

BEST PRACTICES in trauma reporting

Ideas and Insights from Award-Winning Newspaper Articles

by Kevin Kawamoto

TRAUMA REPORTING

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There should be no stigma or shame about having a difficult emotional time after trauma.

– Mark Brayne, from *Traumatic Stress: A Training & Support Handbook*.

The Journalist's Challenge

Writing about people's pain and suffering doesn't come easily to most journalists. It is not a subject that is typically taught in journalism schools, at least not extensively, even though emotional trauma will probably be an unavoidable component of many journalists' future work. Murder, sexual assault, torture, war, terrorism, arson, domestic abuse and intimate partner violence – not to mention devastating natural disasters – are subjects that appear repeatedly in the news media and can occur almost anywhere in the world. Even something as seemingly routine as a car crash can provide journalists with their first glimpse of extreme suffering or tragic death. All of these experiences – especially when they involve human violence and malicious intent – can contribute to considerable psychological distress for victims, survivors, their loved ones, as well as the journalists who tell their stories.

How and where does one begin to learn how to write about violence and trauma?

The Dart Center for Journalism & Trauma – a global resource for journalists, journalism students and health professionals dedicated to improving media coverage of trauma, tragedy and conflict – has produced this practical guide for writing about trauma using 12 years of Dart Award winners as models of journalistic excellence. It is intended for

journalists and journalism students who are untrained in trauma reporting (or who want to enhance their basic training) and is a complement to another Dart Center publication, a small guidebook called, *Tragedies & Journalists: A Guide for More Effective Coverage*.

Because the Dart Award is U.S.-based, many of the examples used in this guide are about news events that occurred in the United States. Trauma, however, does not recognize geographical boundaries. A case in point: the *Detroit Free Press* journalist and photojournalist who were part of the team that won the 2005 Dart Award for “Homicide in Detroit: Echoes of Violence,” wrote about violence in an American city. However, these same journalists also witnessed violence in Iraq when they were assigned there.

The tips offered in this guide are meant to apply to traumatic events wherever they occur.

Recognizing the importance of sharing knowledge about trauma reporting internationally, the Dart Center supports journalism and trauma programs in various parts of the world, including programs coordinated by Dart Centre Europe and Dart Center Australasia. The Dart Center web site also features content

from or about Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, Europe, Australia, Asia and elsewhere. Mark Brayne, Director of Dart Centre Europe, served for 30 years as foreign correspondent and senior editor for Reuters and the BBC World Service. Now a transpersonal psychotherapist, he has developed and implemented trauma training and support for journalists at the BBC and produced *Traumatic Stress: A Training & Support Handbook*. A key message Brayne offers in the handbook is:

People react differently to trauma and traumatic stress. Some cope without trouble. Many will find trauma distressing, but get over it fairly quickly – usually within a couple of months. A minority however – journalists and programme-makers included – will experience more serious physical and psychological distress. It is vital that this is recognized, understood and accepted.

Trauma reporters would be wise to embrace this insight from a psychotherapist and fellow journalist. Wishing you good writing – as well as good mental and physical health – as you embark on this rewarding and often challenging work.

The Dart Award

Since 1994, the Dart Center for Journalism & Trauma (hereafter referred to as the Dart Center) at the University of Washington and its predecessor, the Victims and the Media Program at Michigan State University, have recognized outstanding trauma reporting through the annual Dart Award for Excellence in Reporting on Victims of Violence. (The Dart Center has administered the award since 2000; prior to that, the award was administered by MSU’s Victims and the Media Program.) Each year a cross-section of judges composed of journalists, clinicians and victim/survivor advocates has selected a newspaper article or cohesive series of articles from approximately 50 entries in an intensive two-tiered evaluation process.¹ The top prize is given to the entry “that best portrays victims and their experiences with accuracy, insight and sensitivity while illustrating the effects of violence on victims’ lives and the process of recovery from emotional trauma.”

The 12 winners of the Dart Award from 1994 to 2005 represent all regions of the United States and deal with a wide range of topics. Recognizing that exemplary news stories about victims of violence involve the coordinated work of journalists, editors, photojournalists, design and layout professionals and others, the award is actually a team prize. Winning teams have come

from newspapers in Alaska, California, Maine, Maryland, Michigan, New Jersey, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Texas and Virginia. Finalists and Honorable Mention recipients further broaden the geographical swath. The nature of violence covered in winning articles has included incest, arson, terrorism, domestic abuse, sexual assault, gang-related shootings and other gun violence. Some of the winners have been large newspapers with daily circulations in the hundreds of thousands, whereas others have had daily circulations under 100,000.

In short, Dart Award winners show that outstanding trauma reporting is possible in a wide variety of contexts. These articles also show that the urgency of writing about violence and its consequences exists in communities of all sizes and demographic characteristics.

What makes these particular articles so good? For starters, they adhere to the criteria that the Dart Center has established for excellence in trauma reporting (see sidebar).

While the criteria are helpful for judges evaluating the merits of articles that have already been written, these criteria can also serve as helpful guidelines for journalists and journalism students preparing to write news stories about victims and survivors of violence, their

loved ones and their communities. As they set out to collect their facts, conduct their interviews and consider their angles, they can think of the award guidelines as questions that they would ask themselves before, during and after crafting words into stories as a constant check for ethical, sensitive and compelling reporting. The following checklist, derived from the criteria, may help journalists writing about trauma critique their own work:

- Does my story portray victims of violence with accuracy, insight and sensitivity?
- Is my story clear and engaging, with a strong theme or focus?
- Does it inform readers about the ways individuals react to and cope with emotional trauma and the process of recovery?
- Does it avoid sensationalism, melodrama, and portrayal of victims as tragic or pathetic?
- Does the story emphasize the victims’ experience rather than the perpetrators’?

If the answer to any of these questions is “no,” the journalist should consider whether the story can be enhanced or improved by changing it so that the answer is “yes.”

Dart Award judges look for entries that go beyond the ordinary in reporting on victims of violence, taking into account all aspects of an entry. They should:

- Portray victims of violence with accuracy, insight, and sensitivity.
- Be clear and engaging, with a strong theme or focus.
- Inform readers about the ways individuals react to and cope with emotional trauma and the process of recovery.
- Avoid sensationalism, melodrama, and portrayal of victims as tragic or pathetic.
- Emphasize the victims’ experience rather than the perpetrators’.

A Winning Example

Because newspapers have access to the criteria for the Dart Award before they submit an entry, most of the articles submitted for the award reflect the criteria to some degree. The winning article, however, not only “pulls it all together” best – as determined by a diverse panel of discerning judges – but also has an emotional impact on the reader as any good story usually does.

The Dart Award winner for 2005, “Homicide in Detroit: Echoes of Violence,” published by the *Detroit Free Press*, is a six-part series that seamlessly integrates extended personal narratives (i.e., in-depth profiles of individuals) with social impact narratives (i.e., macro-analytical implications of specific problems). The murders discussed in the *Free Press* series, for example, are framed as part of a larger social problem and yield disturbing statistics, but the crimes also touch the lives of ordinary people who often exhibit extraordinary resilience in the face of the senseless violence around them. One of those people in the article is 62-year-old Margeree Jefferson, who was interviewed and photographed scrubbing down her porch one morning to remove the blood left there by a shooting victim. The language is at once literal and symbolic.

“This is the reality of living inside a murder scene – a grandmother has to wake up early and clean up the blood

of a stranger before it dries and leaves a deep stain that might never come out,” writes journalist Jeff Seidel. In the next paragraph, this one line stands alone: “Some stains never do.”

The photographer, Eric Seals, provided the powerful images that accompanied and enhanced the articles. Although the dark thread of violence is woven through the series, the photographs are not gratuitously violent. There are a few disturbing photos, appropriate to context, but many others simply show people deeply affected in one way or another by the violence and suffering that have stained their community. The photo of Margeree Jefferson, mentioned earlier, might even be interpreted as a symbol of strength – a woman resolved to maintain peace and normalcy in a community where both are disrupted on a regular basis. The blood on her porch is stubborn and doesn’t come out easily. But she continues to scrub, and the stains eventually wash away. Then she washes herself up, changes her clothes and attends a parade with her son, daughter-in-law and grandchildren. The people harmed by violence are portrayed with dignity and sensitivity in the article. Cold hard statistics are humanized by the universal language of pain and healing.

Understanding Trauma

Journalists who are sensitive to the suffering of others and understand the complexity of emotional trauma are often able to write about traumatic experiences in a way that is informative, engaging and often helpful to readers.

Not incidentally, journalists and editors who are sensitive to trauma also tend to be sensitive to each other. The positive changes in trauma reporting are catching on not only in newsprint but in newsrooms. The president of the Dart Center’s Executive Committee, Joe Hight, who is also managing editor of *The Daily Oklahoman*, wrote about *The Wichita Eagle*’s decision to devote extensive coverage to the victims of alleged serial killer Dennis Rader. “Why all the coverage devoted to the victims?” Hight asked. “Because its editor listened to a newsroom who was sensitive to victims’ family members and the community, sensitive to what was needed to continue the long recovery from a sensational tragedy.” Prior to his involvement with the Dart Center, Hight’s own newspaper received a Dart Award for its coverage of the bombing of the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City.

For more than a decade, the Dart Center has steadily laid the groundwork for preparing and training journalists to understand and write about trauma.

“To tell honest stories,” write Roger Simpson and William Coté, authors of *Covering Violence: A Guide to Ethical Reporting About Victims & Trauma*, “the journalist must know the basics of how violent acts and events affect people.” In the book, the authors “show how journalists can give the public vital information about calamities without further harm to the victims. The book is premised on the conviction that news can tie the victim and the public together constructively through the rigor of thoughtful reporting practices.”

Analysis

After 12 years, the Dart Award has amassed a rich resource of “best practices” in newspaper reporting – articles that are forming the basis for research and educational materials that journalists and journalism students can learn from as they develop their own skills and sensitivity in reporting on violence and trauma. Although these examples for best practices come from the print media, the principles they espouse can be applied to other media formats as well, such as broadcast (radio and television) and online news.

The news media have long been criticized for their insensitive coverage of victims of crime and trauma. The Dart Award provides an opportunity to recognize news teams who are raising the bar in trauma reporting and setting high standards of journalistic excellence for their colleagues to emulate and build upon. “What I’ve learned,” says Migael Scherer, director of the Dart Award for six years up to 2005, “is that you don’t teach people a thing when you’re always telling them that they’re wrong. You need to catch them doing it right.”

This best practices guide has “caught” journalists doing it right. It is based on a systematic analysis of Dart Award winners that collectively represent a “best-in-class” of trauma reporting. One way to study this topic is to start with some of the basics, such as reflecting on the Dart

Award criteria (specified earlier) used for evaluating excellence in trauma reporting, as well as reviewing the Dart Center web site (www.dartcenter.org) and the book, *Covering Violence: A Guide to Ethical Reporting About Victims & Trauma* by Roger Simpson and William Coté. Then look at some real life examples of articles written about real people in real communities.

The following is a list of best practices, starting with some conceptual aspects of trauma reporting and progressing toward more detailed and specific examples. The thing to remember is that these are not absolute rules but rather guidelines or issues to seriously consider. There will occasionally be exceptions to these guidelines. One hopes that these exceptions are made after an informed discernment process.

The goal of this best practices guide is not to provide a template for trauma reporting, although the specific examples should be useful for journalists working on similar stories or faced with similar ethical dilemmas related to trauma reporting. The goal is to help journalists produce professional, insightful, informative, ethical and engaging stories about difficult subject matter by using other journalists’ successful ideas, insights and experiences as an inspirational guide. Of course, each journalist writing about trauma will find his or her

own voice and perspective when crafting the story. But that voice and perspective may be *informed* by the voices and perspectives of those who have already engaged in the process effectively.

The following section discusses narrative elements and other considerations that reporters should keep in mind when writing about violence and trauma. Some of these elements are presented as best practices examples. Other elements are more explicitly presented as suggestions or recommendations.

The Dart Center for Journalism & Trauma hopes this guide inspires you to write powerful and constructive stories about human pain and suffering.

This best practices guide has “caught” journalists doing it right. It is based on a systematic analysis of Dart Award winners that collectively represent a “best-in-class” of trauma reporting.

1994 Dart Award Winner

**“Malignant Memories”***Anchorage Daily News* (Anchorage, AK)

Story: Debra McKinney

Photos: Fran Durner

This story revolves around the lives of three incest survivors, now all adults and close friends, whose abuse occurred about three decades ago. With the support of her two friends Vivian and Ezzie, one of them – Margie – revisits the location where her sexual abuse took place and is finally able to release the emotions she had been holding back for so long.

Teamwork

Award-winning coverage of any news event – whether or not it involves trauma – often requires the work of more than one person. The Dart Award encourages entrants to consider the team of journalism professionals who contributed to making the story a success. Although the journalist with a byline on the article may get the most credit for the story, the “total package” of a winning article usually includes reporting, photography, headlines, cutlines, graphics, artwork, layout and so forth.

Think of the total package when writing a story about trauma. How will photographs and other images enhance the story? What artwork is needed? What layout and design considerations need to be addressed? A team of media professionals planning and working together can make the difference between a good story and an outstanding story.

Focus

Central to the best practices in trauma reporting is the tenet, based on the Dart Award judging criteria, that entries “should take victims as their subject matter rather than crime or violence per se. The focus should be on the victim’s story rather than on the actions of police or perpetrators, with emphasis on understanding the effects of violence rather than on anger, revulsion, or revenge.”

“Margie wants to remember more. No she wants to forget.”

This is a kind of basic philosophy for excellent trauma reporting. Violent criminals and perpetrators should not be the heroes or the attention-grabbing protagonists. This doesn’t mean that the perpetrators should never be mentioned in the article. It means that the victims, survivors and their loved ones are not simply incidental to the story – mere supporting actors to the starring role of the perpetrator. Such an angle is offensive to those who have been traumatized and irresponsibly shines the limelight on perpetrators, who may bask in the attention. It may be too optimistic to say that most readers would necessarily find the focus on perpetrators offensive as well. The lives of violent people have been showcased in many movies, novels and television programs for a long time

– often to popular appeal. However, real life tragedies require more socially responsible portrayals. You don’t have to sustain a bad diet for people already gorging on junk food.

All of the Dart Award winners focus on victims, survivors or their loved ones. This is not surprising, of course, given the entry guidelines. Just focusing on these subjects, however, was not enough. Most articles focused on victimized people’s resilience if they survived the violence. (Not all victims did.) In the mental health field, such a focus might be termed a “strengths-based perspective,” identifying inner strengths and external resources that help people overcome barriers to a meaningful life. In the winning articles, victims are portrayed as survivors. Survivors may still be suffering, but they are not immobilized and powerless. Rather they are persevering and rebuilding their lives. Some have found meaning in their tragic experiences. Here are three examples:

- 1) In “Malignant Memories” (1994), three adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse support each other as they come to terms with their past and find meaning in their present. Their emotional struggles continue, but they have found strength in each other and a growing happiness through their strong friendship.

1995 Dart Award Winner



“The Test of Fire”

Austin American-Statesman (Austin, TX)

Story: Michele Stanush

Photos: Lynne Dobson

This story begins with a court sentencing for a crime that took place more than two years previous. Emmett Jackson’s wife and their 16-month-old daughter were killed in a fire started by a man because of an \$8 drug debt. Emmett himself was severely burned and disabled by the fire. Despite his life-changing injuries, he was grateful to be alive and made tremendous strides in regaining some sense of normalcy again in his life.

- 2) In “Test of Fire” (1995), Emmett Jackson is badly burned and disfigured by a malicious fire that killed his wife and daughter. Jackson’s rehabilitation was long and painful, and he will never regain his former appearance, but his passion for life is unstoppable. He is grateful to be alive and will use whatever resources available to make his life a happy and meaningful one.
- 3) In “Legacy of Love and Pain” (2003), Angela Hudson nearly dies after her ex-husband ties her up, douses her with gasoline and sets her on fire. The love and devotion of her family – especially her mother – comes through powerfully in this story. Angela makes a slow recovery, but her family’s support coupled with her strong will to live help her through her darkest days.

Not all stories have resilient victims. Realistically, sometimes the end result of violence is more tragic. In “The Short Life of Viktor Alexander Matthey” (2002), the victim dies before the story is even written. These stories, however, have another point to make, such as problems in the current system of checks and balances or the effects of abuse hidden from public knowledge. In “The Joseph Palczynski Story” (2001), much of the narrative focuses on the abusive perpetrator, but it is to show how his

manipulative nature deceived and harmed his victims. Their names are boldly showcased on the cover page of the special report, perhaps indicating that it is *their* trauma which lies at the heart of this article, not the perpetrator’s.

Even when there are resilient victims, the resilience may be wavering. “Margie wants to remember more. No she wants to forget.” These two sentences from “Malignant Memories” (1994) convey the sometimes contradictory feelings that arise in recovery. The goal for the journalist when focusing on survivors should not be to simplify the recovery process but to describe it honestly.

Length

Dart Award-winning articles, for the most part, tend to be long, much longer than a conventional news story that you would typically see in the newspaper. The challenges of writing about the complexities of violent crime and its far-reaching traumatic effects in a meaningful and informative way are considerable. These stories require time and space to inform readers about the effects of violence, keep their attention and move them to care about the subject matter.

For example, in “The Path of a Bullet” (1997), the *Long Beach Press-Telegram* effectively showed how the murder of a 16-year-old boy had far-reaching ramifications, not only on the boy’s family but on his community. The bullet used in the shooting only cost 22 cents, but the devastation and loss this violent act caused was virtually incalculable. The full impact of this traumatic event would not necessarily be immediately apparent; rather, it unfolds over time in a variety of manifestations. If this story had been written as a conventional hard news story, using the proverbial “Who, What, When, Where and Why” model, there would be less opportunity for the journalist and readers to explore and understand how many lives this single bullet – and the act of murder – has harmed and destroyed. The article shows how individual actions are often part of a system, where one event can reverberate throughout that system and trigger other events.

1996 Dart Award Winner



“Oklahoma City Bombing”

The Oklahoman (Oklahoma City, OK)

Story: Various

Photos: Various

The award this year was given to a newspaper for a vast collection of articles written in the aftermath of the terrorist attack on the Murrah Federal Building in downtown Oklahoma City in which 168 people, including children, died. The newspaper spent considerable resources covering this tragedy from many different perspectives and sustained its coverage for many months, reporting about the different ways this attack deeply affected individuals and the community.

Writing about violence in such a complex manner is not easily done with brevity. As a result, many Dart Award-winning articles are fairly lengthy, taking up large amounts of newsprint and, more often than not, requiring a “special report” type format or more than one issue of the newspaper to fully tell the story. “A Stolen Soul” (1999), for example, took up 26 issues. Other stories were told within a single issue, but the newspaper devoted a large amount of space for the story, photographs, graphics and so forth. Despite the long length of some articles, a number of reporters who wrote winning articles have told the Dart Center that they had to cut their articles down by as much as half prior to publication. They also said that it was important to work closely with their team members – editors, graphic design and layout artists, etc. – throughout the writing process to ensure that the final story developed with their input.

Although many of the award-winning articles were written as extended personal narratives, the winning collection of Oklahoma bombing articles (1996) included noteworthy examples of reporting told in the conventional hard news format. These articles showed how an act of domestic terrorism affected victims, their family members, friends and community soon after the violence occurred as well as in the ensuing weeks and months. Because of deadlines for

breaking news, journalists cannot always devote long periods of time to working on a lengthy story about violence, no matter how complex the circumstances. If a major tragedy has occurred, readers want and deserve to know about it as soon as possible. Under these circumstances, the news gathering and writing process can still be done with sensitivity and professionalism using the recommendations provided in this guide.

The length of an article is determined by a number of factors. What the reporter and the editor deem necessary to tell the story as completely and thoughtfully as possible is just one factor. In print news where space is a premium, the decision to allot large amounts of it to text and images for a single story is a serious commitment. The resulting piece, however, is often more satisfying for readers than a story that feels superficial and incomplete. Space and story length considerations need to be discussed early on in a story’s development.

For a variety of reasons, it may not be possible for a newspaper to devote large amounts of space to a story about victims of violence. If that is the case, it is still possible to write a story that is accurate, insightful and sensitive. Work within your constraints to do the best job possible telling readers about victims of violence.

Proximity & “Acts”

Articles about violence and trauma vary in their proximity (or nearness in time) to the traumatic event being written about. Sometimes the news story is written soon after the news event (e.g., the next day or a few days later); other times the news story is written months, years, or even decades later (as in the case of “Malignant Memories,” 1994).

One way to begin a simple classification of news stories about trauma is by conceptualizing them as a series of “Acts,” a term used in live theater to divide a long performance into parts. The movement from one subdivision in the play to another tends to denote the passage of time as well as the development of plot and characters. Act One is the first part of the play, where the story initially unfolds. By Act Two, the audience already knows the story – thanks to Act One – but expects a continuation or a follow up. Usually there is an intermission between Act One and Act Two.

News stories can make use of the “Acts” concept as well. Sometimes news stories involving trauma are reported immediately or very soon after the traumatic event occurs. For example, to use an extreme case, when the World Trade Center twin towers were attacked on September 11, 2001, news stories began appearing on television, radio and online minutes after the incident, and then of

1997 Dart Award Winner



“The Path of a Bullet”

Press-Telegram (Long Beach, CA)

Story: Ralph De La Cruz
Photos: by Paul Hu

This report produced by the *Long Beach Press-Telegram* examined the extensive personal, social and financial costs of a single 22-cent bullet fired in an act of violence. The involvement of law enforcement, emergency response personnel, hospital staff, the court system, the prison system and so forth add to the personal devastation of injury and death. Although the report focuses on individual cases, it is really a story about the widespread – and not always apparent – social impact of gang violence.

course for days and weeks thereafter. News articles that appeared during this time can be referred to as “Act One” news stories because of their close propinquity to the news event and their function of answering the most immediate questions of who, what, when, where and why for a concerned and frightened public. Act One news stories can vividly show the horror and tragedy associated with a traumatic event. The iconic video footage of the two planes crashing into the World Trade Center twin towers and the collapse of those buildings minutes later is an example of how visual images can be replayed over and over again first on television and then in our heads. These images conveyed the magnitude of the terrorist attack to television viewers in the United States and around the world.

“We watched to learn, to absorb, to begin the process of digesting horror and terror and the irrevocable change in global conditions,” explains Frank Ochberg, M.D., a psychiatrist, pioneer in posttraumatic stress disorder studies and Chair Emeritus of the Dart Center’s Executive Committee. But not moving on from Act One can delay the process of healing and recovery.

“Like many traumatic stories,” Ochberg continues, “we, the viewers, get stuck in Act One, replaying in our own minds what is replayed on TV screens: the shocking images of human destruction,”

Ochberg says. “We all must move on to Act Two, when painful healing occurs and humanity is restored.” Journalists writing about the Act Two stage can help the public find personal meaning in tragic circumstances and “develop strong images of hope and healing, to inspire and confirm our best human instincts.”

“We must move on to Act Two,
when painful healing occurs
and humanity is restored.”

Although news about September 11 never completely disappeared, the volume of news decreased as time passed and weeks turned into months. Predictably, as the one-year anniversary of September 11 approached, the volume of news increased. Journalists began re-visiting the subject, writing the “Where are they now?” type narratives and trying to put their finger on the pulse of America one year after the tragedy. This can be referred to as the Act Two stage of news reporting, a continuation of the story after a brief intermission but perhaps told from a different perspective or angle, less focused on the exposition of basic facts than on an analysis of long-term consequences. How have people (e.g., survivors, family members, etc.) fared since the event? What salient issues continue to linger? How have people

moved on with their lives? How do they choose to remember the tragedy and honor those who lost their lives?

The time span between Act One and Act Two news stories is not fixed and precisely quantifiable. The one-year anniversary of a significant news event (and sometimes ensuing anniversaries thereafter) often marks the commencement of Act Two news stories. However, other developments also tend to trigger follow up stories after a period of declining news coverage. In the case of a violent crime that generated tremendous news coverage when it first happened, for example, the Act Two news stories might emerge when the case goes to trial. That could be months or even years after the crime.

Sometimes news events are revisited many years later, beyond the typical Act One and Act Two stages, such as in contemporary news stories about Vietnam combat veterans and the emotional distress that many of them continue to experience involve war-related trauma that occurred decades ago. For ease of analysis, this kind of story is still referred to as an Act Two story, although theoretically they might also be looked at as Act Three stories since their propinquity to the news event is so distant.

1998 Dart Award Winner



“Children of the Underground”

Pittsburgh Post-Gazette (Pittsburgh, PA)

Story: Mackenzie Carpenter

Photos: Allan Detrich

This story is about children on the run, escaping a complex web of allegations, usually against a custodial father accused of abuse who, in turn, accuses the non-custodial parent of malicious deception. These children are aided by individuals and families who comprise an underground network of “safehouses” that offer safe passage in secret, eluding law enforcement officials.

Using the “Acts” classification scheme mentioned above, most of the Dart Award stories fall into the Act Two category, with the exception of articles that appeared right after the Oklahoma bombing. This makes sense because the process of healing and recovery after a traumatic event is usually gradual. However, even an Act One story can provide important glimpses into human resilience, compassion and hope.

Regardless of whether a story is told during the Act One or Act Two phase, they have the potential, as Dr. Ochberg suggests, “to inspire and confirm our best human instincts.”

Narrative Styles

Winning articles fell into two large but clearly identifiable categories: 1) The Extended Personal Narrative and 2) The Social Impact Narrative. These are not necessarily mutually exclusive categories, but the focus of the articles tended to emphasize one approach more than the other.

The Extended Personal Narrative

The Extended Personal Narratives are just that: extensive and personal. Emotional trauma is a difficult topic to report on because human suffering is often a very private and personal experience. It is clear from the articles that use the Extended Personal Narrative technique that the journalist had to develop a trusting relationship with his or her subjects and enter their world for a period of time. These people were often vulnerable and still suffering from their emotional wounds, but they trusted the journalist to tell their stories to a broader audience, even allowing themselves to be photographed despite sometimes disfiguring injuries.

Interviewing and interacting with someone who has been traumatized can be awkward and uncomfortable for both the journalist and the interviewee. Because telling these stories requires that the journalist gets to know the human subject of the article and their psycho-

social context well, not just superficially, the Extended Personal Narrative almost always take much longer to write than a conventional hard news story. Journalist Michele Stanush and photojournalist Lynne Dobson followed the progress of Emmett Jackson, a man badly burned in a house fire, for more than a year before the two-part article about him was published in the *Austin American-Statesman*. In writing her 26-part series called, “A Stolen Soul” (1999) – which portrayed a tormented mother’s long struggle to see her son’s murderer caught, tried and sentenced – journalist Barbara Walsh spent “hundreds of hours” with the murder victim’s mother, Yong Jones. During the investigation, Jones’ husband also died.

After winning the 1999 Dart Award, Walsh explained what some of her meetings with Jones were like:

I called Yong and met with her the following January. Her son’s killer had yet to be tried. I was overwhelmed by her sadness. She sat in her darkened living room surrounded by dozens of photographs of her murdered son and dead husband. She cried throughout the two hours I talked with her. And at times during our first meeting, I cried with her. Though the local paper had covered her story, no one had told her story from start to finish. No one had explained who

1999 Dart Award Winner



“A Stolen Soul”

Portland Press Herald (Portland, ME)

Story: Barbara Walsh

Photos: David A. Rogers (and others)

Yong Jones, a woman born in Korea who moved with her American husband to the United States, finds out that her only child – a son in college – has been murdered. This story is about a mother’s painstaking journey to find peace and justice after her beloved son is killed. Historical and cultural influences provide an important context for understanding the full extent of this mother’s suffering.

this mother was and why she was so desperate to save her son’s soul. I told Yong I wanted to tell her story as completely as I could in serial form. To gather enough details for the serial, I’d need to spend hundreds of hours with her. I knew before the story was done, this mother’s grief would keep me awake at night and I would not only cry when I talked with her but when I typed my notes and wrote each of the chapters.

Walsh echoes the sentiments of many journalists who report on violence and have shared in the pain and sadness of their interviewees. At one time journalists were less likely to reveal that they were emotionally affected by the subjects they covered, but a more open climate seems to be emerging in a growing number of newsrooms that not only permits but *encourages* candid reflection about the psychological effects of covering violence. *The Daily Oklahoman*, for example, is one newspaper that has a consistent policy of providing counseling for its journalists when needed. The need for this policy became apparent after the 1995 bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City, and its current managing editor, Joe Hight, is a longtime supporter of journalism and trauma education and outreach. This gradual change in attitude toward openly discussing how trauma affects journalists is a positive alternative to “compartmentalization,” a process

in which journalists practice a sort of dissociation from their emotions and go about their business as if everything is fine when it is not. This process may be necessary at times for the short-term, so that journalists who cover trauma can fulfill their professional obligations to the news organizations and the public they serve. Problems tend to occur, however, when compartmentalization interferes with journalists’ psychological well being, manifesting in self-destructive or anti-social behaviors such as alcohol or substance abuse, smoking, unreasonable argumentativeness, depression, dysfunctional relationships, sleep difficulties, lack of motivation and so forth.

Writing about other people’s trauma is difficult, time-consuming and often energy-sapping work – but very important work nonetheless. It can also be rewarding, and not just in the laudatory sense of the word. Producing an engaging, well-crafted and sensitive news story about crime victims, survivors and their loved ones is not only good for the reputation of the news organization and its employees, but it is also good for their communities. A civil society – people engaged in activities that improve and enhance the social welfare – can only be achieved if people are “connected” with others in their community. One of the functions of the news media is to help people make this connection and to care – not only about

those they know, but also about strangers who are in some way also a part of their lives.

Writing about other people’s trauma is difficult ... but very important work nonetheless.

When people are connected to their community (however they may define this concept), they are more likely to respond with empathy to stories about other people’s pain and suffering than with a disinterested gaze. They are more likely to be moved and want to do something: express their support for the victim or the victim’s family; help pass legislation assisting crime victims; speak out against the personal violation or social injustice; demand public safety accountability; and so forth. The personal tragedy of strangers becomes a communal concern. Mass media research over the decades has shown that mediated messages and images can have an effect on the way that news consumers think, feel and act. That is what makes The Extended Personal Narrative a powerful technique to talk about trauma. The story is not just about one person’s – or one family’s – trauma. Rather it is about trauma to a part of a community.

2000 Dart Award Winner



“Who Killed John McCloskey?”

The Roanoke Times (Roanoke, VA)

Story: Michael Hemphill

Photos: Stephanie Klein-David (and others)

This story is about the mysterious circumstances surrounding a young man with brutal injuries whose origins are unknown but almost certainly malicious. The young man, John McCloskey, was in the hospital for 14 months as his condition wavered. He eventually died, and the story of who he was and the devastating effect his condition had on his family is chronicled in this tragic mystery.

The Social Impact Narrative

The Social Impact Narrative does not eschew the personal story, but it is not focused on any single person (even though it might include stories about individuals). Rather, the Social Impact Narrative tells the story of a broader social problem or phenomenon such as gang violence, terrorism or people on the run.

The hundreds of articles written after the Murrah Federal Building bombing in Oklahoma City on April 19, 1995 were a mixture of Act One and Act Two stories, as well as Personal Narratives and Social Impact Narratives. In the days, weeks and months following the blast, *The Daily Oklahoman* was helping readers connect to the lives of individual victims, survivors and families. For example in one article, published two days after the blast, a relatively short news story talked about two young brothers who “clung to the hope” that their mother had survived the tragedy. “The boys’ distress turned into a real-life nightmare about 1 a.m. Thursday,” the article said. “That’s when three men and a woman, all clad in their best Army green, arrived at the door with the horrible news.” They told the boys, who were being looked after by a neighbor, that their mother had not survived. The greater story was about the significant impact the bombing had on the community, but it was personalized

by stories about real people and their real losses.

The Social Impact Narrative tells the story of a broader social problem or phenomenon.

“The Path of a Bullet” (1997) and “Homicide in Detroit” (2005) also weave social impact narratives with personal narratives. These stories clearly focus on larger community concerns while introducing readers to members of that community directly affected by the social problems around them. Unlike “A Stolen Soul” (1999) or “The Test of Fire” (1995), which focuses on a single person’s journey for the duration of the story, the Social Impact Narrative is more of a macro-analysis.

Social Data

Some Dart Award-winners did an excellent job of embedding personal stories within a larger social context. For example, the *Houston Chronicle’s* “Legacy of Love & Pain” (2003) opens with these startling social statistics: “Every 15 seconds, a woman in America is beaten by her husband or boyfriend. Each year, a million-plus are left black and blue by men who claim to love them. They are the lucky ones. Every day, four of them die. Others live a lifetime with mental and physical scars.” Then the article moves into the personal narrative: “On April 9, 2001, in Houston, a brutal attack forced three generations of women to face their family’s legacy of violence.”

The reporter does an excellent job of weaving social statistics into the personal narrative. In part 6 of the series, the reporter states that a May 2000 report titled “Intimate Partner Violence” from the U.S. Department of Justice “reads like a profile of Hudson’s life.”

The report says:

In this country, you are more likely to suffer intimate partner violence if you are: a woman, black, young, divorced or separated, earning a lower income, living in rental housing and living in an urban area.

In 1998, about 1 million violent crimes were committed against

2001 Dart Award Winner



**“The Joseph Palczynski Story:
A Tragic Trail of Violence”**

The Baltimore Sun (Baltimore, MD)

Story: Linell Smith, Patricia Meisol, Ann LoLordo and Marego Athans
Photos: Doug Kapustin (and others)

This story tells of a controlling, abusive man who threatened his victims – girls and young women – with harm and followed through with his threats. He had a nice car, a list of ex-girlfriends, a devoted mother and guns. But he was also polite and well-mannered, not the stereotypical image of an abuser. The picture that unfolds of Joseph Palczynski is one of a man who knows how to terrorize his victims and their families as well as how to manipulate the legal system. Although the perpetrator receives considerable attention in this story, the real subject at hand is the problem of domestic violence and the difficulty of removing a violent offender from society through legal channels.

people by their current or former spouses, boyfriends or girlfriends – a slight increase for both men and women from the year before, according to the report. In more than 80 percent of cases, the victims were women.

What this report didn’t mention is the existence of a pattern of abuse in many victims’ families. According to a report by the American Psychological Association’s Presidential Task Force on Violence and the Family, a child’s exposure to the father abusing the mother is the strongest risk factor of transmitting violent behavior from one generation to the next.

After presenting this information, which provides a social context for the problem of domestic violence, the reporter returns to the personal narrative:

Hudson remembers watching her father shout, scream, punch and hit her mother, while her mother tried to defend herself. It terrified the daughter, but her mother always stayed. It left an impression on her young mind, although she didn’t realize it until she was locked into her own abusive relationship.

The *Detroit Free Press* did something similar when it quoted gun violence and murder statistics for the city, and

then honed in on specific cases, telling the story not of numbers but of human beings.

The Providence Sunday Journal featured a fact box about rape statistics to accompany its article “Rape in a Small Town.” The first bullet-point in the box said, “One in six American women is the victim of rape or attempted rape at some point in her life. (National Institute of Justice and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention survey, 1998.)”

The *Long Beach Press-Telegram* provided readers with an enumeration of the real costs of a 9mm bullet, which by itself costs only 22 cents. But when that bullet is used to shoot someone, and the extensive medical and legal costs are taken into consideration, these related costs soar to \$1.9 million. Why? The article explains by referring to one particular case covered in the article related to the shooting of a Martine Perry: “Medical treatment: \$4,950. Autopsy: \$2,804. Crime scene investigation: \$13,438. Juvenile hall, jail costs for one year: \$85,710. Two-week trial: \$61,000. Total local costs: \$167,902. State incarceration costs if the four suspects are convicted and serve 20 years: \$1,796,625. Total: \$1,964,527. (These figures are estimates based on information from various agencies and businesses involved in the aftermath of the September 7 shooting of Martine Perry.)”

Sourcing

Providing accurate and complete attribution is mandatory in any news article, of course, even long narratives. When using the narrative journalism format, some journalists provide additional sourcing information at the end (or elsewhere) of the article rather than interrupt the narrative flow of the storytelling. For example, in “The Short Life of Viktor Alexander Matthey” (2002), reporter Matthew Reilly added a section at the end of the article called, “Notes on Sources.” This section explains that more than 200 interviews were conducted and hundreds of pages of documents were reviewed.

If readers wondered how Reilly knew what the scene looked like on October 29, 2000, when Viktor was taken to the hospital, the source section explains that the description comes “from interviews with witnesses, an affidavit of probable cause filed by State Police Nov. 8, 2000, and prosecution briefs.” The “Notes on Sources” section explains where other information used in the article came from. Another example from the source section: “Descriptions of the conditions at the Tulimov home in Busse, Russia, when their children were taken by the state are from interviews with Russian journalists who were present, from a videotape made by a regional television crew and from an interview with Olga Tulimova, the children’s mother. All of the interviews were conducted in May 2000.”

2002 Dart Award Winner



“The Short Life of Viktor Alexander Matthey”
The Star-Ledger (Newark, NJ)

Story: Matthew Reilly
Photos: Saed Hindash

Viktor was a 7-year-old boy adopted from Russia. Ten months after his adoption he was rushed to the hospital by ambulance for critical injuries. He “was covered with 40 cuts, scrapes and bruises. The skin on his right hand was bright red, from his wrist to his fingertips. Three bones in that hand were broken, and there was evidence of an earlier, untreated fracture.” His adoptive parents were charged with his death. This story is not only about little Viktor but also the foreign adoption process and, inferentially, about abusive adoptive parents.

In a similar example, “Rape in a Small Town” (2004) provided a section on sources at the end of the article. But first the newspaper explained how it came to some of its decisions. The rape survivor and her family, the newspaper explained, debated among themselves about whether they wanted their full names to be used. Like many news publications, the newspaper had a policy of not identifying victims of first-degree sexual assault. “In the end,” the newspaper explained, “they [the family members] agreed that Laura would be identified by her first name and that her parents’ names would not be used, to protect her from identification by inference.” The paper said the family felt that this agreement would afford them some privacy even though many in the community where the crime occurred already knew who they were. In the “Sources” section, a summary of Bramson’s reporting organized by subject was provided. What follows is a sample from that section. “Sentencing on Jan. 14, 2003: Bramson attended the sentencing. Laura and her parents’ reactions and thoughts about that day were discussed in extensive personal interviews; observations about that day also provided in an interview with school nurse Marilyn Kelley.”

International Perspectives

Traumatic events happen in just about every corner of the world. A number of Dart Award winners, Honorary Mentions and Finalists have had an international component to the narratives. In “A Stolen Soul” (1999), writer Barbara Walsh spends considerable time constructing a historical context around her primary interviewee, Yong Jones. This meant going back to Yong’s childhood: “The 5-year-old girl with the almond-shaped face and solemn brown eyes” who “looked to the sky as the sirens screamed over Inchon, Korea.” Walsh revisits an earlier trauma in Jones’ life – World War II – and the warplanes dropping bombs from overhead. To understand Jones’ life as an adult and mother of a murdered adult son in the United States, readers would first have to understand Jones’ life as a child in her native Korea.

In 2005, the two Honorable Mentions for the Dart Award were both international in scope. “Women of Juárez,” published by the *Orange County Register*, was an eight-part series about survivors in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, a community that has seen hundreds of women killed in the past decade. The other Honorable Mention, “The Healing Fields,” published by the *Rocky Mountain News*, was a 12-part series about a local couple who survived the Cambodian killing fields and returned years later to help others. Both stories required extensive reporting from foreign countries where violence

had taken its toll on the human population.

In “The Short Life of Viktor Alexander Matthey” (2002), writer Matthew Reilly had to “travel halfway around the world and back” to tell Viktor’s story. In his acceptance speech for the Dart Award in 2002, Reilly said he asked himself this question as he embarked upon telling Viktor’s sad story: “How did a boy near death from starvation and exposure in eastern Siberia wind up emaciated, battered and dead of hypothermia in the wealthiest county of the wealthiest state of the wealthiest nation in the world?” To answer that question, Reilly had to go to Viktor’s home in Russia, the orphanage he lived in for a time and elsewhere. Although he never met Viktor because the boy was dead by the time he wrote the story, Reilly said he felt as if he knew him. Bridging two starkly different cultures, Reilly and photojournalist Saed Hindash was able to show that sometimes violence and neglect knows no cultural boundaries.

2003 Dart Award Winner

**“Legacy of Love & Pain”***Houston Chronicle* (Houston, TX)

Story: Daniel Vargas

Photos: Andrew Innerarity

Telling a story almost too horrible for words, “Legacy of Love & Pain” is an up-close and personal look at a heinous act of domestic violence. Angela Hudson’s ex-husband binds her up with a clothesline, throws gasoline over her body and sets her ablaze. Had two people outside her house not heard her screams and tried to douse out the flames, she would no doubt have died. Instead she survives and embarks on an agonizing road to recovery.

Dart Award Director Migael Scherer had this to say about the winning article that year (April 11, 2002):

Last year ended with an enormous story. This is a small one, about a very small victim. Yet it encompasses so much of what we need to understand.

“The Short Life of Viktor Alexander Matthey” is an intense and spare depiction of the life of a Siberian boy. His violent death is told against the larger story of his birth parents, of the orphanage that briefly shelters him, and of his abusive adoptive parents in America. Overcoming the challenge of reluctant sources in the U.S. and in Russia, the reporter and photographer retrace Viktor’s life and take readers into his heart. They speak for all voiceless victims to expose child abuse and neglect as a global problem, and to deftly show how religion is used to justify inexplicable cruelty. No country or culture is immune.

Viktor’s story ends powerfully, with his mother’s words and image. Her remorse and humility engage us all in the process of justice and restoration as our own shock turns to awareness of what needs doing: Acknowledge wrongs. Remember the past. Connect.

Time & Energy

Reporting about victims of violence is not a quick and easy process if it is to be done well. You need to get to know the subject matter, the people, the places, the nuances. Many Dart Award winners were a series of articles that took months to research. As mentioned in an earlier section, *Portland Press Herald* reporter Barbara Walsh spent “hundreds of hours” with her subject, Yong Jones, so that Walsh could tell Jones’ story from start to finish. Of course not all stories will require this much time, but they will take far more time to write than a “just the facts,” hard news story.

Star-Ledger staff writer Matthew Reilly followed the story of Viktor Matthey for a year and conducted more than 200 interviews before writing “The Short Life of Viktor Alexander Matthey” (2002). He and photographer Saed Hindash also traveled to Moscow and elsewhere in Eastern Europe to do further research.

The best practices evidence shows that trauma reporting – especially during the Act Two stage – requires considerable time, motivation and resources. Of course, not all news organizations and journalists have the time, motivation and resources to devote to a single story, at least not to the extent that some of the Dart Award-winning articles have received. Journalists have to work within their personal and organizational limitations.

Although most of the Dart Award-winning articles are Act Two stories, the journalists who cover tragedies immediately after they occur, generating Act One articles, frequently do commendable work under tremendous pressure and expectations. These journalists – the first responders to acts of terrorism, shootings, assaults, car crashes and other tragic events – have to jump right into a volatile situation and get the story, using only the time it takes them to get from home or office to the scene of the tragedy to prepare for what they are going to say or do.

Spend as much time and energy as possible to make a story about trauma worthy of publication. Your particular circumstances may not allow for a year-long investigation, international travel and hundreds of hours of interviews, but it might allow for a genuine and meaningful connection with a few key interview subjects and few hours to really try and understand the culture in which they live and work. Do what you can with what you have.

2004 Dart Award Winner



“Rape in a Small Town”

Providence Journal (Providence, RI)

Story: Kate Bramson

Photos: Bob Thayer

A 15-year-old girl faces the legal and emotional trials that arise after she accuses a 17-year-old male student at her high school of rape. Even though two other female students came forward to also accuse the same student of raping them (although they chose not to go to trial), many students at the school did not believe that the popular 17-year-old committed the crime he was accused of. It also complicated matters that he belonged to an established family in a small town. The 15-year-old girl’s family began feeling threatened by certain people in the community, and during the trial the courtroom was filled with supporters of the accused rapist. While this story clearly illustrates the difficulty that one girl and her family experienced in a small town, the emotional, social and legal complexities that are described can apply to other environments as well.

Interpretation

Provide an explanation to readers about why an article or particular series of articles is being run in the newspaper, especially stories that contain considerable violent content. Example: When the *Detroit Free Press* ran a six-part series of articles about violence and murder in the city, some readers might have assumed it was a marketing ploy to increase sales through sensational journalism. Instead of leaving anything to conjecture, the newspaper explained in an introductory note:

City leaders have tried to stop the violence in Detroit – teaching children tools for conflict resolution, flooding areas with cops, targeting the drug trade, buying back guns and even holding a day of prayer. But the violence continues. Through November, there were 1,279 shootings and 341 murders.

Why is this city killing itself? What has it done to the community’s soul?

That’s what the *Free Press* wants to show you, in the special series that continues today. Staff writer Jeff Seidel and photographer Eric Seals spent the last six months traveling with homicide detectives to crime scenes, watching them try to solve the crimes. Seidel and Seals also spent time with the families of victims, in the courts and in the neighborhoods where people are getting killed.

Resources & Notes

This is really a public service for readers who are attracted to a story because they personally have been affected by similar traumatic events mentioned in the article or know someone who has been affected. Three examples below show how Dart Award winners did this.

Example 1: After the Murrah federal building was bombed in Oklahoma City, not only did *The Daily Oklahoman* doggedly pursue this story from just about every angle imaginable, but it quickly created a sidebar column in the newspaper listing “local social service agencies requesting help in the disaster relief effort” and “local agencies that have set up victims assistance funds and other agencies that have become donation sites.” For people needing help, the community’s newspaper is an essential source of information about community resources. For those feeling somewhat helpless and wanting to help, the community’s newspaper can also be of service there, too, recommending practical and useful ways to give assistance. These printed resources can be saved by readers for future use or for sharing with others who may not have access to the newspaper.

Example 2: At the end of the *Anchorage Daily News* article about incest survivors, a boxed item appeared titled, “Help is Available from a Variety of Sources,” and listed places to contact to report suspected incest or child sexual abuse or

to find support groups and counseling services. A list of resources for further reading was also provided.

Example 3: In the *Baltimore Sun*’s “The Joseph Palczynski Story” (2001), an informational box titled “Help for abused women” was included with the article. It provided names of places and phone numbers for women seeking information or assistance with domestic violence concerns. Preceding this short list of resources is the following paragraph: “In the United States, domestic violence-related injuries are the single most common cause of women seeking emergency room medical treatment, occurring more frequently than auto accidents or muggings, according to a State of Maryland Stop Violence Against Women Program report published last year.”

For people needing help, the community’s newspaper is an essential source of information about community resources.

2005 Dart Award Winner



“Homicide in Detroit: Echoes of Violence”

Detroit Free Press (Detroit, MI)

Story: Jeff Seidel
Photos: Eric Seals

This story begins by offering readers social data about the prevalence of gun-related violence and death. “Through November [2004], there were 1,279 people shot in Detroit -- 247 more than in all of 2003 -- and 341 people have been killed.” The story goes far beyond numbers, however. They introduce you to victims, their families, law enforcement personnel, community members and others – each of whom provide a slightly different perspective on a common and vexing social problem in their community. The story is about people trying not only to stay alive but also to thrive, for their own sake and the sake of future generations.

Cautionary Notes

Warn readers about graphic content rather than surprise them. Give them an opportunity to choose not to read the article or view the images, or to protect their children from viewing them.

When the *Long Beach Press-Telegram* ran, “The Path of a Bullet” (1997), which contained some graphic violent images and text, the newspaper warned its readers what to expect, giving them a choice about whether and how to proceed. The following text is an excerpt from the cautionary note:

The purpose of the report is to educate. Before you look inside, you should be aware that it contains graphic photographs and descriptions which some readers may find troubling. Some may believe the report is too harsh for children to view. We want to let you know about the content of the report in advance so that you can take whatever steps you believe are appropriate.

An explanation like this shows respect to readers by letting them know why the newspaper chose to publish such images. The cautionary note can also clear up misunderstandings ahead of time with audience members who might otherwise assume that the photographs simply reflected gratuitous violence for sensational purposes.

Audience Response

Although readers always have the option of writing a letter to a newspaper’s editorial page to comment about something they’ve read in the paper, a special invitation to respond to an article can be extended to readers in the body of the article itself if it is expected to generate some strong feelings. For example, in “A Stolen Soul,” a boxed item titled “How to Contact Us” was printed next to the article providing a way to immediately contact the newspaper with comments.

This is a good way to get feedback about how readers are responding to the story. Are they upset? Are they sad? Are they inspired? Are they angry? Are they motivated to do something to help? Perhaps a newspaper can publish or respond to the feedback in a future issue. Providing feedback channels, especially for a controversial or disturbing story, can serve as a pressure valve for audience members who need to “vent” about their thoughts and feelings in response to the story.

Policy Issues

Some stories about violence or trauma lend themselves to a broader discussion about solutions, not just involving stories of personal recovery, but also of larger societal responses that might improve a particular social problem.

For example, in “Children of the Underground” (1998), one part of the story was titled, “Some Believe Abductions Would Decline if Punishments were Harsher.” It was a relatively short aside about the possible correlation between the lack of punitive repercussions and the number of child abductions. “[S]ome experts think the reluctance to prosecute only makes the abduction problem worse,” the article states. “It encourages more people to take off with their children, knowing they won’t be punished, they say.”

The article says that according to a Justice Department report, “there are approximately 350,000 parental abductions each year, but that includes incidents where a child is returned home a day late from a visit. A smaller number, about 163,000 cases, involve more serious kidnappings – parents who actually attempt to conceal the child’s whereabouts or prevent contact.”

This article gives readers a number of open-ended issues to consider and suggests a variety of public policy issues to think about.

Follow-Up

How often have you remembered reading a really good story that didn't have a satisfying resolution and asked, "I wonder what ever became of that person?" or "I wonder whether that case was ever solved?" Readers often ask themselves these same questions. Some Dart Award winners have had follow-up stories to give their readers an update.

In "Who Killed John McCloskey?" (2000), the main story ran in *The Roanoke Times* from June 13 to 18, 1999. The question asked in the story's headline was never answered, even at the conclusion of the article. After sticking with the story for almost a week, readers might have felt somewhat deflated to read on the last day of the series that the "state police investigation is now closed. Unsolved, and no arrests." Same for the federal inquiry. The story concluded with theories and questions, but no answers. "Faced with the failure of all official investigations, the McCloskeys have been left to find the truth for themselves."

End of story. But what happened?

Approximately six months later, on December 12, 1999, another story appeared in the same newspaper. Titled, "In Pursuit of the Truth," the article still provided no definitive answers but offered an update. "The case remains steeped in murkiness," the article says, "but new evidence has surfaced that adds

credibility to the McCloskeys' claim that the mental hospital is responsible for their son's death..." The article then went on to review the new evidence and offer informed speculation. In a sense, the newspaper was letting readers know they hadn't dropped the case. It was still trying to answer the question it had posed six months earlier: Who killed John McCloskey?

In "Legacy of Love & Pain" (2003), Angela Hudson went through a harrowing recovery process after being severely burned by her ex-husband. The main article, which ran on February 24, 2002, ended with Hudson at home "working on little things: washing dishes, folding clothes, eating and dressing herself, as much as her mobility allows." Her own words punctuate the final line in the article: "I pray real hard to be a mother again."

A month later, journalist Daniel J. Vargas visits Angela at home again. Things seem to be getting back to normal. Angela is washing dishes. A cordless phone rings, and Angela's daughter Angel rushes to answer it. Like many teens would do, the girl rushes out of earshot from the adults so she can "gab with her friend." Despite her severe trauma and disfigurement, Angela seems to be getting her life back to normal. Vargas writes: "Miracles, this family says, have a way of happening." In the next paragraph: "Hudson is a mother

again, just what she prayed for night after night during her recovery." Angela has moved back to the public-housing community where the attack took place. She is quoted as saying, "You have to learn to deal with it. If I couldn't deal with it, I couldn't move on with my life. I had to learn to let it go." Her ex-husband was convicted of aggravated assault and sentenced to life in prison. Angela's daughter, Angel, testified in court about what happened on the day her mother was attacked. Vargas writes: "When the defense cross-examined her, she stood by her answers and recollections, unwavering." The final words in the article are another quote from Angela: "We're a family again."

Updates allow readers to "check in" on people they have come to know – in a sense – through the power of journalism.

Updates allow readers to "check in" on people they have come to know – in a sense – through the power of engaging journalism.

Layout & Visuals

Visuals complement the written text. All Dart Award-winning articles featured extensive displays of photographs, many of which almost filled entire pages of newsprint and fleshed out stories in ways that words alone would have difficulty accomplishing. In “Malignant Memories,” for example, more than 50 percent of the space that the newspaper devoted to the story was taken up by photographs. Readers saw the three adult survivors of sexual abuse on the front page of the newspaper, one woman with her arm around another, and the third looking on with concern, as they walk outdoors. By the end of the story, readers know the intimate details of these women’s lives, of their troubled pasts and their current emotional conflicts.

In other award-winning articles, photos and graphics may take up well over 50 percent of the page on some pages, with text almost serving as a footnote to the visual layout. “Path of a Bullet” contains perhaps the most literal representation of violent images than any of the other Dart Award winners. The front page of this special report shows a close-up of a 16-year-old Martine Perry – “longtime Boy Scout, gang member and beloved son” – lying on the ground after being shot in the head by a bullet. A bloody white cloth is crumpled near his head. The photo fills the entire top half of the page. A golden-colored bullet image (taken from a photo) lies on the bottom right-hand

corner of the page with another image of a spent bullet casing nearby. A photo of the shooting victim as a 3-year-old child being held by his father on a sofa is positioned near the bottom center of the page and a hand-written letter written by his father is reproduced on the left-hand side of the page, bottom of the fold. The text on this page is relatively sparse. In large point size, it reads:

Three hours short of his 17th birthday, Martine Perry is lying naked on a stainless steel hospital table, life seeping out of his body. A baby wails in a distant corner of the emergency room. An elderly woman pleads with a nurse to hold off putting a tube down her throat. And Martine lies silent, motionless, blood oozing from his head, as eight people work frantically to revive him.

The impact of this page, taken as a whole, is profound. Although disturbing, the page design and layout is congruent to its weighty subject matter. It is attention-grabbing but also moving, connecting so many different and contrasting images simultaneously: youthful and happy innocence (from the three-year-old child photo), gun violence, grief, confusion and despair, and whatever else the reader takes from it.

Photojournalists have a special challenge when photographing traumatic images.

Former Dart Award Director Migael Scherer profiled photojournalist Lynne Dobson, who was part of the winning team for the Dart Award in 1995, in *Covering Violence: A Guide to Ethical Reporting About Victims & Trauma*. Here is what Scherer wrote:

The paramedic described him as “a human being in tatters,” crisp skin hanging off in rags, more than 80 percent of his body burned. The fire, the work of an arsonist, took Emmett Jackson’s hands, nose, eyelids, and lips and killed his wife and baby daughter. Three years later photographer Lynne Dobson and reporter Michele Stanush of the Austin American-Statesman set out to learn how he had survived such loss and kept going. The result was an award-winning story, “The Test of Fire.”

The photos are compelling, not just for the respectful way they reveal such horrible injuries but for the way they transform the reader. Dobson turns the voyeuristic impulse to simply stare at a disfigured human and back away into a sense of connection.

Without the text to accompany it, the photographs of Emmett Jackson are jarring. With Dobson’s sensitive but unsentimental photos and Michelle Stanush’s engaging writing, however, the reader sees beyond the disfigurement.

“The photos are compelling, not just for the respectful way they reveal such horrible images but for the way they transform the reader. [Photographer Lynne] Dobson turns the voyeuristic impulse to simply stare at a disfigured human and back away into a sense of connection.”

– Migael Scherer profiling award-winning photographer Lynne Dobson.

First, photographs can draw you in to a story, getting your attention from the get-go with an image that invites a closer look. Second, photographs can invoke immediate emotions as the image seen triggers an almost instantaneous reaction from the brain. And third, photographs are an important part of the storytelling process.

“He taught me to see through his appearance,” Dobson told Scherer for her profile. Dobson and Stanush, in turn, show the reader that a person is more than his physical attributes. Scherer writes:

She [Dobson] captures the nuances of posture that are as expressive as a raised eyebrow or the crinkle in the corner of an eye. There’s the set of Jackson’s shoulder’s – all attention – as the therapist teaches him to use a headset. The stiff determined stride as he jogs. The exuberance in his raised metal forearms as he watches a football game to which he drove in his own car. And, most especially, there’s the unexpected tenderness in Jackson’s prosthetic claws as he holds a worn open Bible, its page marked by [his wife’s] picture and obituary. The layout itself is a progression that reflects the increments of Jackson’s physical and spiritual recovery.

The total collection of powerful photographs purposefully embedded in Dart Award-winning articles would make a fascinating and engrossing study in itself. They capture fear and anxiety in a child’s face, inconsolable grief over the death of a loved one and a partial mirror reflection of a teenage rape survivor that serves to obscure her identity as well as symbolize her fragmented outlook.

A photo that the Dart Center has used in a number of publications is of an older woman’s hands holding a gold heart-shaped locket with the picture of a young man’s face encased within the heart. This photograph conveys meaning that would be difficult to put into words. We learn from the article, “A Stolen Soul” (1999), that the man in the picture is the woman’s only son, who was shot and left to die on a sidewalk in Baltimore. He eventually dies in the hospital, leaving behind a father and a mother who spent four years waiting for her son’s killer to be caught and sentenced. Some of the photographs show the utter anguish the mother feels for having lost her only child. The locket photo, however, shows only deep, devoted and unending love.

Another strategically taken and used photo appeared on the front page of the *Providence Sunday Journal* when it ran “Rape in a Small Town” (2004). Not wanting to visually identify the teenage rape survivor who is the subject of the article, the large front-page photo showed only a portion of her face as reflected in a hand-held mirror. The photo is subtly powerful in that it shows the young face of the survivor, but it is a partial or fragmented image, perhaps a reflection of the fragmented identity experienced after a violent assault. Under the photo is a caption, two lines out of the survivor’s journal: “It’s like I’m a walking dead girl. I think of the times

I loved myself, better yet, liked myself.” The caption and the photo together speak to the trauma of surviving a sexual assault while affording some privacy to the survivor who is trying to heal from the emotional wounds left by her attacker.

“Children of the Underground” (1998) uses large, compelling photos throughout the pages. The front page features a photo of a 13-year-old girl with worry etched on her face as she holds a telephone receiver to her head. The scene behind is her dark, grey and dreary. Her hair is scraggly. She looks like she may have been crying. The photo as it appears on the page is more than 12 inches in width and eight-and-a-half inches in height. The first thing you see when looking at the page is the girl’s frightened, worried expression. The photographic layout in “Children of the Underground” is like a gallery of human misery, resilience and determination. The adult perpetrators and victims in this story are not always clear. The “truth” boils down to who the reader believes more, or believes at all. The children, however, have a kind of innocence that is captured in their photographs. They seem trapped or caught in a situation too complex for their young minds to analyze. All their faces seem to reveal is spontaneous, guileless feeling.

After carefully reviewing one Dart Award winner after another, one soon realizes

Graphic art can convey considerable information to readers in easy-to-digest visual representation.

how vital photographs are to the telling of a story. First of all, they can draw you in to a story, getting your attention from the get-go with an image that invites a closer look. Second, photographs can invoke immediate emotions as the image seen triggers an almost instantaneous reaction from the brain. And third, photographs are an important part of the storytelling process. Exposition, plot and denouement progress through both words and pictures.

Graphic art can also convey considerable information to readers in easy-to-digest visual representation. A number of Dart Award winners used graphic art, along with photography, as part of their stories. Timelines, boxed information, highlighted “factoids” and an array of other graphic representations can enhance the cognitive and visual impact of a story, as well as reduce complex details to a more reader-friendly format. Graphic art and photographs in “The Path of a Bullet” (1997) special report take up a large proportion of most pages in the report and draw readers’ eyes to a dynamic and striking layout rather than a static flow of text. These artistically crafted images, all created by Paul Penzella, provide information about medical costs, police costs, incarceration costs, hand gun types and – perhaps most startling – a graphic titled, “The Real Cost of a Bullet,” which details the economic costs of a 22-cent bullet as estimated from an actual case

involving a real murder victim and four suspects.

Compelling, sensible and informative newspaper design and layout involves knowledge and experience by professionals. The Dart Award recognizes the contributions of these professionals, which is why the award is meant to be a team award. Remember: It takes a team to construct the total package.

Trauma reporting is a noble calling, but it can also be emotionally and physically demanding. Remember to take care of yourself and your colleagues.

Best Practices

This “best practices” approach to learning about trauma reporting relied on news stories that have been evaluated by diverse teams of judges to be models of excellence. The stories are not necessarily perfect examples, but they stood out among their peers for a wide variety of objective and subjective reasons. An example of an objective reason might be that they met a particular criterion that judges felt was important, such as focusing on the victim or survivor, not the perpetrator. An example of a subjective reason might be that the story affected the judge at an emotional level, making an impact that left a meaningful and lingering impression of some kind.

A best practices guide can point you in the right direction by providing examples, ideas, issues, suggestions, recommendations, guidelines and so forth related to trauma reporting. The goal is to share strategies, activities and approaches that have worked for others in the hope that they may also work for you or inspire your own strategies, activities and approaches. Paying close attention to the elements of trauma reporting as discussed in this guide will help prepare you for writing excellent stories in every sense of the word.

Some of the elements discussed in this guide are listed below:

- Teamwork
- Focus
- Length
- Proximity and “Acts”
- Narrative Styles
- Social Data
- Sourcing
- International Perspectives
- Time & Energy Investment
- Interpretation
- Resources & Notes
- Cautionary Notes
- Feedback
- Policy Issues
- Follow-Up
- Layout & Visuals

Also important are the concepts of:

- Self-care
- Preparation
- Training

This guide lays the foundation, providing the beginnings to developing competencies in trauma reporting. The rest is up to you with experience, lifelong learning, writing ability, journalistic instincts, sensitivity and understanding of complex situations and, when needed, helpful editorial or peer support and guidance.

Now that you have a taste of the Dart Award-winning articles, go the Dart Center Web site to take in the full meal. Full-length winning articles can be found at www.dartaward.org. Continue to learn by observing and thinking about the ways that other journalists have written about trauma. What resonates with you about these stories? What ideas can you take away that you can apply to your own trauma reporting in the future?

Trauma reporting is a noble calling, but it can also be emotionally and physically demanding. Remember to take care of yourself and your colleagues. The section called Self-Care at the end of this guide can help.

A Reporter's Perspective



Daniel Vargas, reporter for the *Houston Chronicle*, gave this acceptance speech at the 2003 Dart Award ceremony in New York City on April 2, 2003. His story, "Legacy of Love & Pain," won the Dart Award that year. Vargas' description of why and how he pursued this story is a reflection of both journalistic professionalism and human sensitivity. It is a succinct and excellent example of how one journalist approached the daunting task of writing about a specific case of trauma that "hit a nerve" in him personally and reflected a larger social problem.

On April 9, 2001 a shocking offense occurred in an overlooked public housing project in Houston: a mother of five was purposely set ablaze by her estranged husband - the man who once vowed to love, honor and cherish her had tried to kill her. The attack was initially reported by the media but quickly faded in favor of other news stories. Meanwhile, Angela Hudson was fighting for her life after suffering second- and third-degree burns from her waist to the top of her head.

When I read the newspaper brief about this attack, I was instantly drawn to the story. Partly because of the brutality of the assault. Mostly because it hit a nerve. Like many others, I grew up a witness to domestic violence, although less violent in comparison to Hudson's situation. Yet, the memories to this day are vivid. I can still hear the squeal of police sirens. I can still see my older sister (time and time again) black and blue after her husband beat her. I can still smell the fear.

I knew firsthand that the effects go beyond the offender and victim. They extend generations.

When I approached Hudson's mother, Doris Tate, in the burn unit waiting room, I recognized her face. It was one of loneliness and heartache. I had seen that face before.

She shared pictures of her oldest daughter with me and how she spiraled from a loving, outgoing woman to a defeated and controlled wife. Understandably, Tate was reluctant at first to cooperate on a story. Her daughter was on life support clinging to life. This was the worst moment of their lives and a reporter and photographer — strangers — were asking to document it all.

Andrew Innerarity, the photographer on this project, and I pledged to be respectful of the family's wishes including Angela's decision to participate in the story once she was able to make that determination on her own. It was a huge gamble journalistically speaking, but we were there to report a remarkable story not worsen a family's pain or hinder the recovery process. This, after all, was a family who never dealt with the media. They, like all other victims of crime, deserved that extra care.

After that, they allowed us tremendous access — from heart-wrenching visits in the sterile burn unit to family birthday parties. As we spent our days, nights, weekends and holidays with the family, they shared their history with us — an unfortunate legacy of domestic abuse that is far too prevalent in our society. Each of these women (including Hudson's teen-age daughter Angel) had a story to tell — from the past, present to

the future. Three voices. Three perspectives.

The reader response was tremendous. In two days following the story, more than 100 women contacted shelters wanting help to escape their abusive situations. And those are just the ones we know about. That's all the family wanted out of this endeavor — to help others so that they wouldn't have to suffer as this family had.

Today the family continues to receive calls from well-wishers. To them it's a good sign; their message of hope is still circulating. I'm happy to report that the family is slowly moving forward. Angela Hudson is back with her children although they once again live in the apartment where the attack took place. She says it's a sacrifice she's willing to make to be a mother again.

Only recently did I tell the Tates and Hudsons of my experiences with domestic violence. As journalists we are taught to be fair and impartial and to keep our feelings on the sidelines. I believe in those tenets, but that shouldn't preclude us from drawing upon our life experiences to report stories others can't quite see or comprehend. You see, it's our unique experiences that give us the insight and the ability to tell a story with more heart, more feeling. It's that

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perspective that makes the story more than a collection of words.

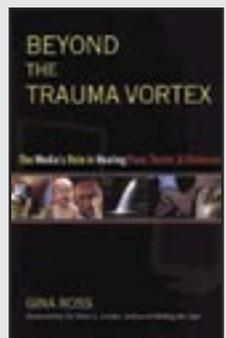
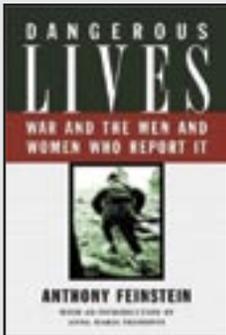
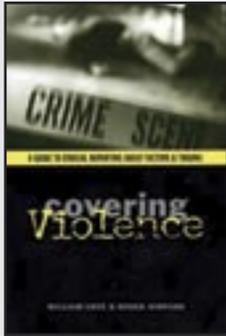
Tonight's ceremony comes during a time when terrorism and the war in Iraq dominate headlines. (Right now, Andrew Innerarity is imbedded with Fort Hood troops who are on their way to the Persian Gulf.) The Dart Award reminds journalists not only of the importance of covering the news events but also documenting the life-changing effects and trauma that will no doubt be left behind.

On behalf of the *Houston Chronicle* and all my colleagues (from editors to designers) who worked so hard on this project, I'd like to thank the Dart Center for recognizing newspaper coverage that documents the effects of violence — whether it is a catastrophic event or a brief but savage moment of domestic violence. It's an honor to be this year's recipient of the prestigious Dart Award. We are thrilled yet humbled by the recognition.

I'd especially like to thank Angela Hudson, Doris Tate and Angel Tate for sharing their heart-tugging journey with us. Their bravery and resiliency is nothing short of inspiring.

Thank you.

For Further Study



A relatively early research study by Simpson and Boggs (1999) called, “An Exploratory Study of Traumatic Stress Among Newspaper Journalists,” was published in the Spring 1999 issue of *Journalism and Communication Monographs*. This study of 131 participants from daily newspapers in Washington and Michigan showed that journalists were susceptible to traumatic stress after exposure to traumatic events they covered as news stories.

Other studies have supported this finding. Feinstein’s (2003) *Dangerous Lives: War and the Men and Women Who Report It* is written by a neuropsychiatrist who studied the effects of trauma on war journalists. He found that many of these journalists experience work-related psychological distress, including Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, alcoholism and depression.

How prevalent is exposure to traumatic events among journalists? Pyevich’s (2001) doctoral dissertation involved conducting an online survey of 906 newspaper journalists at daily newspapers in the United States. She found that more than 95 percent of them covered at least one violent or traumatic assignment in the year 2000 in which they were personally threatened, exposed to events in which people are hurt or killed, or indirectly involved with events in which people are hurt or killed.

The Dart Center has been providing information and resources to news organizations and journalists who have been exposed to trauma and violence directly or indirectly. A seminal book on journalism and trauma was authored by Coté and Simpson (2000) and is currently being updated. Called *Covering Violence: A Guide to Ethical Reporting About Victims & Trauma*, the book discusses the science of trauma and relates it to the journalistic experience. Interviews with journalists who have covered violent crime stories and actual story examples are included in the book. This text provides substantial conceptual and practical information for journalism students and practicing journalists alike.

Another publication that is of practical value to journalists is Ross’ (2003) booklet called *Beyond the Trauma Vortex: The Media’s Role in Healing Fear, Terror, & Violence*. This booklet provides bullet-pointed information about trauma and its second-hand effects on the public (via the media) and on journalists themselves. The author has enumerated four goals in writing this publication: 1) To provide information on the nature and characteristics of trauma the media can pass on to the public; 2) To explore the issue of second-hand trauma and its effect on journalists, and offer tools to cope with it; 3) To explore second-hand trauma’s impact on the public with suggested guidelines for the media to

avoid contributing to it; and 4) To learn how to work with the “political trauma vortex” and enhance the power of the “political healing vortex” (terms which she explains in her booklet).

The Dart Center for Journalism & Trauma web site is a repository of useful resources and can be accessed at:

www.dartcenter.org.



Talk to a person about how you're feeling during these times. It can be an editor, a peer or spouse, but you must trust that the listener will not pass judgment on you. Perhaps it is someone who has faced a similar experience."

– Joe Hight, President, Dart Center for Journalism & Trauma Executive Committee.

Self-Care

Finally, an important component of trauma reporting pertains to journalists themselves. The Dart Center encourages journalists to practice self-care – i.e., to treat themselves with compassion and respect, so that they will do the same to others. More news organizations are taking seriously their responsibility to prepare journalists for the stress of trauma reporting. Mark Brayne, former BBC and Reuters foreign correspondent and current director of Dart Centre Europe, for example, has worked with the BBC on a new program of trauma training and support for journalists and program makers. His writings, lectures and training sessions help prepare journalists for trauma and help them cope with its effects.

Teaching journalists how to take care of themselves when covering trauma is an important part of trauma reporting. A psychologically healthy and “trauma-literate” journalist is more likely to be sensitive to victims than someone who has not adequately processed his or her experiences. Joe Hight, president of the Dart Center’s Executive Committee and managing editor of *The Daily Oklahoman*, provided the following practical self-care tips for journalists who cover trauma:

- Get away from your desk and take brief breaks. Look outside to see that the sun is shining and life continues.
- Try deep breathing. The Eastern Connecticut Health Network recommends that you “take a long, slow, deep breath to the count of five, then exhale slowly to the count of five. Imagine breathing out excess tension and breathing in relaxation.”
- Talk to a person that you trust about how you're feeling during these times. It can be an editor, a peer or spouse, but you must trust that the listener will not pass judgment on you. Perhaps it is someone who has faced a similar experience.
- Exercise. Twenty minutes of walking or other forms of exercise can be a great stress reducer.
- Listen to music. Do your favorite hobby. Go to church. Laugh. Do something that relaxes you or provides you with relief from the pressures.
- Eat right — most difficult for any journalist. Foods high in protein or vitamins A, B or C can help reduce stress. And, yes, the experts say the coffee and doughnuts that we've been chugging down really don't help. (However, they're great in the morning, if you didn't get enough sleep. Oh, that could be another tip: If you can, get enough sleep.)
- As Oklahoma City counselor Charlotte Lankard, who provided counseling to *The Oklahoman's* newsroom after the 1995 bombing and 1999 tornadoes, advises: “Write about it. Talk about it. Cry about it.”
- However, if your problems become overwhelming, seek counseling from a professional.

Our belief at the Dart Center is that journalists with an understanding of trauma are both more likely to stay emotionally healthy and to be better equipped to report violence, or the impact of violence, with sensitivity, respect and authenticity.

About the Author

Kevin Kawamoto, Ph.D. has worked in media and communications as an educator, researcher and practitioner. He is currently a Seattle-based writer pursuing an advanced degree in clinical social work and studying group psychotherapy.

About the Dart Center

Stories of trauma and violence are the stuff of news. Along with firefighters, police and emergency workers, journalists witness profound human suffering in their work. With other first responders, journalists face the dual challenge of responding professionally to what they witness and dealing with the psychological impact on themselves and their colleagues.

Why journalism and trauma?

In recent years, news organizations have begun to recognize the emotional impact of trauma on journalists and to add training and support for trauma effects along with attention to physical safety. The result of exposure to trauma, in extreme cases, can be Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) — a treatable clinical condition whose symptoms can include nightmares and flashbacks, heightened state of anxiety and a desire to avoid reminders of the triggering event. Reporting violence and trauma can take a severe toll on the individual, families, friends and co-workers.

What is the Dart Center?

The Dart Center for Journalism & Trauma is a global network of journalists, journalism educators and health professionals dedicated to improving media coverage of trauma, conflict and tragedy. The Center also addresses the consequences of such coverage for those working in journalism. To these ends, the Dart Center:

- Advocates ethical and thorough reporting of trauma; sensitive, professional treatment of victims and survivors by journalists, and greater awareness by media organizations of the impact of trauma coverage on both news professionals and news consumers.

- Educates working journalists about the science and psychology of trauma and the implications for news coverage through this website, academic research, seminars, workshops and training.
- Serves as a forum for print, broadcast and Internet journalists to analyze issues, exchange ideas and advance strategies related to reporting on violence and catastrophic stress. We also create and sustain partnerships among media professionals, therapists and others concerned with trauma, and nurture peer-support among working journalists.

Visit us online at:

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www.DartCenter.org

Dart Award

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