

## Module 4 Video Class 5 - Interview with Bruce Shapiro

Hi. Welcome to module four of our course, Journalism In Pandemic: Covering COVID-19 now and in the future.

Right now, we're going to talk about something that I'm sure has been on your minds a lot, which is how to take care of yourself as you tackle this incredibly complex and daunting topic. So here for this video segment, I'm going to talk to Bruce Shapiro. He's an investigative journalist, a human rights reporter, and the executive director of the DART Center for Journalism and Trauma, which is a project of Columbia Journalism School. Bruce, thanks for coming to talk to our class.

Very glad to be here, Maryn.

First, the journalists who are taking this course come from all over the world. There are thousands of them, and I suspect that particularly those in other countries may not know about the DART Center. So could we start by having you describe a bit what the Dart Center is and what it does?

Sure. The DART Center for Journalism and Trauma is based in New York City. We are the only university-based center in the world devoted to effective, ethical, innovative reporting on violence, conflict, and tragedy all over the world. And that means a couple of things. It means on the one hand, asking what are the skills, the tools, the knowledge about psychological trauma, its impact on individuals, and families, and communities that we need in our toolkit as reporters. How do we cover not just the breaking news of crisis, but the long aftermath, the after shots of violence, of tragedy, of disaster, as they play out in the lives of families, and communities, and individuals?

That is traditionally an area neglected in journalism training and journalism practice, and we've been trying for the last 20 years to foster innovation and exciting new compassionate reporting in that area.

At the same time, when you ask, "How are people affected by trauma?" As a reporter, you stumble over the other question, which is, "What about us?" Reporters cover a lot of tragedy, a lot of difficult events, some of the most difficult events in people's lives, whether it's at the level of intimate partner violence, street crime, or war, or this pandemic, and how does that work affect us as journalists? The Dart Center has been a pioneer in researching the impact of trauma on journalists and in developing approaches to self-care, and to institutional duty of care, and community-wide peer support that journalists need to stay resilient, to cope well with enormously important and sometimes challenging assignments.

I think resilience is going to be an incredibly important aspect of what all of us as journalists do for the next months or years, perhaps, as the story rolls out. But what why is trauma a particular concern for journalists?

Well, I think there is sort of a general thing about trauma or journalism, general reasons support and there are specific issues there. You know, a lot of the worst things that happen in people's lives happen to be what is considered newsworthy, and there's a good reason for that. It's not just sensationalism. Things like murders, mass shootings, earthquakes. These are big disruptions in the social fabric, and they're also huge challenges to democracy. And in fact, if you kind of go through the list of what are the biggest decisions that societies have to make anywhere in the world: How do we take care of vulnerable people? What do we do about gender violence? What about migrants and refugees? What about the mentally ill? What about, in this case, the long aftermath of a pandemic? These go to the heart of the journalistic mission. You wouldn't send a reporter out to cover a football game who doesn't know what the rules are, what a goal is, what the ref does. And yet historically, we've sent out journalists to interview victims, to report on trials, and on all kinds of wars, all kinds of terrible events, without any knowledge or literacy about trauma. The science of trauma, how it can change our sources, how it can challenge news consumers, and how it can challenge us as journalists.

That's the general picture. And then with this pandemic, I think, which is really unprecedented in so many ways, we're dealing not only with the usual challenges of reporting on difficult events. But the inescapability of the pandemic for us in our whole lives as journalists, the craft challenges

that come with remote reporting from reporting incorporating social distancing, and in particular the combination of fear and loss with this unremitting and uncertain period of stress that all of us are coping with. People who are engaged in social distancing are worried about their loved ones they're dealing with, but for us as journalists, it includes a number of added features. So I think we need as a community of journalists to be talking about trauma both to do justice to the people we are reporting on and so that we can stay the course and bring our skills to bear for the duration of this pandemic. Not just be sprint runners who get exhausted and burned out, but rather flatten the stress curve, if you want, through the pandemic and make sure that as a community journalist we're on the job, holding power to account, bearing witness for those who are contending with illness for as long as it takes.

You know, what you're saying really resonates with me in some of the assignments that I've had in the past, which you know about that have been particularly challenging for me, that have involved trauma to others and trauma to myself as well. Going to the Indian Ocean tsunami. Going to Hurricane Katrina. I was on assignments. I knew that at some point I'd be going home. There is no going home from this pandemic. It is with us in our lives, in our houses where most of us are confined. At this point, it's truly inescapable. And it seems to me, the challenges of taking care of both sources and taking care of ourselves are even more acute as a result.

They are. I do think it's important to know one thing, though, which is that 20-years of research into journalists and to other sorts of trauma-facing professions, but into journalists in particular, does give us one very important insight and one important assumption, which is that on the whole, even though journalists are exposed to more trauma than most professions, we are actually a very adaptive and resilient tribe. On the whole, our rates of PTSD and other psychological injury are much lower than the general population. We're dealing with the same issues we're dealing with and are comparable with or lower than cops, firefighters, soldiers, other trauma facing professions. What the science is telling us is that our craft is protected. Having a job to do in the face of events like this pandemic is protected. Our craft skills and our efforts are protected, conveying a sense of mission and meaning that help us through difficult assignments. Our colleagues are protected. Having a community, being part of a newsroom, or a team, or a community of journalists, even if we're freelancers. Those things are protective.

So as we look at the challenges and the costs of reporting through this pandemic, it's also important that we both not pathologize ourselves, that we recognize we're a pretty adaptive and resilient profession, and that we do some things to bolster those sources of strength and those sources of resilience that we already have.

So I want to ask you both about our duty of care to the people we're talking to and also our duty of care to ourselves. Let's talk about the sources first. As journalists are reporting on this pandemic in all its aspects—whether it's actual clinical care or all the ripple effects on trade, on the food system, on travel, on families—what advice would you give to journalists about feeling careful of the people they speak to?

So, I think it is important to remember that people who are experiencing a lot of fear or have dealt with a lot of loss, as is so present in this pandemic, are people who have been, whatever their original social, economic status, deprived of some real power in life. And, you know, a lot of our tools as reporters are very well suited to mayors, and presidents, and police chiefs, and corporate executives. People who have a lot of power. But we have a kind of different tool kit when we're trying to build trust with people who are highly vulnerable, who experienced loss, or who may feel that governments or medicine betrayed them or let them down somehow. Sometimes people will be very eager to talk, and that's fine. Sometimes we'll need to spend much more time as journalists not only building trust in a general way but finding some ways in the course of reporting to shift little bits of power back.

You know, anybody can go and interview Donald Trump or Vladimir Putin, and you do what you need to do. You keep your foot in the door. You want to get them to say embarrassing things on the record. You're hard-charging because that's what we need to do. With vulnerable sources, with traumatized sources, with victims, and survivors in this pandemic, you want to be thinking about yourself as a reporter as having more power. The ability to communicate and bear witness for them, an understanding of how that story plays out. So you want to give them more choices,

be a little bit extra careful and more transparent about who you are, and what you're doing, what reporting is going to require. Stuff like that. There are a lot of tip sheets on trauma interviewing on the DART center website.

It is also important, however, to recognize that we don't need to pathologize or coddle traumatized sources. A lot of research and just human experience says that very often people who have been through catastrophic loss, or grief, or trauma will sometimes have a high desire to bear witness, are keen to talk to reporters. In fact, I've been really struck in a number of conversations I've had with journalist colleagues—investigative reporters, political reporters, all kinds of journalists—over the course of the last couple of weeks around the world, all of whom are saying that actually right now, on the whole, their sources are more keen to talk to them. Both new sources and old sources are keen to have the connection that talking to a reporter represents.

So, you know, I think it's really important. And what's more, I think as reporters now, we sometimes fear, thanks to having a little knowledge about trauma, we sometimes fear retraumatizing, increasing the suffering of people. What the research seems to suggest is that being interviewed about trauma is not by itself going to re-traumatize people. It may be hard. It may cause some short term distress, but the studies suggest that being interviewed about a traumatic experience doesn't really make the long-term outcome any worse for people.

And in fact, the opposite is true. There have been studies showing that, for example, victims of torture who testify in truth commissions tend to do better on a poll in the long run than those who choose not to. There is a way in which the connection to society that a journalist represents, that sense of being ratified by a listener—an behind that individual listener, the reporter, all of the readers, or listeners, or viewers, or downloaders—being ratified by society is an important connection for many survivors when these interviews go well.

What is a challenge, and that I think is important, is not so much re-traumatization as trust and avoiding betraying sources' trust. It is important to remember that whether it's a loss in this coronavirus pandemic, or a sexual assault, or torture, or a mass shooting, people who have experienced trauma or abuse have experienced gross violation of the social contract. Gross betrayal of the kind of safety we need and expect to get through life. So as reporters, if we go in and we seem not to be listening to them, or if we break our promises, or if we're disorganized, that may be experienced as a second betrayal, as a reopening of that wound, that moral injury. And that, I think, when people think about re-traumatizing and think about any reactions many of us as journals have had from our sources that sometimes can be quite challenging, often it's on the terrain of trust and betrayal rather than the "what happened to you?" story of trauma. And I think that's a really important distinction.

You know, we need to be extra careful, extra transparent, and extra ethical in our engagement with people whose moral safety and social contract has been violated or abused. That to me is crucial. There's actually a wonderful study that came out about a year, about two years ago now, on Yazidi women who had been interviewed by reporters about being assaulted under ISIS rule. Sexual assault under ISIS rule. And these women, many of them, when they were interviewed by psychologists months later, expressed some distress at journalistic practices. They didn't like feeling manipulated or coerced, and there was a minority, but a significant minority of cases, in which they felt that had been the case. But overwhelmingly the women in this study felt that nonetheless, they were glad to have participated. They wanted the world to know what had happened to them. And you know, if we can latch into that survivor mission, avoid being coercive, avoid being manipulative, trauma interviewing can actually be profoundly rewarding.

Let me ask you, because we've been talking about how to take care of our sources and treat them appropriately, how should journalists take care of themselves? Are there particular things that they should keep in mind as they embark on this reporting over the next month, months, or years?

So this is crucial. And again, I'm going to refer you to see tip sheets on the DART Center website.

We will link to them.

But I think there's a couple of things to know. First of all, as I said at the beginning, what's distinct about this trauma, this coronavirus pandemic around the world, is the kind of open-ended, unremitting, and complicated stress it imposes on us as journalists. Where we're juggling our home environments, our social distancing, our failures of technology, our fear for the economic viability of news organizations, even as we're trying to do what would be challenging work under any circumstances. So, along with the trauma self-care, which I'll get to in a minute, I think that a key message that I'm getting from the psychologists and psychiatrists who the DART center talked to is the need to flatten the curve of stress, to pace our work and our load, to make sure where we're getting recovery time. That means not just big days off, but even in the course of a workday, if you're working at home, taking nano breaks, having rituals at the end of an interview or the end of an edit where you go off, wash your hands for 20 seconds, splash cold water on your face. Do these things in a structured way.

Building in time away from devices and away from the news cycle. We all need a little bit of neurological recovery time, a little neurological calm from the constant little shots of anxiety and adrenalin represented by our social media feeds, even in our non-journalistic lives.

We need, because we're dealing as journalists and as citizens with a lot of fear of death and a lot of difficult imagined images or real images, we need some positive imagery in life. We need to be structuring in some time to look at art, or take walks in nature, or do other things that implant positive images in our heads, and even sometimes calling up those images. Some journalists I know keep what they think of as comfort files on their phones or computers. A few pictures that are, to them, are immediately calming, immediately comforting. So that if you've been looking at a challenging video feed from a hospital ward somewhere or are finding an image coming back to haunt you and intruding when you don't want to, you can actively call up those pictures and push out, in a cognitive way, images of distress.

We need the kind of self-care strategies that lower our biological arousal, and we need to do it in a deliberate way. I mean, I believe that in this pandemic, all journalists actually need a self-care plan, and it doesn't need to be complicated. But it should be a plan that you write down and are focused on a few things you can do every day as part of your work routine to gain some control over the things you can control. So things like making lists, keeping a work journal. That's very helpful. Yoga, and meditation, cycling, and those kinds of aerobics things that lower your biological arousal are helpful.

You know, stuff like that you might ordinarily do. Or maybe it has worked for you in the past, but you sort of fell off the wagon a while ago. Now is the time to call out that library up and pick just a few things that you know you can stick with and do them for the pandemic. Because the psychologists are quite concerned, properly, about burnout and depression as a consequence of this long arc of stress.

Now on the trauma side. And you know, they're connected, obviously, but for journalists who deal with trauma, some of the advice is similar. We know that exercise, yoga, meditation, those kinds of things are very helpful. We know that understanding your own signs, thinking a lot about what your own normal work performance arc is like and paying attention to changes. If you're no longer sleeping so well, or if you're finding that you're blowing deadline more than usual, you want to pay attention to that.

Peer support is crucial. Simply being in touch with colleagues, even if it's to talk in a craft way about your work. In all the literature that's been done on journalists as well as other trauma-facing professions, the number one risk factor for psychological injury is social isolation. And the number one resilience factor, the number one factor associated with people doing well, is social connection. So this time that's isolating us from our colleagues, and our families—or not isolating from some families and isolating us from others, it's complicated—but we want to think about deliberately building up for the duration some ways of engaging with our colleagues in a way that gives us a culture of learning, that focuses on how we can keep learning from our assignments to doing our work better, gaining a few new skills over the duration. Stuff like that all makes an enormous difference in trauma, self-care.

And then finally, I would say, that if journalists do find that the work is getting to you—if you find that you're getting images from past stories that are constantly coming back in ways that interfere; if you find you're blowing deadline in ways that are not like you, some of us push deadline all the time, but if you find you're doing it a new way; if you find yourself medicating more than you would like—talk to somebody about that. I mean, first, bottom line, talk to a trusted colleague or family member. But it's also an area where actually, trauma is an area where psychologists who are skilled in that particular field actually have an excellent track record.

The science of treating trauma is quite robust. It's mostly about short-term therapy and mostly not involving drugs. If left untreated, genuine post-traumatic stress disorder, which is a minority of all journalists, but if left untreated, it can be horribly persistent and interfere in a very direct way with the very mechanisms that we rely on in our reporting. On the other hand, it's one of the most successfully treated areas in the whole mental health universe. So get help if you need it. Avoiding help is mostly not going to make things go away. They tend to get worse.

I am so grateful for this advice. Thank you so much for sharing it with all the members of our class who are going to be tackling this challenge for the next weeks, months, years. I think I myself am going to go to my phone as soon as we cease talking and set up some image comfort files for myself and maybe start a journal. So thank you so much, Bruce Shapiro, executive director of the DART Center for joining our MOOC. I appreciate it.

Very glad to be here.