauma exposure, and enable comparisons between the two sources. To that end, further research is needed into the efficacy of such record-keeping as a means of monitoring journalists' trauma exposure. Thirdly, it is recommended that specific training in understanding the impact of journalism trauma should be given to those in newsroom leadership such as Chiefs of Staff or duty editors, to facilitate greater consideration to the related matters of journalists' workload due to the cyclical and immersive nature of journalism itself.

### *6.3 Industry attitudes and responses*

Despite previous research that found Australian journalists were positivist and empiricist in their attitudes and identified strongly with the journalistic norms of objectivity and detachment (Hanusch 2008, 2016), this research has found these Australian journalists

nonetheless broke these norms at times and identified with or empathised with their story subjects. They share such behaviour with their overseas counterparts (Simpson, Coté & Scherer 2006). Australian journalists in this research have expressed such empathy for those they interview, especially in highly charged or sensitive situations—also consistent with their counterparts in the United States (Dworznik & Garvey 2018). Yet the inner conflict this causes them and the effort to manage it in the long term, through the use of emotional labour, may put them at risk of mental harm (Dworznik-Hoak 2020a). According to responses to both the survey and interviews, Australian journalists can and do change roles or leave the industry altogether in response to their traumatic experiences on the road. This is corroborated by US research (Huxford & Hopper 2020), while others change roles or leave due to burnout (Monteiro, Marques Pinto & Roberto 2016; Murphy 2022; Reinardy 2011). In an echo of the title of this thesis, a social media post (Siebert, 2023) described unpaid overtime "as a way of life" for some at Australia's national broadcaster, despite "wilful blindness" by its management:

> Meanwhile, the ABC is upskilling, burning out and churning out people who may have become long term assets to the organisation, had they been offered sustainable conditions, career progression and some kind of job security. (Siebert, 2023)

This post exemplifies findings of this research which indicate an enduring issue for Australian journalists, and further research is needed into the extent of Australian journalists' decisions to change roles or exit the industry altogether due to their experiences of trauma and/or burnout. These issues have ramifications for news organisations in the identification and prevention of staff turnover and extend to their readers, viewers and listeners, who benefit from sensitive and trauma-informed reporting. Therefore, it is recommended that greater attention be given to providing appropriate support to those expressing distress to newsroom managers, particularly in methods that do not involve negative coping mechanisms traditionally associated with newsroom culture, such as the consumption of alcohol. Further, to minimise the "churn and burn" effect of journalists changing roles, self-censoring or leaving the industry due to bullying or abuse in particular (Binns, 2017), it is also recommended that Australian newsrooms provide training to employees on managing online audience interaction. This would include:

a. robust policies on when and how to report incidents of bullying, harassment or trolling online, both internally and to police and/or federal authorities

b. integration of corporate social media policies with those relating to trauma (as described above), so adequate duty of care is provided to journalists who report physical or online incidents

c. reasonable expectations of time spent posting and engaging with audiences online, including formal recognition of the right to "switch off" devices or pause engagement

d. partnering journalists on the road with dedicated online content producers in stories of high emotional or trauma risk. This would ensure reasonable workloads were not exceeded due to unnecessary repetition and provide opportunities for immediate and consistent peer support, in addition to mentoring and other trauma support outlined above. These producers would also receive sufficient training in trauma-informed reporting. In small or regional organisations, this would mean partnering journalists on the road with an editor or senior journalist who would act in this capacity.

### *6.4 Trauma risk: Who is more likely to experience trauma on the road?*

This research set out to determine whether the prevalence of the news values of Consequence and Conflict were more likely to lead Australian journalists to experience news reporting conditions that could lead to symptoms of trauma. While this was demonstrated to an extent, the application of a third news value—Currency—to Consequence and Conflict—may play an even greater role in indicating risk of trauma to Australian journalists due to its repetitive nature. The three news values of Consequence, Conflict and Currency therefore provide a key theoretical indicator that may be a useful tool for universities in particular in terms of helping journalism students to identify the possible future risk of exposure to traumatic conditions. Australian researchers such as Barnes (2015) have acknowledged attempts to develop trauma training in tertiary courses, although with inconsistent results. Trauma literacy education remains a challenge for Australian universities (Wake, Smith & Ricketson, 2023) and those around the world (Newman, Madrigal & Hight, 2023). It has also been perceived as being focused on how to cover victims (Hill, Luther & Slocum, 2020). Therefore, it is recommended that priority be given by Australian universities to developing consistent and thorough trauma literacy curricula:

> Otherwise, journalism instructors and media managers are letting their reporters become the frogs that slowly boil to death. (Young 2011, p. 16)

Further, it is recommended that journalists keep a work diary or logbook of stories covered for at least a three-month period every year (Gaba, 1991) in addition to any workplace assignment

diary as recommended in Section 6. 2 above. This would include details such as the subject of the story, date and location, and where appropriate, how many versions of the story the journalist was required to write. A final brief observation recording the journalist's personal response to the story should also be included. This would provide an overview of the journalist's workload and exposure in terms of repetition and/or immersion in a story subject.

This research also found while the greatest number of journalists who reported covering a story they found traumatic had worked for more than 25 years in the industry, responses were reported across all age groups. This means time in the industry, or career longevity, has little or no effect on the likelihood of experiencing a traumatic reporting assignment, as newcomers through to newsroom veterans reported having had at least one such experience. An explanation for this may be found in the interview responses, which were consistent with previous research in demonstrating this experience is likely to occur early in a journalist's career (Dworznik & Garvey 2018; Hill, Luther & Slocum 2020; McMahon 2001). These findings also remain consistent with those of Tyson and Wild (2021), McMahon (2001), and Simpson, Coté and Scherer (2006) in particular, that repeated exposure increases the likelihood of reporting trauma. Correspondingly, age does not appear to be a risk factor for this group in whether an Australian journalist is likely to experience trauma, as respondents in each age category overwhelmingly said they had experienced a traumatic event at work. These findings indicate an acute problem for Australian journalists. Due to the vulnerability of younger journalists and those beginning their careers, it is recommended that newsrooms pay particular attention to their mentoring and support, through the formal pairing of junior editorial staff with a more experienced, senior journalist. In the case of very small newsrooms, this pairing may be with a staff member at a different work site or city and integrated with existing peer support programs. Employers also bear a responsibility to both monitor and manage their employees' wellbeing in response to work-related trauma. This should include monitoring journalists' responses to traumatic assignments, especially those involving death or serious injury, using the sensitive supervision recommendations in Section 6.1 above.

### *6.5 Conclusion*

When this research began, no one had ever heard of COVID-19. Now it is hard to remember what life was like without it. The pandemic has interrupted, coloured and influenced this research in direct and indirect ways, and not least, added yet another context in which journalism trauma can occur. Since 2020 in particular, the development of understanding in emotional labour in journalism has also been pivotal to providing a framework and vocabulary

with which to describe journalists' experiences of trauma. Without it, a phenomenological understanding of journalism trauma would not have been possible to describe unless through the lens of psychological or psychiatric terms, restricting research such as this to observations of "symptoms of trauma" only.

Despite the limitations of this research, it builds on previous findings by Place (1992) and McMahon (2001) to suggest that the experience of trauma is an enduring, but also an acute problem for Australian journalists. In quantifying these experiences across a career, this research also suggests that a significant number of Australian journalists are simultaneously victims and news-bearers of the same stories. Further research is needed into the extent of this phenomenon in Australian newsrooms, and its effect on the work, lives and careers of those affected. This research is the first to connect elements such as exposure to the types of stories journalists cover with news values and experiences of trauma and their impact. Unfortunately, however, Australian newsrooms are still known as "the land before HR" (Harvey 2022). For this reason, it is recommended that news organisations pay particular attention to the care of their employees in such situations beyond provision of a phone helpline, and closer attention to subsequent workload and assignment requirements for them as outlined above. These findings also demonstrate that news organisations and universities have a duty to review the care and training of young journalists:

> Throughout history, newsworkers have remained anonymous though recognized elements of the production process; they are trivialized as individuals and marginalized as a class of workers with professional or quasi-professional aspirations. Leab (1970) quoted an editor who described newsworkers during the 1920s and early 1930s as individuals who "give all that is in them to the service of their employers and when they are old and worn out, they are cast adrift like battered wrecks." He added, "The luckier ones die young. I myself was a machine and the men I worked with were cogs" (p. 6). (Hardt 1990, pp. 353, 354)

Although this quote refers to a workplace environment that is now a century old, it appears that the technology used by the journalists referred to here may be all that has changed. The results of this thesis also demonstrate the need for further research to determine with further precision how many Australian journalists experience trauma in the course of their work, and the conditions under which it occurs. It is time that "worn-out" journalists are no longer cast adrift or allowed to die young if they are lucky. It is time to correct course and sail Australian journalism toward a safer harbour.

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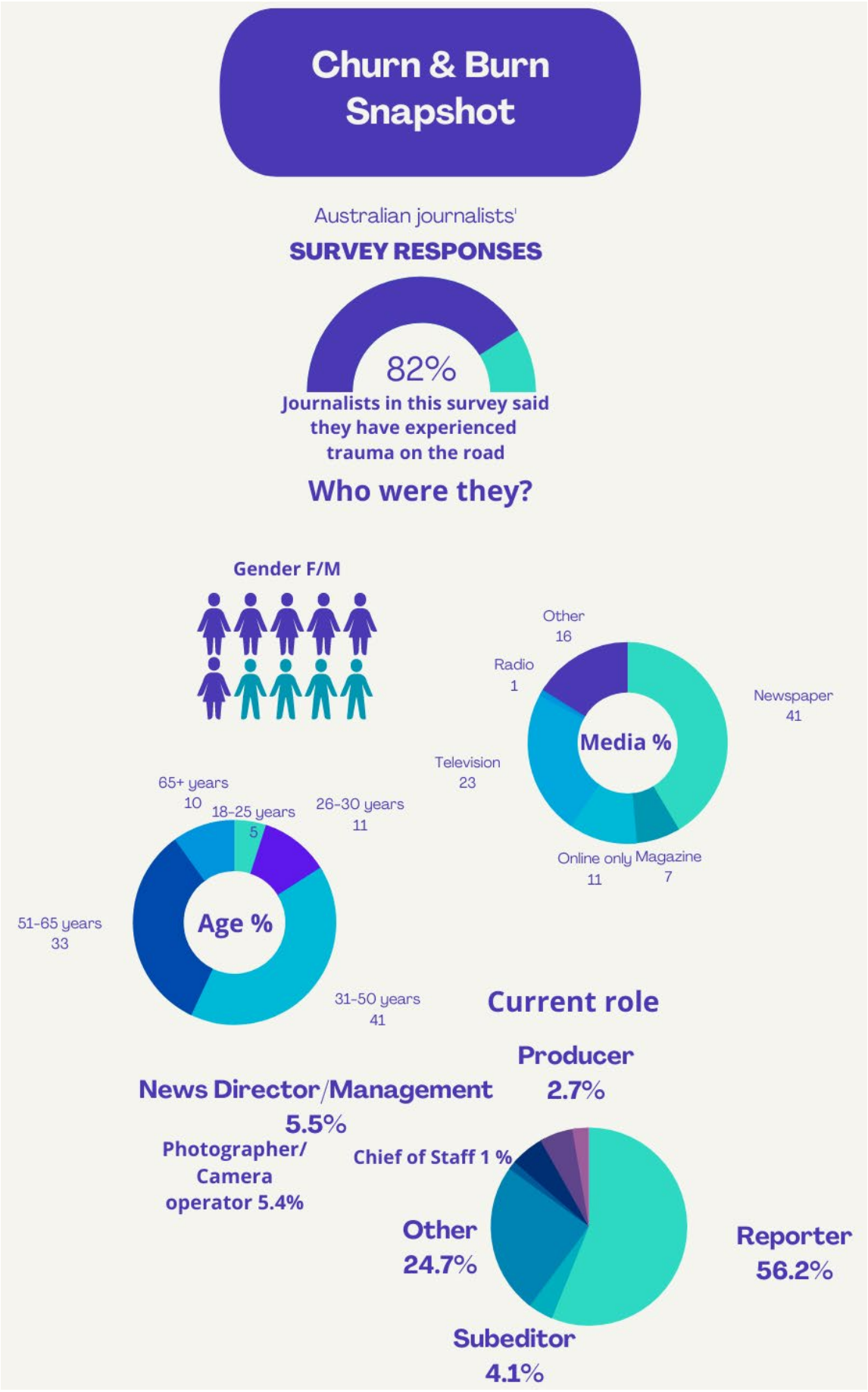
# Appendix A: Demographic data

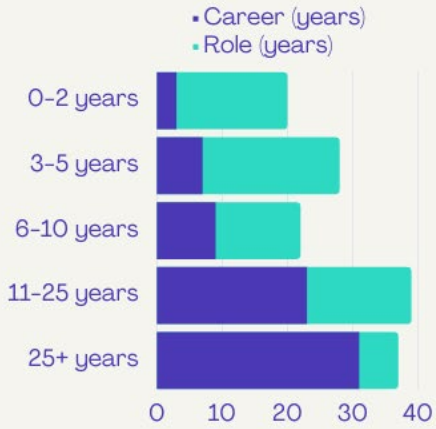


# Churn & Burn Snapshot

## By the numbers

Australian journalists'

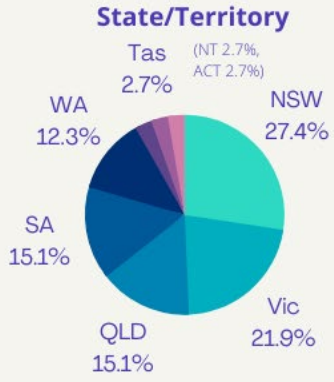
**ONLINE SURVEY RESPONSES**



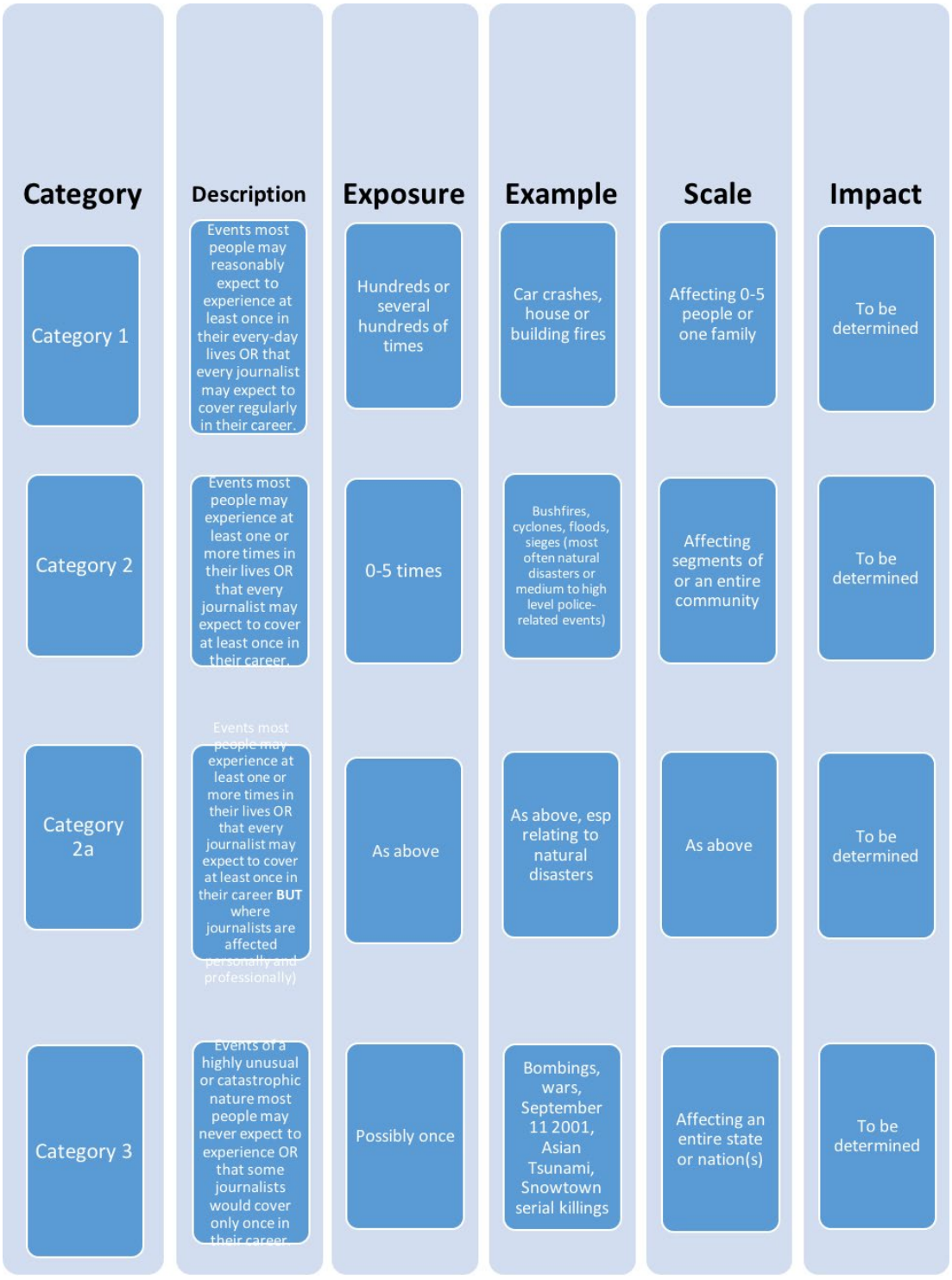






# Appendix B: Trauma Category Matrix



# Appendix C: Story Category Matrix

## STORY CATEGORY MATRIX

| | Description | Exposure | Example | Scale | Impact |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | REGULARLY COVER | Hundreds/Several hundreds of times | Car crashes, house or building fires | Affecting 1-5 people | 4th highest: Sleep & Dreams/Unsure |
| 2 | COVER AT LEAST ONCE | 0-5 times | Disasters, violent, extreme or distressing subject | Affecting segments of/entire community | 3rd highest: Impact on Relationships |
| 3 | COVER & PERSONALLY AFFECTED | 0-5 times | As above and personally affected | As above | 2nd highest: Anxiety |
| 4 | RARELY IF EVER COVER | Possibly once | Catastrophic/Unprecedented | Affecting entire state/nation(s) | Highest: Sadness & distress |

# Appendix D: Individual Story Category Matrix example

## STORY CATEGORY MATRIX

Participant 57

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | REGULARLY COVER | 20+ times | Car crashes, house or building fires | Affecting 1-5 people | |
| 2 | COVER AT LEAST ONCE | 20+ times | Murders, car accidents, child abuse court hearings. Covering the sentencing hearing for Anthony Robert Harvey, who stabbed and clubbed his family to death. | Affecting segments of/entire community | Speaking about the sentencing of Harvey made me feel occasionally emotional. |
| 3 | COVER & PERSONALLY AFFECTED | 1-5 times | I have personally known murder victims whose killers were subjected to the justice system (and sentenced). I had no involvement in the actual coverage. | As above | None really except it did make me more aware of how families and friends deal with such issues. |
| 4 | RARELY IF EVER COVER | 20+ times | Covering the refugees from East Timor in 1999. Dealing with the survivors and relatives of the first Bali bombing. | Affecting entire state/nation(s) | A lingering feeling of sadness and concern about various incidents, and how the people impacted are coping. |

# Appendix E: Participant Information Sheet

Dear Participant

For research for my PhD thesis, "Trauma 'On the Road': investigating the risk and impact of traumatic assignments on journalists in Australia" I am seeking survey and interview participants.

This research aims to investigate and understand the risk and traumatic impact reporting "on the road" has on Australian journalists. The impact the research examines concerns the effects of the assignment on the journalist, not whether the assignment itself was of a traumatic or serious nature. The risk examined concerns exposure to a trauma response, as described by symptoms experienced by a journalist.

If you take part in the interview component of the research, I would like to interview you for your views on these issues. The wider goal is to improve the reporting of traumatic events as a whole, for both journalists and the wider community.

**Participation**

If you choose to participate, you will be asked to complete an online survey of about 20 minutes' duration. Within the survey you will be asked to indicate if you are interested in taking part in a follow-up interview requiring 30 to 60 minutes of your time. The interview would be conducted by telephone or at a location of your choice.

Your participation in this project is voluntary. Please note that, should you choose to withdraw from the interview component of the study, you have two weeks after the submission of your responses to request that your data be removed from the study. Your decision about whether or not to participate will in no way impact upon your current or future relationship with myself or University of South Australia.

**Expected benefits**

This research will contribute to the understanding of the responses journalists have to certain stories they cover 'on the road'. This area of professional practice is under-researched in Australia. Your contribution will add to knowledge about journalism that is being developed world-wide.

**Risks and Confidentiality**

The researcher will take every care to remove responses from any identifying material as early as possible unless you specifically advise me that you wish to be named. Likewise, individuals' responses will be kept confidential by the researcher and not be identified in the reporting of the research unless specifically asked. However, the researcher cannot guarantee the confidentiality or anonymity of material transferred by email or the internet.

The interview will be audio or video recorded. A certified transcription of your interview will be retained for five years, and the data will be stored in password-controlled files on the computers of the chief investigator of the research. The transcripts will thus not be available to anyone other than the researcher and her academic supervisors. The transcription records will be identifiable to the researcher and her academic supervisors, unless you wish your name to be masked. If so, your name will be removed from the transcription and re-identifiable by a code that is only available to researcher and her academic supervisors. All records containing personal information will remain confidential and no information which could lead to identification of any individual will be released, unless required by law OR if individuals will be able to be identified.

If you would like to receive a copy of the final published research, please indicate by providing your email address to the researcher.

If at any time you would like to seek support as a consequence of this research, you are encouraged to seek assistance from your organisation's Employee Assistance Program or the University of South Australia's counselling service on 1300 107 441.

**Questions / further information about the project**

Please feel free to ask the researcher above if you have any questions or require further information about the project.

**Concerns / complaints regarding the conduct of the project**
This project has been approved by the University of South Australia's Human Research Ethics Committee. The institutions involved in this research are committed to researcher integrity and the ethical conduct of research projects. However, if you do have any concerns or complaints about the ethical conduct of the project you may contact the University of South Australia Research Ethics Officer on 08 8302 3118 or email her on **vicki.allen@unisa.edu.au**. **The Researcher Ethics Officer is not connected with the research project and can facilitate a resolution to your concern in an impartial manner.**

**Consent to Participate**

Please complete the Statement of Consent (below) to confirm your agreement to participate.
In signing this form, I confirm that:

- I have read the Participant Information Sheet, and the nature and the purpose of the research project has been explained to me. I understand and agree to take part.
- I understand that I may not directly benefit from taking part in the project.
- I understand that I can withdraw from the study at any stage and that this will not affect my status now or in the future.
- I confirm that I am over 18 years of age.
- I understand that I will be audiotaped or videotaped if I participate in the interview component of the study
- I understand that the recording(s) will be retained and stored at the University of South Australia's password-controlled computer storage system and backed up to USB, which will be stored securely in a locked office in accordance with University of South Australia guidelines and that only members of the research team will have access.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| *Participant Signature* | *Printed Name* | *Date* |

The survey can be completed through this link:
https://canvass.acspri.org.au/n/384748?lang=en

Thank you.

Yours sincerely
Sharon Smith
Chief Investigator

# Appendix F: List of Survey Questions

| Question ID | Group / Question order | Code | Question | Question type | Group | Mandatory | Other |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 27847 | 0 / 0 | A1 | Your name | Short free text | About you | * | ⊘ |
| 27848 | 0 / 1 | A02 | Gender | Gender | About you | * | ⊘ |
| 27849 | 0 / 2 | A03 | Age | List (radio) | About you | * | |
| 27856 | 0 / 3 | A04 | Current role | List (radio) | About you | * | ⊙ |
| 27895 | 0 / 4 | A051 | Number of years working as a journalist: | List (radio) | About you | * | |
| 27857 | 0 / 5 | A05 | Length of service at current position | List (radio) | About you | * | |
| 27858 | 0 / 6 | A06 | Your location | List (radio) | About you | * | |
| 27859 | 0 / 7 | A07 | Location type | List (dropdown) | About you | * | |
| 27860 | 0 / 8 | A08 | Media | List (radio) | About you | * | ⊙ |
| 27861 | 0 / 9 | A09 | Employment status | List (radio) | About you | * | |
| 27862 | 1 / 0 | B01 | Have you covered or witnessed a traumatic event as part of your job? (That is, an event that you found traumatic, as opposed to whether someone else would have found it traumatic or whether it was considered traumatic generally.) | Yes/No | Your experience | * | ⊘ |
| 27863 | 1 / 1 | B02 | If you previously answered yes, what type of event was it? Please briefly describe: | Short free text | Your experience | | ⊘ |
| 27864 | 1 / 2 | B03 | How many times have you witnessed or covered a traumatic event over the course of your career? | List (radio) | Your experience | | |

| | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| ☐ | 27862 | 1 / 0 | B01 | event as part of your job? (That is, an event that you found traumatic, as opposed to whether someone else would have found it traumatic or whether it was considered traumatic generally.) | Yes/No | Your experience | * | ⊘ | |
| ☐ | 27863 | 1 / 1 | B02 | If you previously answered yes, what type of event was it? Please briefly describe: | Short free text | Your experience | | ⊘ | |
| ☐ | 27864 | 1 / 2 | B03 | How many times have you witnessed or covered a traumatic event over the course of your career? | List (radio) | Your experience | | | |
| ☐ | 27868 | 1 / 3 | B07 | Have you ever covered a traumatic story that affected you emotionally, or that you can't forget? | Yes/No | Your experience | * | ⊘ | |
| ☐ | 27865 | 1 / 4 | B04 | If you answered yes to the previous question (have you witnessed or covered a traumatic event as part of your job), what impact has this had on you personally, or on your family? Please describe: | Long free text | Your experience | | ⊘ | |
| ☐ | 27866 | 1 / 5 | B05 | Have you ever experienced or witnessed a traumatic event outside of work? (That is, an event that you found traumatic, as opposed to whether someone else would have found it traumatic or whether it was considered traumatic generally.) | Yes/No | Your experience | | ⊘ | |
| ☐ | 27867 | 1 / 6 | B06 | If you answered yes to the previous question (Have you ever experienced or witnessed a traumatic event outside of work), please describe: | Long free text | Your experience | | ⊘ | |
| ☐ | 27869 | 1 / 7 | B08 | If so, how many times? | List (radio) | Your experience | * | | |
| ☐ | 27870 | 1 / 8 | B09 | If you answered yes to any of the previous questions, would you like to be interviewed further about this experience? | Yes/No | Your experience | * | ⊘ | |
| ☐ | 27871 | 2 / 0 | C01 | How many times over the course of your career have you covered the following: | Array | Professional Experience | * | ⊘ | |
| | | | | Have you ever had a situation where you were affected by a story both personally and | | | | | |

| | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| ☐ | 27871 | 2 / 0 | C01 | How many times over the course of your career have you covered the following: | Array | Professional Experience | * | ⊘ | |
| ☐ | 27878 | 2 / 1 | C02 | Have you ever had a situation where you were affected by a story both personally and professionally? e.g. covered a natural disaster that you or your loved ones were also affected by. | Yes/No | Professional Experience | | ⊘ | |
| ☐ | 27879 | 2 / 2 | C021 | If you answered yes to the previous question (you were affected by a story both personally and professionally), please describe: | Long free text | Professional Experience | | ⊘ | |
| ☐ | 27880 | 2 / 3 | C03 | How many times have you have been affected by a story both personally and professionally? | List (radio) | Professional Experience | | | |
| ☐ | 27884 | 2 / 4 | C04 | What impact (if any) did this have on your ability to recover from the event? Please describe: | Long free text | Professional Experience | | ⊘ | |
| ☐ | 27881 | 2 / 5 | C05 | What impact (if any) did this have on your ability to continue to perform your duties? Please describe: | Long free text | Professional Experience | | ⊘ | |
| ☐ | 27882 | 2 / 6 | C06 | Was the support you received from your employer adequate during this time? | Yes/No | Professional Experience | | ⊘ | |
| ☐ | 27883 | 2 / 7 | C07 | What kind of support did you receive from your employer or the newsroom generally during this time? Please describe: | Long free text | Professional Experience | | ⊘ | |
| ☐ | 27885 | 2 / 8 | C08 | Has your physical health or safety ever been threatened at work or on an assignment? | List (radio) | Professional Experience | | | |
| ☐ | 27886 | 2 / 9 | C10 | Have you ever been threatened, harrassed or bullied at work? This includes sexual harrassment and online bullying/trolling. | List (radio) | Professional Experience | | | |
| ☐ | 27887 | 2 / 10 | C11 | How many times have been you been threatened, harrassed or bullied at/in the course of your work? Please estimate the number of times: | Multiple numerical input | Professional Experience | * | ⊘ | |
| ☐ | 27890 | 2 / 11 | C09 | Have you ever been warned that newsgathering could be hazardous to your physical health? | Yes/No | Professional Experience | | ⊘ | |

| | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| ☐ | 27886 | 2 / 9 | C10 | Have you ever been threatened, harrassed or bullied at work? This includes sexual harrassment and online bullying/trolling. | List (radio) | Professional Experience | | | |
| ☐ | 27887 | 2 / 10 | C11 | How many times have been you been threatened, harrassed or bullied at/in the course of your work? Please estimate the number of times: | Multiple numerical input | Professional Experience | * | ⊘ | |
| ☐ | 27890 | 2 / 11 | C09 | Have you ever been warned that newsgathering could be hazardous to your physical health? | Yes/No | Professional Experience | | ⊘ | |
| ☐ | 27891 | 2 / 12 | C12 | If you answered yes previously (you had been warned that newsgathering could be hazardous to your physical health), by whom? Please select one: | List (radio) | Professional Experience | | | |
| ☐ | 27892 | 2 / 13 | C13 | Have you ever been warned that newsgathering could be hazardous to your mental health? | Yes/No | Professional Experience | | ⊘ | |
| ☐ | 27893 | 2 / 14 | C14 | If you answered yes previously (you had been warned newsgathering could be hazardous to your mental health), by whom? | List (radio) | Professional Experience | | | |
| ☐ | 27894 | 2 / 15 | C15 | Is there any aspect of any of these answers you would like to describe further in an interview? If so, please send an email to sharon.smith@mymail.unisa.edu.au with your contact details. | Yes/No | Professional Experience | | ⊘ | |

Selected question(s)...

Displaying 1-35 of 35 result(s). 100 rows per page

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