



Journalist Fellowship Paper

# Violence-related trauma among frontline Burkinabè journalists

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# Contents

Introduction	3
Journalism on the frontline	4
What is PTSD?	6
Gauging comprehension of trauma among Burkinabè reporters	8
Methodology	8
Findings	9
What it's like reporting from the frontline	10
Self-reporting of PTSD-aligned symptoms	11
Preparation for the frontline	11
Support in newsrooms	12
Discussion of findings	12
The long-term impact of trauma on local journalists in Burkina Faso	14
The view on psychological support in newsrooms	16
How to address trauma in West African newsrooms	19
How should journalists be prepared before working in a conflict zone?	19
What training do journalists need in journalism schools, before entering the trade?	20
Conclusion	22

# Introduction

Burkina Faso is undergoing an unprecedented security crisis. What began as [small acts of banditry](#) following the resignation of President Blaise Compaoré in 2015 has escalated into a far more critical situation with numerous attempted coups and terrorist attacks.<sup>1</sup>

Attacks on security and defence force positions now increasingly affect civilians, resulting in more than [2 million internally displaced people](#) (IDPs), according to UNHCR.<sup>2</sup> To date, the conflict has claimed [7,600 lives](#) – 2,000 of those in 2023 alone.<sup>3</sup>

Despite successive coups in Burkina Faso – supposedly justified by the worsening security situation – the situation remains dire, with an increase of around 3.17% in the number of internally displaced people according to the latest figures from the Permanent Secretariat of the National Council for Emergency Relief and Rehabilitation (CONASUR).

The country faces a predominantly jihadist threat in the Sahel region at the southern edge of the Sahara Desert from two main terror groups: the Al Qaeda-affiliated JNIM (Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin), and the EIGS (Islamic State in the Greater Sahara), which defected from Nigeria's ISWAP (Islamic State West Africa Province) and pledged allegiance to the Islamic State.

The current junta, led by Captain Ibrahim Traoré, further militarised the conflict at the end of 2019 when he passed a new law to enlist civilians known as VDPs

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<sup>1</sup> 50 unidentified gunmen on a Burkina Faso gendarmerie brigade near the country's western border with Mali. See: <https://www.reuters.com/article/burkina-attacks-idAFL8N12945P20151009/>

<sup>2</sup> UNHCR, n.d. Burkina Faso. UNHCR Operational Data Portal. Available at: <https://reporting.unhcr.org/operational/operations/burkina-faso> [Accessed 8 July 2024].

<sup>3</sup> Human Rights Watch, 2024. Burkina Faso. World Report 2024. Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2024/country-chapters/burkina-faso> [Accessed 8 July 2024].

(Volunteers for the Defence of the Homeland).<sup>4</sup> The junta called for 50,000 volunteers and [90,000 enlisted](#).<sup>5</sup>

Despite the surge in defence, JNIM's offensive has spread to [10 of the nation's 13 regions](#) since then, with over 200 attacks carried out in 2022.<sup>6</sup> According to French daily *La Croix*, intensifying terror attacks have claimed [5,000 lives](#).<sup>7</sup>

### Journalism on the frontline

It is in this environment, fraught with physical and emotional risks, that journalists in Burkina Faso must fulfil their duty. They serve as sentinels, bridges, eyes, and ears for the people of Burkina Faso and the wider world. To report true and accurate information, they often need to get as close as possible to danger, frequently risking their own lives.

According to [Reporters Sans Frontières](#), five journalists have been killed in the Sahel in the past 10 years, and six have gone missing. Hundreds more have been threatened and can no longer work without putting their lives in danger.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Law N°028-2022/Alt Instituting Volunteers For The Defense Of The Homeland (Vdp), Loi N°028-2022/Alt (2022).

<sup>5</sup> ADF, 2023. Burkina Faso's Volunteer Defense Groups Pose Danger in Volatile Area. ADF Magazine, February. Available at: <https://adf-magazine.com/2023/02/burkina-fasos-volunteer-defense-groups-pose-danger-in-volatile-area/> [Accessed 8 July 2024].

<sup>6</sup> ACLED, 2022. 10 Conflicts to Worry About in 2022: Sahel Mid-Year Update. ACLED Data. Available at: <https://acleddata.com/10-conflicts-to-worry-about-in-2022/sahel/mid-year-update/> [Accessed 8 July 2024].

<sup>7</sup> La Croix, 2023. Le Burkina Faso impuissant à enrayer les attaques meurtrières contre les forces armées. La Croix, 6 September. Available at: <https://www.la-croix.com/Monde/Le-Burkina-Faso-impuissant-enrayer-attaques-meurtrieres-contre-forces-armees-2023-09-06-1201281590> [Accessed 8 July 2024].

<sup>8</sup> What it is like to be a Journalist in the Sahel, 2023, Reporters Sans Frontières [https://rsf.org/sites/default/files/medias/file/2023/04/What%20it%20is%20like%20to%20be%20a%20journalist%20in%20the%20Sahel\\_EN.pdf](https://rsf.org/sites/default/files/medias/file/2023/04/What%20it%20is%20like%20to%20be%20a%20journalist%20in%20the%20Sahel_EN.pdf)

As Dart Centre Asia Pacific's [Leading Resilience](#) guide puts it: "News reporters are often first on the scene. Decisions about whether the film or photos are appropriate to publish will be made later; their first objective is to capture what has happened."<sup>9</sup>

In this sense, journalists are like first responders. But, as Mark Brayne writes in [Trauma & Journalism](#): unlike soldiers and paramedics, they are least likely to be educated and equipped to recognise the psychological implications of that responsibility.<sup>10</sup>

In a [2002 study](#) of 140 war journalists co-authored by Dr Anthony Feinstein, the lifetime prevalence of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) was reported to be 28.6%.<sup>11</sup> It also found 21.4% experienced major depressive episodes and 14.3% reported substance abuse.

While the intensity of Burkina Faso's conflict is not comparable to the widespread destruction in hotspots like Gaza, for example, I wanted to understand whether Burkinabè war reporters are also experiencing symptoms of PTSD, and what internal mitigation mechanisms exist in press organisations to guard wellbeing.

To do so, I have surveyed 56 journalists and interviewed editors at three of Burkina Faso's biggest newsrooms. I also reviewed available resources and policies in other parts of the world to understand what we might do differently in our own region. Before I share these results, we must take a semiotic approach to defining PTSD and related terms.

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<sup>9</sup> Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma, n.d. *Leading Resilience: A Guide for Editors and News Managers on Working with Freelancers Exposed to Trauma*. Available at: [https://dartcenter.org/sites/default/files/leading\\_resilience\\_-\\_a\\_guide\\_for\\_editors\\_and\\_news\\_managers\\_on\\_working\\_with\\_freelancers\\_exposed\\_to\\_trauma.pdf](https://dartcenter.org/sites/default/files/leading_resilience_-_a_guide_for_editors_and_news_managers_on_working_with_freelancers_exposed_to_trauma.pdf) [Accessed 8 July 2024].

<sup>10</sup> Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma, n.d. *Journalism & Trauma: A Handbook for Journalists, Editors & Managers*. Available at: [https://dartcenter.org/sites/default/files/DCE\\_JournoTraumaHandbook.pdf](https://dartcenter.org/sites/default/files/DCE_JournoTraumaHandbook.pdf) [Accessed 8 July 2024].

<sup>11</sup> Feinstein, A., Owen, J. and Blair, N. (2002) 'A Hazardous Profession: War, Journalists, and Psychopathology', *American Journal of Psychiatry*. <https://psychiatryonline.org/doi/full/10.1176/appi.ajp.159.9.1570>. 2002/09/01, *American Psychiatric Publishing (AJP)*, 159(9), pp. 1570–1575. doi: 10.1176/appi.ajp.159.9.1570.

# What is PTSD?

To understand the concept of PTSD, we need to turn to psychiatry and mental health – an almost taboo topic in Burkina Faso.

PTSD can be defined as a clinical diagnosis of moderate to severe psychological disorders resulting from one or more traumatic experiences, leading to a specific set of symptoms. As [Dr Feinstein notes](#), it can also arise in individuals exposed to overwhelming threats.<sup>12</sup>

First defined in the third edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-III) in the 1980s, early PTSD research was heavily influenced by the experiences of Vietnam War veterans. Since then, much resource and attention has been paid to understanding and mitigating PTSD risk in soldiers, but comparatively little mind has been paid to the journalists who cover war.

As River J. Smith et al. wrote in their 2017 research, journalists face substantial physical and psychological risks in their daily working lives, and PTSD may be a consequence of their work.<sup>13</sup> Smith et al. report signs of PTSD in journalists include:

- intrusive memories (persistently re-experiencing traumatic events),
- avoidance of trauma-related cues,
- negative changes in thinking and mood, and
- changes in physical and emotional reactions.

For a diagnosis of PTSD to be made, these symptoms should not only be present, but creating significant impairment in social, occupational, or other key areas of functioning.

Dr Feinstein writes in *Journalists Under Fire: The Psychological Hazards of Covering War*: “Witnessing the death and the suffering of others and confronting dangers that increasingly include kidnapping for ransom and staged executions can prove

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<sup>12</sup> Feinstein, Anthony & Osmann, Jonas & Patel, Viral. (2018). Symptoms of PTSD in Frontline Journalists: A Retrospective Examination of 18 Years of War and Conflict. *The Canadian Journal of Psychiatry*. 63. 070674371877739. 10.1177/0706743718777396.

<sup>13</sup> River J. Smith, Susan Drevo, & Elana Newman. (2017, July 14). Covering traumatic news stories: Factors associated with post- traumatic stress disorder among journalists. 1/9 (218).

emotionally challenging, leaving journalists vulnerable to psychiatric illnesses like posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and major depression.”<sup>14</sup>

Newsrooms have traditionally upheld a culture of competitive mental toughness, according to researcher Raymond B. Flannery Jr., which is unhelpful in that it discourages journalists from reporting symptoms and seeking help.<sup>15</sup>

In the Sahel, and more specifically in Burkina Faso, journalists are directly or indirectly exposed to scenes of daily violence and macabre images. The risks incurred by these reporters are enormous. Compounding the risk, psychiatric diagnostic services in the country are poor, or sometimes non-existent. As you will see in the next section, most journalists I spoke to were not familiar with PTSD.

Depression is also not an easy subject to talk about, not only in newsrooms, but in Burkina Faso in general. It can be falsely equated with weakness and can have dire consequences for journalists in the newsroom. This specific aspect will be discussed in more detail later.

What the literature makes clear is that this problem needs to be tackled head-on by both editorial teams and authorities in charge of media-related issues. In the words of media researcher [Ola Ogunyemi](#):<sup>16</sup>

*"The devastating emotional and psychological impacts of witnessing traumatic events on journalists can no longer be ignored by editors and newsroom managers."*

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<sup>14</sup> Feinstein, A., 2006. *Journalists Under Fire: The Psychological Hazards of Covering War*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

<sup>15</sup> Raymond B. Flannery Jr. (2021, April 10). *News Journalists and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: A Review of Literature, 2011–2020*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11126-021-09920-z>

<sup>16</sup> Ogunyemi, O. (2023). Exploring the attitudes of journalism educators to teach trauma-informed literacy: an analysis of a global survey. ResearchGate. Available at: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/367375502\\_Exploring\\_the\\_attitudes\\_of\\_journalism\\_educators\\_to\\_teach\\_trauma\\_informed\\_literacy\\_an\\_analysis\\_of\\_a\\_global\\_survey](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/367375502_Exploring_the_attitudes_of_journalism_educators_to_teach_trauma_informed_literacy_an_analysis_of_a_global_survey) [Accessed 8 July 2024].

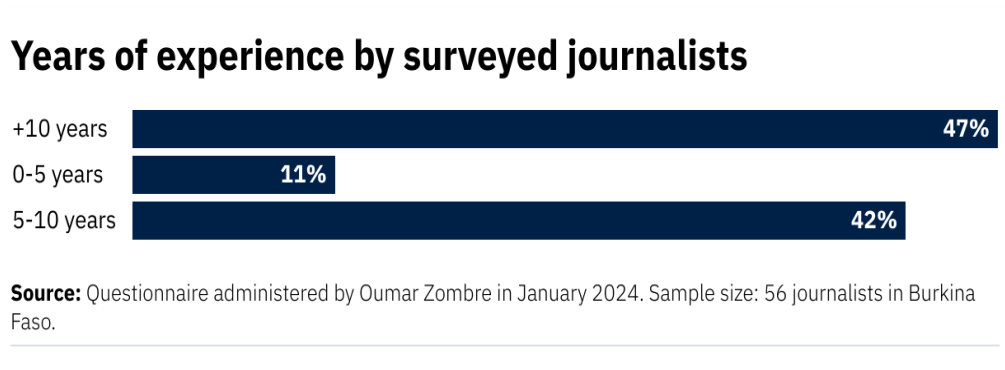
# Gauging comprehension of trauma among Burkinabè reporters

## Methodology

To gauge the comprehension of topics like trauma, depression, and PTSD among Burkinabè journalists, I compiled a questionnaire using Jisc that included 26 questions – both multiple-choice and long-form, in French (the *lingua franca* of Burkina Faso). It was sent to 80 journalists in Burkina Faso, of whom 56 responded.

The questions probed their experiences covering conflict, their knowledge of the psychological impact of witnessing trauma, psychosocial support available in their newsrooms, and their willingness to receive support.

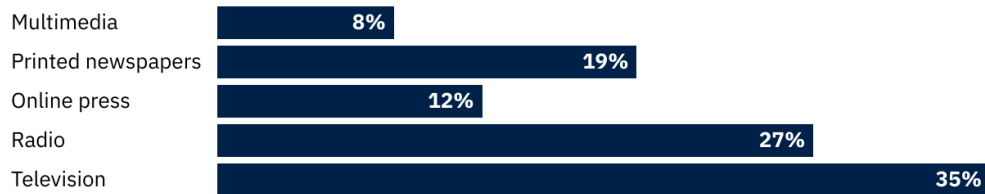
The sample included well-experienced journalists: 47% had worked for more than 10 years, while 42% worked for between five and 10 years.



Among the respondents, 35% working in television, 19% in print, 12% in online, 27% in radio and 8% in multimedia.



## Profile of journalists surveyed



**Source:** Questionnaire administered by Oumar Zombre in January 2024. Sample size: 56 journalists in Burkina Faso.

Geographically, 65% were based in the nation's central capital of Ouagadougou and 35% in various other provinces. In Burkina Faso, conflict reporting is not just the business of journalists in the capital; local journalists are also impacted by violence and are keen to report on these issues despite the additional difficulties they face, such as a lack of financial support and physical threats from terrorist activity.

Most of the respondents have dealt with conflict indirectly through images and victim interviews: very few are embedded full-time at the frontline, as I myself once was. RTB Television has three journalists reporting on the conflict full time, and two of them have been embedded with the armed forces. At major private TV stations like BF1 and Burkina Info, there are one or two journalists reporting on the conflict full time.

In accordance with the sensitivity of the subject matter, I guaranteed the anonymity of all participants.

### Findings

Among our 56 respondents, 83% of journalists said that have been to the frontline with soldiers or had gone solo to collect information related to the ongoing conflict.

Of these, 73% said they had not received any training in preparation on the risks of reporting in a warzone or being embedded with army and vigilantes. A further 4% said they are uncertain whether or not they had.

65% (36) reported that they had been exposed to traumatic imagery or had witnessed traumatic events.

Asked if they had heard of PTSD, 63% of respondents said "no". We asked the 36% who said "yes" to provide a definition. These responses (translated from French) included:

"Retaining a trauma after reporting in high-security zones where one has seen horror and scenes of violence."

"The situation of fear that drives a person after having been exposed to a traumatic scene."

"anxiety, fear, change of habits"

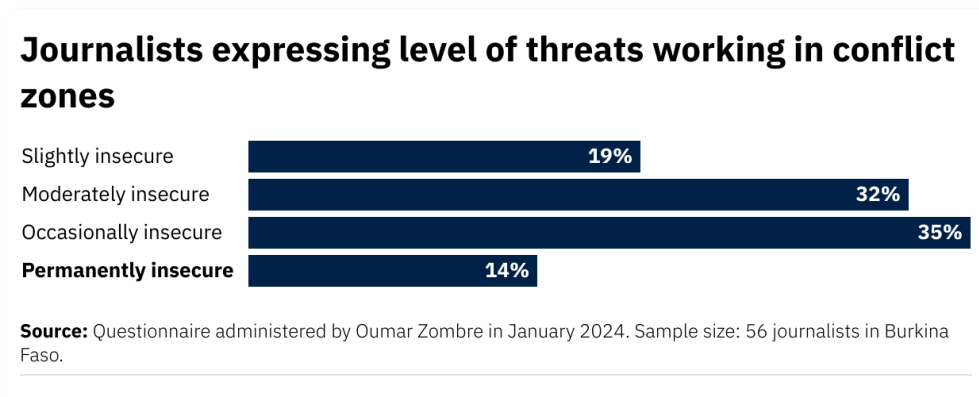
Asked if exposure to traumatic imagery and events had affected them in the past or was currently affecting them, 70% felt it had affected them in some way and 16% felt they were still feeling the effects. Among respondents, 45% said they knew someone who was suffering as a result of exposure to violence or traumatic imagery in the line of work.

Among those personally affected, 42% said they experienced anxiety, 13% said they were moderately stressed, 13% said they were moderately stressed, and 16% reported low levels of stress.

### What it's like reporting from the frontline

Among the journalists surveyed, those active in the field were more likely to report that their work made them feel insecure than desk editors (55% journalists vs 6% desk editors).

Among those experiencing feelings of insecurity around their work 14% reported feeling permanently insecure, 35% occasionally insecure, 32% moderately insecure and 19% slightly insecure.



65% said that they had been exposed to corpses, humanitarian tragedies, or scenes of violence during their career. 35% reported having nightmares as a result.

In Burkina Faso's current hostile environment, the high risks and hyper volatility of the threat. One of the major threats is improvised explosive devices (IEDs), which require journalists remain in a state of hypervigilance. More on this below.

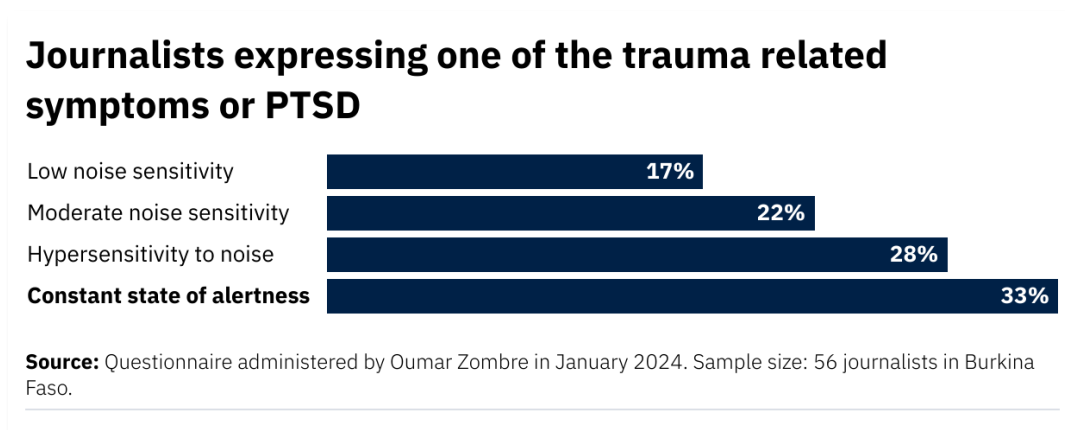
### Self-reporting of PTSD-aligned symptoms

A series of questions asked respondents to self-report on a series of symptoms related to PTSD. Asked if they experienced nightmares about what they had witnessed, 35% said "yes".

Asked about their sensitivity to scenes of violence after repeated exposure, 59% said they were less tolerant of traumatic images or horrific scenes.

Asked if they were in a state of permanent arousal since exposure, 33% said "yes", while 28% reported being hyper-sensitive to noise and 22% said they were moderately sensitive to noise.

Asked, "Have you ever been in a state of anxiety or prolonged fear after being exposed to images of violence or witnessing a scene of violence", 25% said "yes".



15% said trauma related images had negatively impacted their personal life.

### Preparation for the frontline

Among the journalists surveyed, 37% said that they have been embedded with the armed forces or with the VDPs.

Only 27% of the journalists said they had received training from the military before attending a conflict zone. Those few journalists are organised in an

encrypted messaging group created by the army. 79% said they had not received any first aid training before going to a conflict zone.

### Support in newsrooms

Of 56 journalists surveyed, 88% said they do not have psychological support or moral support in their newsroom.

Another 88% said they would like to have access to moral support or psychological support via their news organisation.

However, not everyone felt comfortable receiving that support from an internal source: 58% said they would not use internal psychological or moral support if their newsroom made it available.

This is likely because of how mental health is stigmatised in Burkina Faso generally and in newsrooms specifically, and seen as sign of weakness.

Underlining this point: 90% of journalists surveyed said they would make use of an external psychological service or a support centre if it was made available. Of 56 surveyed, 27 journalists left their phone numbers and email addresses, asking to be contacted if such a service became available.

### Discussion of findings

While many of the journalists surveyed were not aware of PTSD, a significant proportion reported experiencing symptoms of distress related to exposure to trauma. It is important to note that a journalist may experience distress without ever visiting the frontline.

As Lyn Barnes notes in her [2016 thesis](#), *Journalism and everyday trauma: a grounded theory of the impact from death-knocks and court reporting*, interviewing victims of crime or, in the case of court reporters, listening to the testimony of distressed survivors of violence can be traumatic for journalists, too.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Barnes, L., 2016. Journalism and everyday trauma: a grounded theory of the impact from death-knocks and court reporting. Auckland University of Technology. Available at: <https://openrepository.aut.ac.nz/handle/10292/10228> [Accessed 8 July 2024].

In addition to this, viewing unedited videos or photo files through the news desk or writing stories in dangerous working conditions, with exposure to sexual harassment, online harassment, threats, physical attacks, or losing a colleague to violence are all factors related to traumatic experience, as documented by researchers like Anke Weidmann, Jenny Papsdorf, and Anthony Feinstein, and cited by Ola Ogunyemi in 2023.<sup>18</sup>

Whether engaged in the frontline with military or not, prepared or not, all reporters know that many things can go wrong while reporting in the field. Not being duly prepared for these risks only further exposes journalists to remaining in a state of hypervigilance.

This survey provided journalists an opportunity to express their feelings about exposure to trauma. Not all journalists respond to challenges or express their feelings about traumatic situations in the same way. The information gathered during this survey confirms this variability.

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<sup>18</sup> See footnote 16

# The long-term impact of trauma on local journalists in Burkina Faso

As mentioned earlier, journalists who visit conflict zones in Burkina Faso are usually in a state of high alert due to the presence of improvised explosive devices (IEDs). These hidden and unpredictable landmines pose significant dangers, not just to soldiers but also to journalists.

In 2019, while embedded with the French Army in Burkina Faso, I witnessed two soldiers being killed after stepping on an IED.<sup>19</sup> They were scattered into pieces before my eyes. That horrible scene was the source of nightmares for many days after, and left a lasting impact on my psyche.

Exposure to such traumatic events can overwhelm thoughts and emotions, and individuals will express these feelings differently. Symptoms such as hyperarousal and heightened sensitivity to noise are common. For example, hearing a metallic "clank" noise can trigger recollections of the traumatic events, even long after the experience.

Not all journalistic experiences result in trauma; some journalists demonstrate remarkable resilience in the face of adversity. However, others do not adapt as well.

For those who are affected and unsupported, the lasting imprint of trauma can go on to affect their daily lives and productivity. Poorly managed trauma can lead to severe consequences such as alcohol and substance abuse, suicidal thoughts, and self-loathing.<sup>20</sup>

The Dart Centre lists signs of unresolved PTSD as including intrusive re-experiencing of the event, nightmares, physical reactions (such as palpitations and trembling), reduced concentration, irritability, anger, guilt, shame, difficulty

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<sup>19</sup> RTB - Radiodiffusion Télévision du Burkina, 2019. RTB - 3ème jour d'opération de la mission Bourgou IV. YouTube video, added by RTB - Radiodiffusion Télévision du Burkina [online]. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-hHzQE5SC6Q> [Accessed 8 July 2024].

<sup>20</sup> Yang, Yi. (2023). Causes and Recommendations of Stigma in PTSD. Lecture Notes in Education Psychology and Public Media. 9. 312-318. 10.54254/2753-7048/9/20230229.

sleeping, emotional numbness, detachment, and self-medication with alcohol or drugs.<sup>21</sup> The survey results above show that many Burkinabè journalists exhibit these symptoms, with some experiencing nightmares, detachment, or hypersensitivity to noise. Furthermore, 45% of surveyed journalists knew colleagues who had suffered from trauma or been deeply affected by exposure to traumatic scenes.

Journalists must recognise the need for professional help to deal with trauma, though denial is common due to the fear of being perceived as weak or losing field assignments. And, unfortunately, most newsrooms do not provide supportive environments for reporters to properly process these feelings.

Organisations like the BBC offer programmes like [Trauma Risk Management \(TRIM\)](#) to help war reporters manage their emotions after returning from hostile environments.<sup>22</sup> However, local news organisations in Burkina Faso often lack the resources to provide such crucial psychological support.

In the following sections, we will explore how newsrooms in Burkina Faso address PTSD and trauma-related issues and the perceptions of journalists regarding these challenges in their editorial departments.

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<sup>21</sup> See footnote 9.

<sup>22</sup> BBC, n.d. Trauma support. BBC Safety. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/safety/health/trauma-support> [Accessed 8 July 2024].

# The view on psychological support in newsrooms

Research has shown that peer support and management-level provisions are crucial in creating a newsroom environment where journalists can adequately process the trauma their work exposes them to.

According to the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma, having dedicated support resources within media organisations is important for several reasons. Firstly, it gives confidence to reporters knowing that a supportive facility is available upon their return from difficult assignments. Secondly, it provides a structured facility for processing major stress. Finally, the combination of these factors enhances journalistic resilience and productivity.<sup>23</sup>

Studies also indicate that the implementation of [peer support networks](#) helps journalists cope with stress and trauma. For example, informal peer support groups and employee assistance programs may help journalists manage job-related stress and trauma effectively.<sup>24</sup>

Finally, experts highlight that news organisations need to be [proactive in training](#) journalists to recognise symptoms of trauma in themselves and their peers.<sup>25</sup> This training enables early intervention, which is critical in preventing the escalation of trauma-related symptoms.

In Burkina Faso, it is exceedingly rare to find a media organisation offering any sort of official mental health support. I spoke to editors at the three most significant media outlets in the country: Omega Média, BF1 and RTB, and did follow-up interviews with a vast number of employees.

None of them have a unit dedicated to the wellbeing of journalists. Instead, social support is provided organically, mostly by veteran journalists in the newsroom.

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<sup>23</sup> See footnote 9.

<sup>24</sup> PEN America, 2023. The Power of Peer Support. Available at: <https://pen.org/the-power-of-peer-support/> [Accessed 8 July 2024].

<sup>25</sup> International Journalists' Network, 2023. Mental Health Tips for Journalists. Available at: <https://ijnnet.org/en/story/mental-health-tips-and-resources-journalists> [Accessed 8 July 2024].



Arrangements are informal and ad hoc, such as arranging visits to journalists who fall ill or collecting money in the event a colleague needs financial support following a bereavement or accident. That's how journalists described the support system at RTB, the biggest newsroom in Burkina Faso, which is thought to employ 2,000 people around the country.<sup>26</sup>

When our surveyed journalists were asked about support in Burkina Faso newsrooms, 19% said no support was given to journalists exposed to trauma, while 39% said they felt supported. The majority – 42% – said they were not sure if they were supported or not. When asked if their newsroom had a dedicated point of contact for journalistic wellbeing in the newsroom, 88% said "no".

By all accounts, Burkinabè journalists are on their own. An editor at a private media company in Burkina Faso told me, "We provide a certain amount of advice for our reporters on discretion in the field. With the security services, we try to have identity cards that do not mention the profession to avoid exposing journalists in the frontline."

Another editor struck a more hopeful note: "The difficult security situation in the country is causing a lot of concern – not just about security reportage but about other stories as well. That is why we talk a lot with the staff to encourage them to do their job. We share our advice and emotions, which is especially useful in defusing stress."

Upon the return of the journalists from the battlefield, they said, a debriefing session is organised to talk about the different challenges encountered by the reporters. This helps the journalists to express themselves openly about what they have undergone.

For several journalists I spoke to, expressing themselves openly with an editor was not an appealing concept. Stigmatization is a key concern, as they fear they will be ostracised in the newsroom if they are honest. A potential solution here might be to hire a dedicated psychological support resources: "It would help to overcome trauma and boost the morale of journalists and motivates others," wrote one survey respondent.

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<sup>26</sup> Official figures were not available.

When I asked editors about implementing this idea, they said it was not economically viable. "We have expressed the need to have a psychology or trauma specialist in our newsroom, but it is out of our reach and out of our budget," said an editor in private media. "We can't afford that luxury."

### Surveyed journalists expressing their need for a psychological support Centre



**Source:** Questionnaire administered by Oumar Zombre in January 2024. Sample size: 56 journalists in Burkina Faso.

In this context, a solution might be for media houses to pool their resources and create a centre that offers training, peer support and counselling services, in person and online, that any journalist in Burkina Faso can access.

# How to address trauma in West African newsrooms

As the conflict in Burkina Faso rages on, journalists will continue to face immense physical and emotional risks. To ensure the resilience of the Burkinabè reporting fraternity, several questions must be seriously addressed at many levels.

## How should journalists be prepared before working in a conflict zone?

At the preparation level, newsrooms have an essential role to play. The editorial department must provide training on how to behave in a dangerous situation and in combat.

First aid training must also be provided to journalists in Burkina Faso. It should be funded by newsrooms, with support from the public sector where possible. As the Dart Centre sees it: “If you have asked someone to cover a story for you, you have a legal and ethical duty of care to that person”.

Colleagues in western media have access to huge amounts of training material and support in English via organisations like the Rory Peck Trust and the Dart Center. The Dart Center, for example, has the following advice for newsrooms who wish to become trauma-ready:<sup>27</sup>

*Build fluent communication with your team on all levels. Freelancers and other news gatherers consistently report that open and frequent communication with the newsrooms is vital to their ability to do their job well. If you focus on building this culture, it will form a solid foundation from which to add trauma-aware conversations and check-ins.*

*Conduct a basic psychological health and wellbeing check or risk assessment.<sup>28</sup> Awareness of the physical and psychological risks of*

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<sup>27</sup> See footnote 10.

<sup>28</sup> See the appendix at the resource cited in Footnote 27 for a template of a risk assessment.

*trauma exposure and how your organisation will deal with it will increase individual news gatherers' confidence to do the 'tough' jobs – leading to better stories.*

*Talk through the possible emotional risks involved and the coordination and purpose of the assignment. Remind the team that distress from trauma exposure is a normal human reaction and not a weakness. It may even inform their reporting.*

*Reassure that disclosing distress will not impact on opportunities for future assignments. And follow through.*

*Acknowledge and appreciate the individual's willingness to do the assignment. Feeling valued keeps people emotionally balanced and more invested in their work.*

Newsrooms in Burkina Faso could also replicate BBC's TRIM experience.

### **What training do journalists need in journalism schools, before entering the trade?**

Many schools in Burkina Faso provide academic or professional training in journalism. None of them teach or prepare journalists to face trauma or related issues during their career.

Researcher Ogunyemi further notes that there is a gap in the literature on the attitudes of journalism educators towards equipping journalists with the skills to cope with traumatic events.<sup>29</sup>

Journalism schools worldwide are grappling with the challenges of embedding trauma-informed literacy in journalism curricula. In the United Kingdom, for example, a review of the curriculums of 63 journalists' vocational or academic

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<sup>29</sup> See footnote 16.

schools failed to find a single trauma-focused program or module or concrete mentions of trauma, vicarious trauma, PTSD or eyewitness media.<sup>30</sup>

Some organisations are bridging this gap by providing training materials. For example, Reuters' resource centre provides journalists with access to information and guidance on stress and burnout; trauma, vicarious trauma & PTSD; Covid-19; digital overload; mental illness; sexual harassment; and online harassment, according to the [Society of Editors](#).<sup>31</sup>

Finally, to address shortcomings in internal wellbeing resources of Burkina Faso newsrooms and journalism school training, I recommend the creation of a centralised independent resource for both journalists and journalism students. It need not serve only Burkina Faso: journalists across West Africa struggle with a similar landscape and lack of support and resources available in French.

**The ideal West African Centre for Journalistic Wellbeing would provide:**

- Training for editors and managers to create a supportive newsroom environment,
- Basic safety training for journalists before they enter a conflict zone,
- Training for journalists on how to handle exposure to traumatic news content, how to process difficult emotions, and how to identify and best support colleagues in distress,
- Training for journalists on how to conduct trauma-informed interviews
- Peer support networks for journalists,
- Confidential referrals for journalists with mental health problems to specialist resources.

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<sup>30</sup> See footnote 16

<sup>31</sup> Society of Editors. (2020, November). *Resources – Mental Health in the Newsroom* [News paper]. Society of Editors.

## Conclusion

Trauma, and resilience to trauma, are two vital but often overlooked aspects of the journalistic profession. To ensure journalists are able to enjoy long and productive careers, both must be carefully considered.

This project highlights the urgent need for newsrooms in Burkina Faso to recognise the impact of the work they are asking their journalists to perform, and to mitigate against the damaging effects of sustained exposure to trauma without support – particularly the risk of PTSD.

The questionnaire results paint a stark picture about the lack of awareness of PTSD and the effects of trauma among most journalists who have reported on conflict. It's easy to understand why this has gone unnoticed: with more than 5,000 killed and 2 million displaced by violence, the struggle to survive to report another day has taken precedence. But we cannot afford to ignore the impact of that struggle any longer.

Journalists have spoken here of feeling numb to violence, easily startled, and struggling with nightmares. They have mentioned seeing colleagues struggle. This speaks to a level of psychological discomfort created by the work of reporting on Burkina Faso's roiling conflict that surpasses the professional and will have repercussions in their personal lives.

The first route to addressing trauma in newsrooms is to educate and raise awareness among journalists. I hope this project goes some way to accomplishing that.

The second step is for newsroom managers to step up to create support resources available in their newsrooms – such as counselling and peer support networks. Failing this, the next option is to make an external resource available to their staff.

This research calls for collective action: inviting society, the media, and journalists themselves to work together to create an environment where mental health is a priority and empathy prevails in the face of the challenges inherent in covering conflict zones.