

# Trauma simulation technique makes better journalists

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Just hours after the tragic shooting of 27 victims at Sandy Hook Elementary School, Twitter was overloaded with messages slamming reporters for interviewing children involved in the tragedy. While some of the journalists probably knew better but wanted the story at all costs, others were rookie reporters facing ethical decisions for the first time and unaware of the impact these interviews might have on the young survivors.

Past studies have documented that new journalists can cause a number of problems at the scene because a lack of sensitivity can lead to unnecessary intrusions, thus further traumatizing victims. But research from Concordia University proves that journalism students can be prepared for these [ethical issues](#) before they must face the shock of a real event.

The new study by Concordia researchers Elyse Amend, Linda Kay and Rosemary Reilly, published in the *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, proves that simulation is an effective [training tool](#) that can teach rookies ethical behaviour before they must handle a traumatic event.

Linda Kay, who chairs Concordia's Department of Journalism, first presented the idea of using simulation as journalism training at a conference in 2008. "Educators were very interested in the idea and wanted more information about how it would work," she recalls. Study co-author Rosemary Reilly, an associate professor in Concordia's Department of Applied Human Sciences notes that "this is a perfect

example of the interrelationship between research and teaching – how one informs the other and vice versa."

To find suitable guidelines for a simulation experience, the research team first set out to find what kind of ethical issues face reporters working in the field today. They created a focus group of seven Canadian journalists working in TV, radio and print with experience ranging from three to 30 years.

These reporters highlighted the four major ethical decisions they commonly face at distressful or [traumatic events](#): understanding their role at the scene; getting the story vs. respecting needs of victims; learning the limits of meeting job obligations; and properly navigating on-the-job training.

Though simulations are not new as a teaching tool, they have been rarely used with journalism students. In their study, Amend, Kay and Reilly identify specific guidelines to ensure these simulations would actually create believable events that young reporters might face on the job.

At one such simulation experience where participants had to report on an Art Gallery fire, one student remarked afterwards: "I would have to say in all honesty that it was the best two hours of university I've had yet." Classroom simulations give budding journalists a safe place to explore the ethical issues they might face on the job and to try out different behaviors and their consequences.

"There's a growing awareness in the journalism teaching profession that students need more preparation," say Kay. "Trauma is such a huge issue now and it can be harmful to all if a young journalist is just thrown into the situation to learn on the job."

Provided by Concordia University

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