



Joe Skipper / Reuters

A technician works in the “Acquisition Room”, which receives television feeds from around the world, during an event to mark the opening of the new Univision and Fusion television networks newsroom in Doral, Florida August 28, 2013.

Developing Your Own Standard Operating Procedure for Handling Traumatic Imagery

By Gavin Rees

A standard operating procedure (S.O.P.) is a device for building a systematic approach to a task. This guide goes through a series of structured steps for how to craft a personalised workflow for handling graphic content that depicts death, injury, and other violations.

Before reading any further, make sure that you have read the Dart Centre’s tip sheet^[1] on Working with Traumatic Imagery. It introduces the following topics:

- Why reviewing material, even at a distance from the events described, engages the body’s biological alarm systems
- How journalists are highly resilient but still need to take measures to protect themselves from the potentially adverse effects of trauma exposure
- Why it is useful to think of traumatic images as a kind of radiation that may have a dose-dependent impact
- The importance of minimising unnecessary exposure
- The need to have self-care routines in place and to remain socially connected

This guide looks in more detail at specific routines for handling the images themselves.

Traumatic User Generated Content (UGC) can demand our attention in ways that we may not be fully aware of. At times, we may feel forced to avert our gaze; at others, sucked in, almost as if the material is forcing us to look. Gory images don't just tell us what has happened at a particular place and time, they also have various subtle effects on how we process that information. When confronted with visual horror, we often feel less intellectually agile, and may as a consequence be more likely to get stuck on limited dimensions of the story.

Pushing back against this effect is important both for preserving news judgement and for self-care reasons. We know from trauma research that the greater the sense of control people have over how they experience traumatic exposure, the more resilient they tend to be.^[1] Simple rituals, deliberative pauses, and other acts that build in a certain amount of distance from content can help cultivate a sense that one is in charge of the material, rather than the other way around.

TACTICS: HANDLING STILL IMAGES AND VIDEO

Below are some options for how you might handle incoming material. Not all the suggestions will be relevant to your situation or work for you, so feel free to experiment.

Step 1. hit pause

If you know the material is graphic, it's best not to click on it without a procedure in mind. If it catches you unawares, hit pause straight away to disrupt the tendency to cruise-ahead on autopilot. If you are working with video, park the play-head at a frame that is not traumatic.

Step 2. disrupt and then decide

Simple ritualised acts can be good "disrupters": devices for freeing up headspace, building in a little distance, and ensuring one takes a more deliberate approach to the next stages of engagement. For your own S.O.P., you might consider doing some of the following before turning back to the imagery.

Changing your viewing position, by for example, standing up and looking away from the screen. *Staring out of the window or looking at something that is living, like foliage or an indoor plant, may boost the "resetting" effect.*^[3]

- **Steeling yourself**, by putting on imaginary protective clothing of some kind, such as a raincoat, or visualising that bulletproof glass exists between oneself and the screen. *Forensic investigators use these techniques.*
- **Taking one or more deep breaths.** We tend to breathe more shallowly or haltingly when working with screens. Deep diaphragmatic breaths help calm the body's distress responses, and are used by other professionals in high-stress environments. *Breathe from the belly, inhaling slowly through the nose and out through the mouth, making the out-breath somewhat longer than the inhalation. The military call variants of this "tactical breathing".*

The relevant questions now are:

- Do I need to see this now? *If you have a choice, it is best not to work with material when you are tired. See step 6 below for more details.*
- Do I need to see all of it, or just sections?
- Do I need to see it at all? How does this material fit into my purpose of explaining events or telling a story? *If you know this material is old, can't be used, or is of no real relevance to your objectives, it is best not to engage.*

Step 3. set the machine

Altering how you view material can help build in some distance. Try:

- **Changing the position of the window and making it smaller.** *This disrupts the narrative flow of the material and builds in distance.*
- **Lowering the sound, or turning it off altogether.** *Sound is often the most affecting part of a video. You can always turn it back on later if you need to.*
- **Reducing the colour vibrancy by adjusting the saturation controls (if the equipment allows).** *Turning saturation all the way down should switch the image to black and white.*

Step 4. be active and analytic

When returning to the video to verify material, you may need to look at it in detail in real time, with the sound on. But consider whether this is strictly necessary for your current task - it may just be force of habit. Here are some options for minimising unnecessary exposure:

- **Taking notes to minimise the need to go back and forth repeatedly** over distressing footage you have already seen. *If you are comparing videos or images, you may find that taking partial screen shots of clothing, architectural features, or perpetrators faces is all you need to track down the location, or make a match with other footage.*
- **Scrubbing through**, or dragging your cursor through the timeline, in order to locate aversive sections. If you don't need to look at them in detail, then don't.
- **Riding the audio controls.** If you need to listen to audio, toggle the volume up and down as if tuning an old-fashioned radio to the correct station.
- **Blocking out the most distressing sections of an image** so that you can work with the rest more effectively. Consider using a temporary matte – like a black marquee box – in software; or for a low-tech solution, try propping a book or a piece of cardboard against the screen. *Sometimes, the most distressing sections may not be images of actual injury. A child's personal possessions or clothes, for example, might be more difficult to look at if they remind you of your own children.*
- **Specifics for film editors:** Avoid using loop play or working with dynamic trim rollers when cutting around images of death or body parts; and consider setting clip thumbnails to images that are less intense. (But don't forget to colour-code, label or title your clips in a way that makes it clear that they contain disturbing content.) Use temporary mattes wherever possible to avoid unnecessary repeat viewing. You may also need to have a conversation with your producer about finding the best time to work on particularly traumatic sequences. Ideally, you don't want to be constantly reworking these scenes when you are tired. See step 6 for details.
- **Specifics for translators:** Even if you need to listen to audio in detail for translation purposes, experiment with ways of building in some protective distance. For example, if you are transcribing, you might try looking away when you are typing and focusing on some abstract quality of the subject's speech, such as their accent or their individual choice of words. When working with footage of perpetrators, some journalists find it helpful to cut these perpetrators down to size by thinking of them as inadequate rather than powerful. Humour may help here. Make sure that you take regular breaks so that you are not working with the material when you are too tired. See step 6 below.

Step 5. think of colleagues down the line: log and tag

Never pass traumatic imagery on to a co-worker without a warning that it contains graphic material. People are more resilient to shocking content if they have an opportunity to first firm up their inner defences. Files left on a server should also be properly tagged, and ideally restricted from general access to minimise the chance of colleagues stumbling on material by

accident. Consider:

- **Adding a standard, unambiguous strap-line in email subject headings and log sheets.**
For example: "WARNING: CONTAINS / LINKS TO TRAUMATIC CONTENT"
- **Giving a rough description of the material in accompanying notes**, such as "body parts", "signs of torture", "beheading", etc. Be sure to mention if it contains children or sexual violence.
- **Jotting down time-codes for the most adverse sections of video footage.** This allows people to skip sections they don't need to view.

Step 6. take breaks whenever your concentration lapses

Research shows that we are most vulnerable to emotional overload when we begin to feel fatigued. Neuroscientists also suspect that when we are tired and not fully utilizing the more analytical functions of our brains, we may be more likely to "record" traumatic images in a way that leads them to come back as nightmares or intrusive images. (For example, doing a double take when you think you have seen a potential assailant in the corner of your eye – or other elements of the material you are working with – only to discover there is nothing there.)^[4] If you start to feel tired, agitated or spaced out, never let the material wash through you; do something to shift that pattern. These strategies can help:

- **Taking regular screen breaks and shifting your viewing position.** Getting some fresh air and moving your body by walking somewhere is often a good idea. (If your supervisor doesn't understand why you need to do this, explain why and send them this guide.)
- **Paying heed to basic physical needs.** Not eating properly or skipping meals, being inadequately hydrated, and drinking too much caffeine can all impair the brain's capacity to deal effectively with disturbing emotional content.
- **Making time for conscious breathing.** Try five or more deep diaphragmatic breaths. **See Step 2 above.**
- **Identifying how you are feeling.** Simply itemising your own physical and emotional reactions, and giving a name to them can help bolster a sense of control. **And don't underestimate the value of being open with colleagues about the intense nature of material you are dealing with. It may also encourage others to be more proactive in taking care of themselves.**
- **Using a recognised grounding technique if you start to feel "spaced out", unusually "floaty" or that you are being sucked into the content.** It can help to break screen contact and look around the room or out of a window to remind yourself that the events depicted in the video are not happening in the space around you. But if that doesn't work, try other more deliberate techniques, such as counting backwards, trying to remember the colour of the socks you are wearing, or tallying a certain category of object in the room. Actions that put you back in touch with your body – like stretching, squeezing, shaking a limb or using a self-massage technique, such as padding oneself with a softly-furled fist – can work to disrupt that overly-wired, spaced-out feeling.
- **Using humour as a distancing mechanism.** Making light of terrible things can help you to regain balance, and often reduces tension and boosts camaraderie at bleak moments. You should be a little careful with black humour, though. Be cautious about forcing it on people who don't appreciate it or on those outside of your core work group, such as interns, new staff and members of the public who are less likely to understand its root. ***If black humour is the only tool you use to manage the trauma load, it's best to broaden your repertoire. Over-reliance on black humour may lead to a kind of emotional tone-deafness where all horror and tragedy, even in one's own personal life, becomes macabre or funny, making it harder to respond to effectively.***

Step 7. putting a lid on the work

Using a ritual or doing something pleasurable can help “park” the content when you take a break or finish work for the day. This makes it less likely that the content will spill into whatever you are doing next. You could try:

- **Distraction files.** Some journalists and video editors have found that keeping what they call “distraction files” – pictures of cute puppies or landscapes, etc. – to be a useful way of transitioning out of verification work. There is evidence to suggest that looking at pleasurable images that are different from the material that you have been verifying can help “disrupt” how distressing material is encoded in the memory. (Playing ten-minutes of Tetris, a non-violent video game which involves a concentrated visual-processing task, has been shown to have this effect in lab settings.)^[6] If you are working intensively with traumatic imagery, don’t feel any guilt for spending time catching up on something pleasurable afterwards, be it entertainment media or Internet shopping.
- **A more deliberate transition ritual.** Examples might include walking around the block, washing your hands or face, or physically tidying the space that you are working in. If you used a visualisation technique such as putting on a raincoat when you started work, you might imagine taking it off when you finish. The more aversive the material is, the more deliberate you might want to be about this.
- **A practice that acknowledges the reality of what happened in the material you have just engaged with.** Some people may want to take a spiritual, religious, or humanistic approach to mark the transition away from a period of working with traumatic imagery. For instance, they might take an inward moment to acknowledge what has been documented, to register compassion for the suffering of those who have been filmed or photographed, and to wish that others are spared of such experiences.

STRATEGIES: PLANNING WHEN YOU WORK

We don’t always have full control over when we work with traumatic images. Nevertheless, when you schedule your work, it is important to manage your energy levels and to be mindful of how working with graphic content can impact other activities in your life. Ideally you should:

Give your best working hours to the worst material. As explained above, if you have a choice in the matter, it is best to work with traumatic imagery during times in the day when you are at your freshest and most able to concentrate analytically. Our brains are less effective at processing traumatic material when we are tired.

Avoid working with traumatic imagery late at night before sleep. Research suggests that we are more likely to experience intrusions – seeing things, nightmares, etc. – if our sleep is broken or disrupted. And so be careful with anything that is likely to leave you feeling wired before going to bed: Late night exercise, caffeine, and working with traumatic imagery can all make it harder to sleep. Heavy drinking late at night is also more likely to disrupt sleep than aid it; alcohol flips from acting as a sedative to a stimulant several hours later, which increases the chance of waking up in the middle of the night. Depending on alcohol as a sleep aid, then, is a bad idea if you are working intensively with traumatic imagery.^[6]

Taking power-naps during the day can be a good way of maintaining overall alertness, but don’t time them too close to your normal going to bed time, as that may make sleeping harder, and keep the naps short (10 to 20 minutes). Napping for longer than 20 minutes is more likely to induce sleep inertia, that incapacitating grogginess one can experience when waking up in the wrong phase of a full 90-minute sleep cycle.^[7]

Work as a team. Discuss the issues openly with colleagues, and try to understand who is impacted by what and how. People have different tolerance levels. For example, there may be somebody on your team who can’t tolerate images of vivisection or animal cruelty, but is not as affected by images of hurt children as a colleague who is a parent might be. Share the workload accordingly.

Keep work and personal life separate. Transitioning straight from work to social engagements or home life can be challenging. It can be hard to engage with people who are relaxing or having fun if material from work is still churning through your mind. Consider building in a buffer zone. You could, for example, organise your work so that you are doing non-trauma related administrative work or less intense research at the end of your shift; or, alternatively, do something completely unrelated on the way home. Some people find doing something physical, like cycling home or going for a run, to be an effective way of building a healthy separation between work and the rest of life.

THE BROADER PICTURE

The following questions and ideas have all come up during Dart Centre workshops and newsroom discussions:

I feel bad about not scrutinising every detail. Surely it is my duty to bear witness?

Some people feel they have a moral imperative to watch the material all the way through as a sign of showing respect to the dead or violated. To those people, some of the distancing mechanisms suggested here may seem disrespectful to victims or survivors, as they run counter to some established ideas of what it means to bear witness.

Whatever your personal view on this, try to be agile. Becoming overwhelmed from exposure to traumatic imagery can impair your ability to work with it effectively. And that doesn't benefit anyone, least of all the victims. Moreover, perpetrators often circulate images of atrocity with the deliberate attention of terrorising their opponents and pushing the news agenda in directions that suit their aims. Building in some strategic distance when viewing images is a way of pushing back against that. Self-care is a professional duty as well as an act of personal resistance.

I would feel like a coward if I didn't look...

The logic here is similar. Take the case of something that is likely to be particularly horror-inducing, such as a film in which a prisoner is beheaded. You might feel tempted to watch it to prove that you are not afraid, and to show your refusal to be intimidated by the perpetrators. It is worth remembering, though, that by watching the video you are doing precisely what the killers want you to do.

For people starting out with trauma work, it may be helpful to gradually build up their exposure to traumatic imagery as a way of inoculating against its effects. Nevertheless, the worst material is not the best place to start.

To look or not to look is always a personal decision, but it is probably best to avoid looking at anything that is not strictly necessary for work, especially if you are working with high volumes of material.

Is there anything wrong with wanting to look at traumatic material?

No. Some trauma researchers believe that as a species we have a natural desire to seek out knowledge of phenomena that threaten our existence as part of an attempt to develop mastery over them. People slowing down to get a better view of car crashes are often accused of voyeurism; but the desire to look is just as much an instinctive survival reaction as is the desire to turn away. Our brains need to approach danger in order to understand whether we should fight or flee.^[8] This need to understand what danger is may in part explain the appeal of thrillers and horror films.

Some journalists and analysts do, though, find that their personal thresholds reverse: The more heavily they work with traumatic imagery in the workplace, the less they feel the urge to view it

in leisure time.

Horror films that once brought excitement and a sense of release, instead start to feel fake and unnecessarily adrenalizing.

What if I start “seeing things” that I have been working on?

Intrusive recollections – re-seeing traumatic images one has been working with – are not unusual. Our brains are designed to form vivid pictures of disturbing things, so you may experience images popping back into consciousness at unexpected moments. That again is a function of our built-in survival apparatus.

Intrusions are usually nothing to worry about in-and-of themselves, unless they are particularly persistent and are associated with a longer and more general sense of becoming unwell or functioning poorly. If you are troubled by intrusive thoughts, try not to push the images away. Forcing yourself not to think about something can paradoxically help those thoughts to boomerang back. Instead, try and use your imagination to transform the images into something else. Apply the equivalent of a matte in your mind, or even blur the images, paint over them, or scroll forward to a moment in the video where the violence is no longer happening.

I am a manager. What should I be thinking of?

As a manager, you can't control the tide of toxic content coming into newsrooms, but you play a crucial role in mitigating impacts on staff. People are more resilient when they feel that their supervisors have their best interests at heart. You should:

- Understand how trauma-related issues can affect the newsroom, and where your duty of care lies
- Review newsroom workflows and file management procedures to make sure that they minimise unnecessary exposure to traumatic imagery
- Prepare new-staff for the nature of the work they will be asked to do ^[9]
- Foster a supportive and cohesive working environment
- Allow staff to take adequate breaks, and, if necessary, to rotate out of shifts that require high intensity work with user generated content to others that are less demanding
- Understand how the physical environment of a workspace – access to light, presence of plants, and various design features – contributes to resilience
- Respect people's needs to develop their own workflows and strategies for handling traumatic content
- Know how to identify and support journalists whose well-being is being affected by trauma exposure
- Ensure that your organisation has a comprehensive trauma-management and training policy

You can find more information on this on the Dart Centre website (www.dartcenter.org). There, you can also find resources for specific situations. For example, this one looks at what managers should do in the event of a colleague's death.

What are the warning signs for when someone is not doing so well?

Distress per se is not a sign of any kind of underlying emotional injury. Stories that involve human cruelty are likely to be upsetting. If you are working with such material, distress reactions – including anger, despair, bad dreams, periods of numbness, feeling agitated or wired, and difficulty concentrating – are far from unusual. Such periodic bouts of emotional

“bad weather” can be disruptive and annoying – and do require active self-care – but they are not signs in themselves that one needs to seek external help.

Do be attentive, though, to any reactions that get stuck and become generalised to other situations. There is a significant difference between feeling numb the first time you watch a traumatic video, and losing enthusiasm for activities outside of work or affection for people who matter to you. In terms of warning signs, be particularly alert to:

- Marked changes in character
- Unusual irritability, or explosive anger that fires up without apparent reason
- Images or thoughts related to a project intruding at unwanted times, which are unusually persistent and don't diminish over time. Particularly if they involve situations in which you imagine yourself being followed or attacked.
- Unusual isolation or withdrawal
- The sense that life has become meaningless or foreshortened
- A persistent and general feeling of being numb or deadened inside
- Increase in self-medication (alcohol, drugs, compulsive overworking, etc.)

If you have any concerns, please consult the Dart Centre's website for more information.

What else should I do to look after myself?

Everybody whose work involves trauma needs a self-care plan. Don't forget the importance of maintaining a balance between work and other aspects of life. Exercise and finding time for friends and family are important ways of restoring balance. Take time to reflect: the material you are working with could provoke political and moral questions, and challenge certain beliefs. You may find it helpful to talk these through with friends who have similar interests and values. Keeping a journal can also be a good way of both processing one's reactions and reconnecting with what matters to you. If a story starts to feel all consuming, as if nothing else matters any more, that is an indication that you should seek better balance.

SPREAD THE WORD

Don't be afraid to speak out about images or content you find distressing. It's very likely that your colleagues will also feel the same way, even if they don't express it. In particular, look out for inexperienced and younger colleagues by offering advice and being open about the challenges of working with intense graphic material. Solidarity and social connection are cornerstones of resilience.^[10]

If you find the advice in this helpful or have useful tips for how to manage traumatic imagery in your own workplace, please share with your colleagues.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Live links to the following resources can be found at the end of the digital version of this guide, available a www.goo.gl/Q7qHt9

They include:

- The Dart Centre's introductory tip sheet on Working with Traumatic Imagery
- Journalists and Vicarious Trauma, a handbook by First Draft News for journalists working on the digital front lines.
- Making Secondary Trauma a Primary Issue: A Study of Eyewitness Media and Vicarious Trauma on the Digital Frontline, a report by EyeWitnessMedia Hub
- High Res, a web resource created by the Australian military which offers guidance on tactical breathing and other techniques for dampening down the body's stress responses. Also available as an app.
- And many other useful Dart Centre resources

1 See www.dartcenter.org/content/working-with-traumatic-imagery

2 For two different approaches to these issues, see: Hartley, C. A., & Phelps, E. A. (2010). Changing fear: the neurocircuitry of emotion regulation. *Neuropsychopharmacology*, 35(1), 136-146, p139-142; and, Hobfoll, S. E., Watson, P., Bell, C. C., & Bryant..., R. A. (2007). Five essential elements of immediate and mid-term mass trauma intervention: empirical evidence. *Psychiatry*, 70(4), p293-6.

3 Park, S.-A., Song, C., Choi, J.-Y., Son, K.-C., & Miyazaki, Y. (2016). Foliage Plants Cause Physiological and Psychological Relaxation as Evidenced by Measurements of Prefrontal Cortex Activity and Profile of Mood States. *HortScience*, 51(10), 1308-1312.

4 The science behind this is complex. Areas in the pre-frontal cortex involved in executive control are thought to play an important role in dampening down distress responses. (See Ochsner, K. N., & Gross, J. J. (2005). The cognitive control of emotion. *Trends Cogn Sci*, 9(5), 242-249.) When tired we are less able to do this, as demonstrated by the following study in which alcohol plays a similar role to fatigue. See Bisby, J. A., Brewin, C. R., Leitz, J. R., & Valerie Curran, H. (2009). Acute effects of alcohol on the development of intrusive memories. *Psychopharmacology (Berl)*, 204(4), 655-666.

5 Researchers from the Medical Research Council Cognition and Brain Sciences Unit in the UK have conducted a series of studies examining the potential of the computer game Tetris as a tool for reducing intrusions from trauma exposure. In these experiments, subjects had to first bring to mind a film they had seen, and then begin intensive game play. In different studies, the research team has demonstrated significant reductions in intrusions if Tetris is played in the immediate window after exposure, and also if deployed a day later, after memories of the traumatic scenario had time to consolidate during sleep. The results are impressive, but rely on specific protocols being followed. See James, E. L., Bonsall, M. B., Hoppitt, L., Tunbridge, E. M., Geddes, J. R., Milton, A. L., & Holmes, E. A. (2015). Computer Game Play Reduces Intrusive Memories of Experimental Trauma via Reconsolidation-Update Mechanisms. *Psychol Sci*, 26(8), 1201-1215; and Iyadurai, L., Blackwell, S. E., Meiser-Stedman, R., Watson, P. C., Bonsall, M. B., Geddes, J. R., . . . Holmes, E. A. (2017). Preventing intrusive memories after trauma via a brief intervention involving Tetris computer game play in the emergency department: a proof-of-concept randomized controlled trial. *Mol Psychiatry*, CD006869.

6 Vandrey, R., Babson, K. A., Herrmann, E. S., & Bonn-Miller, M. O. (2014). Interactions between disordered sleep, post-traumatic stress disorder, and substance use disorders. *Int Rev Psychiatry*, 26(2), 237-247.

7 Milner, C. E., & Cote, K. A. (2009). Benefits of napping in healthy adults: impact of nap length, time of day, age, and experience with napping. *J Sleep Res*, 18(2), 272-281.

8 Three Acts of Trauma News, an essay by the psychiatrist Frank Ochberg, explores this theme further in the context of how journalists make news choices. www.giftfromwithin.org/pdf/threeract.pdf

9 The military and medical professions build resilience by gradually increasing new trainees' level of exposure to stressful or traumatic work. Rather than expose new entrants to the most intensive intake roles straight-away, think what you can do to pace their exposure so that they have more time to adjust to the role. In terms of learning how to work with trauma, gradual immersion is better than being thrown into the deep end. See Southwick, S. M., & Charney, D. S. (2012). *Resilience: The Science of Mastering Life's Greatest Challenges*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, especially chapter 3.

10 See Southwick and Charney (2012, chapters 4, 6 and 7)

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Prior to working at the Dart Centre, Gavin produced business and political news for US, British and Japanese news channels, and has worked on drama and documentary films for the BBC, Channel 4 and independent film companies. He was a leading producer on the BBC film *Hiroshima*, which won an International Emmy in 2006. He is a visiting fellow in the Media School at Bournemouth University, and is a board member of both the European Society of Traumatic Stress Studies and the UK Psychological Trauma Society.

Dart Centre Europe is the regional hub of the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma, a project of Columbia Graduate School of Journalism. A registered charity, it is dedicated to supporting informed, ethical and innovative media coverage of violence, conflict and tragedy. For more information about our work, see www.dartcenter.org.

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