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Images and Identity

While our brains go through similar processes when confronting distressing social media content, what we find distressing varies. How and when those processes are triggered and how we respond can differ significantly depending on context: the nature of what we encounter, what our past experiences have been, what coping mechanisms we use, our political persuasions, and even the reasons why we are looking at a particular video or photograph in the first place. Reactions to distressing imagery are almost never a one-size-fits-all. When we talk about what is distressing, we need to talk about distressing *to whom*.

For Eileen Clancy, the video archivist and activist introduced in Chapter 1, "Who you are equals how you respond." To illustrate her point using an offline example, Clancy told us the story of a white woman who was arrested and jailed in New York City after a protest. The conditions in the jail, a converted bus terminal, were notoriously bad. Clancy explained that the woman shared a racial identity with the predominantly white police force and therefore didn't think they would mistreat her. She was sorely mistaken. "[The woman] has her period, she needs to use the restroom, needs tampons, needs whatever she needs, she goes to the cops and they don't care. They say no. She tells them, 'This is abuse, you can't do this to me,'" recounted Clancy, who had interviewed the woman for a legal case. "She tells them her brother is in the FBI, that he's in the Joint Terrorism Task Force … she mentions headquarters down in Queens, etc." to try to get them to identify with her. But the officers continued to ignore her requests. The woman finally became so enraged at her treatment, Clancy said, that she took out her used tampon and threw it at the police officers.

Ultimately, according to Clancy, the woman's distress was less about the officers' refusal to let her use the bathroom than it was about the ways in which this incident damaged her sense of who she was and her identity in relation to others. "I told her there's a spectrum of life-changing stories, [including] a bunch of monographs of women's time in prisons in Northern Ireland. I told her, "Now you're part of that tradition, that history." She was very distraught by that, her changing view of the world."

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Susan Sontag, in her seminal book *Regarding the Pain of Others*, has pointed out that while photographs have power in their universality, not being bound to a specific language and thus being accessible to all people,[1] we all derive different meanings from those photographs. As she's warned, "no 'we' should be taken for granted when the subject is looking at other people's pain. … Normally, if there is any distance from the subject, what a photograph 'says' can be read in several ways."[2] While war photography is often created and published in condemnation of war, Sontag explains that in addition to motivating peace, depending on the identity of the viewer, "surely [the same photograph] could also foster greater militancy."[3] To assume one response, she explains, "is to dismiss politics."[4]

Sometimes, it's less about the graphic nature of imagery than the history a moment carries with it that gets to us – and peoples' relationship to that history, and thus their identities, that determines their differing reactions. The overturn in 2022 of the Supreme Court case *Roe v. Wade*, which for fifty years had protected a woman's constitutional right to an abortion in the United States, is one of these floor-shifting moments where no graphic content is required to stir a deep and unsettling traumatic response. Indeed, sometimes it's not the graphic nature of an image but the monumental nature of the news itself that affects us; that news can feel for some like a boa constrictor wrapped around their chests, squeezing out their ability to take a deep breath. But of course for others, including those who had long labored to eliminate a women's right to choose, that same decision may feel freeing.

University of Southern California Professor Allissa Richardson has described the role she believes identity plays in how we create, how we consume, and the meanings we derive from visual imagery. In her book *Bearing Witness While Black*, Richardson explores visual reporting of the deaths of Black men at the hands of police and how the response to such reporting varies with a viewer's identity:

> As a former full time journalist I sighed every time I saw cable television news loop images of fire and brimstone in Ferguson in 2014, after police killed Michael Brown, or in Baltimore in 2015, after Freddie Gray's death. I wanted someone on air to describe instead how black people experience police brutality, and video proof of it, differently from non-black people. How African Americans, like my father [watching Rodney King's beating] in 1991, see themselves in the bodies of the battered. I wanted the news pundits to say bearing witness while black is a specific kind of media witnessing. It is as networked, collective, and communal as the South African philosophy of Ubuntu, which states, 'I am because WE are.' Black witnessing carries moral, legal and even spiritual weight.[5]

[1] "In contrast to a written account … a photograph has only one language and is destined potentially for all." Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (Picador 2003): 20.
[2] Ibid. at 7, 29.
[3] Ibid. at 8.
[4] Ibid. at 9.
[5] Allissa Richardson, *Bearing Witness While Black: African Americans, Smartphones, and the New Protest #Journalism* (Oxford University Press 2020).

"Black witnessing," she has said, ".… involves more than simply observing tragic images on TV or online. It is more complicated than picking up a smartphone and pressing 'record' at the right time. When most African Americans view fatal police shooting videos, something stirs at a cellular level. They want to *do* something with what they just saw. And they want to link it to similar narratives they may have seen before. In this manner, black witnessing is reflexive, yet reflective. It despairs, but it is enraged too."[6]

As she powerfully illustrates, there's a difference in how white and Black populations typically perceive and metabolize images of the killings of Black men, women, and children: "When whites see the videos of [Black men] being brutalized … they may be able to maintain a safe amount of narrative space."[7]

Of course, such differences in perception aren't just limited to race or ethnicity. Religion, class, and gender are also salient – as are other aspects of our identity. When we asked Liz Scott, who worked as a full-time employee at YouTube in content moderation, whether there was ever a video that she saw that was especially difficult for her personally, Scott answered without hesitation, citing the infamous video of the woman raped in Egypt's Tahrir Square, mentioned in Chapter 1:

> I saw the video before it became news. And I was like 'There's no way [the survivor] wants this public.' But our policy [at YouTube] was not to take this kind of content down. Our policy was this person needs to file a first party privacy complaint [for us to do anything]. So three days later [in response to growing public outrage that the video was still on YouTube] there was a conference for YouTube employees. … And so sure enough, I get called down to the conference room to go hang out with people more senior than me. They were getting tons of pressure about the video and to take it down. And I was like, *yeah, we should take it down*. It was all men in the conversation except for me. I was arguing we should take this down and the counter was 'but this could spark a social movement in Egypt.' I remember driving to work. I cried every day that week, I was very upset and really felt for this woman. I think for anyone who has had personal experience with sexual assault, you could just so relate to how vulnerable she was in that moment. And I had lived in Egypt, I had been in Tahrir Square. … My thing was 'no woman should have to be the face of a social movement without her consent.'

All of the videos were eventually removed except for those where the woman's naked body was blurred. Nevertheless, Scott received performance feedback to "not take things so personally" in the future. "I just thought, wow, I'm going to disregard that because this *is* so personal to me."

The link between identity and reactions to what is perceived as challenging has been striking to observe in our work with a very diverse, very international cohort of

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[6] Ibid. at 4–5 (italics added).
[7] Ibid.

digital investigators on the Berkeley campus. It was important but perhaps unsurprising that sexual violence survivors would struggle with depictions of rape and harassment; that immigrants and children of immigrants would struggle with slurs leveled against those newly in the country; and that parents would have an especially hard time processing cruelties against children. In such situations, there's an additional, visceral layer of identification with the material beyond that of general human empathy and concern about human rights violations that may be difficult, if not impossible, for others to perceive.

Mallika Kaur, a lecturer who teaches a class on trauma and law at UC Berkeley, underscored that peoples' thresholds of extreme distress can also shift over time. Immediately after she had a baby, for example, she said she was no longer able to watch anything with violence against children, whereas before she could bear it. "I do domestic violence work. I've always worked with trauma, including traumatized children. … But [after having my baby] I couldn't watch any of it." She explained to us how her sensitivity to violence against children became so acute that she got to the point where she would have her husband watch part of a movie for her if it involved children and describe it to her so that she could decide whether she could watch it. She recalled having him watch the first four minutes of one movie in particular, a Punjabi movie that featured the experiences of a parentless child. "I asked, 'Did you cry?' And he was like, 'No, that child [in the movie] doesn't have parents and that's the context for the film but there's no violence.'" Kaur told us she *still* cried when she watched the film, moved by the idea of the child not having parents. "It wasn't graphic, but it was something that resonated so deeply with the enormous responsibility I felt having just brought a child into the world."

Richard Drew, the AP photographer mentioned in Chapter 1 who snapped the iconic 9/11 photo of "The Falling Man," (Figure 3.1) also believes that how we respond to graphic imagery has a lot to do with who we are and what we identify with. He has repeatedly grappled with why media outlets so often refused to print the image of the man in the suit jumping from the World Trade Center, unlike the pictures he took of Robert Kennedy's assassination (which were far bloodier) or Nick Ut's famous photo of the child in Vietnam who had been napalmed and was on fire (an image that was also more graphic). He believes it's because so many Americans can identify with a suited falling man in ways they can't with a famous politician or a foreign child. As he's written:

> In the World Trade Center photo, it's about personal identification. We felt we knew Bobby Kennedy, but we didn't identify with him. We weren't wealthy scions of a political dynasty or presidential candidates. We were just ordinary people who had to show up for work, day after day, more often than not in tall office buildings. Just like the guy at the World Trade Center. … That's what unsettles people about the picture. We look at it and we put ourselves in the jumper's place.
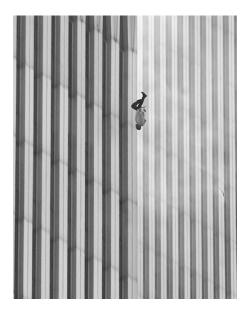
FIGURE 3.1 A person falls from the north tower of New York's World Trade Center on Tuesday, September 11, 2001, after terrorists crashed two hijacked airliners into the World Trade Center.
Source: AP Photo/Richard Drew

While the other photos depict far more visceral pain and suffering, "[t]he man in my picture is uninjured. He does not look like he's in pain. But you know he is moments from death. And you can't help but think, 'That could have been me.'"[8]

Consistently, students in UC Berkeley's Investigations Lab have said that hate speech and violence leveled against people like themselves – in terms of race, gender, sexuality, national origin, ethnicity, etc. – have been especially difficult to process emotionally, even if far less graphic than other posts they may have come across.

For students finding and analyzing social media posts of human and civil rights abuses in countries with which they have family ties, the responses have been mixed, often difficult to anticipate before exposure. For example, one student with family in Syria asked to be moved to a different investigation after several weeks researching Syrian-based war crimes, saying the politics within his family, who supported the Assad regime and whose alleged crimes he was investigating, made the work he was doing psychologically difficult. Conversely, another student, this one with family in Iran, said her inquiry into atrocities in that country was one of the most fulfilling projects she'd ever worked on. For years, she'd heard of her family's suffering but felt helpless to do anything about it; now she had an outlet, the power and agency

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[8] Richard Drew, "Excerpt: 20 Years on, 'The Falling Man' Is Still You and Me," *Associated Press*, September 9, 2021.

to identify, analyze, and communicate the stories of those victimized to the world which, she hoped, would motivate a response that would protect other potential victims. The meaning she derived from the work was not only protective, but healing.

Another student investigator, this one from Turkey, spent years analyzing images of atrocities from Egypt, Syria, Sudan, and the United States, leading teams to find and verify that information to expose those abuses. Throughout, she experienced little more than expected human reactions to the horrors she witnessed. But when Turkey launched strikes on border towns in northeastern Syria in October 2019, she broke down in front of her team in the middle of a work session. Suddenly, the work she was doing had become too close to home and her distress was spilling over.

What feels "close to home" can be triggered by a variety of identity factors, including gender, race, birthplace, class or geography. "We need "transparency that there *are* people of color doing this work, and what it means to be from the place you're investigating," said another student investigator, whose family comes from Central America. When asked whether there was ever an incident that was especially hard for her to deal with, she explained that "one moment that stood out to me is when I started investigating where I have family, which is Guatemala, and then seeing what people in the U.S. say about people crossing the border from Guatemala. Because of the [Human Rights Center Investigations] Lab, I was able to go to others for support." Having such support from colleagues who are sensitive to the effects of exposure to negative social media about the places and people with whom you identify is critical, she believes, as is providing people with resources like access to therapy or meditation for handling the reactions that come with that exposure.

Michael Shaw is a clinical psychologist, publisher of the website ReadingThePictures.org, and a frequent commentator and writer on visual politics, especially the history and context of images used by the media. As a psychologist, his clientele has included photojournalists and other members of the media. He believes war photographers are more equipped to cope with the violence they witness on assignment because the terror is expectable, and the exposure is for a set length of time. By contrast, "Many conflict photographers living in New York during 9/11 were a lot more unnerved because it happened at home. The same could be seen at the height of COVID as these professionals never expected to see refrigerated trucks filled with bodies in their own backyards."

Ashley Bradford, the technologist working with a team of UC Berkeley students to build a digital tool to minimize exposure to graphic social media content, has also reflected on how who you are affects what content you find triggering online. He's building a digital product that will aid journalists and investigators who have to look at large quantities of graphic content, enabling them to blur disturbing images, mute sound, and tone down other imagery to mitigate the potential of secondary trauma.

"The idea of what can be triggering … the breadth of that is always surprising to me, even in working with students," he says. "I'm a white guy and haven't had racial slurs directed at me. [Triggers that are] sexually or racially oriented … aren't as active

on my radar. They're not an immediate and regular part of my lived experience, and it's important for me to make the effort to remain mindful of that." Bradford pauses, then continues. "Of course, some things are traumatic for all of us. And then there's if you've had trauma x, y, or z, those things might trigger you and not someone else. If you tried to block all triggering content [on social media], we would be looking at a giant, muted, blurred block for all of our investigative images."

The fact that digital content quickly traverses geographic boundaries means that a surprisingly large number of people can be emotionally affected by it. For example, the shock over George Floyd's killing expanded beyond communities in the United States to those overseas. Adebayo Okeowo, for example, is Nigerian and works for WITNESS, a nonprofit that trains activists how to capture civil and human rights violations on camera. He reflected on his reaction to the Floyd video: "As much as we know the police in Africa can be extreme … even we couldn't think of any cop who has done that, even though some have shot someone point blank. This was even more extreme [for them to do that] and even as cameras were rolling, as if that life didn't matter. People protested across the world, even in Nigeria, because that was such an unbelievable sight." Ultimately, the reaction to the images of Floyd's death strengthened activism on the continent. Okeowo said the fury over Floyd's killing and the ensuing uptick in the Black Lives Matter movement fed the Free Senegal protests and the #EndSARS police violence protests then raging in Africa.

> It would have still been an injustice if a white person had been killed that way, but it was more painful from a Black person's perspective because it seems to be a pattern: that disregard for a Black life. If I had been in South Africa I would have had a better sense of how the white community in South Africa responded, but I have a feeling that those who have been allies to the Black struggle would have responded like white allies in the US: with shock and disdain. … The anger was palpable in many parts of Africa because this was a Black person, the sense that this could happen to me. [People even started saying] maybe you shouldn't go to the U.S. because you could just be killed [for no reason], without any regard.

Like Clancy, who told the story of the white female protestor who threw her used tampon at her jailers when they refused to let her use the restroom, Okeowo uses an offline example to further explain the power of identity in reactions to upsetting events. He recalls an excursion he made with friends to an apartheid museum in Johannesburg. Two of the Black South Africans in his group refused to go in. "I remember it clearly. They couldn't go in and relive the horrors of the apartheid regime. They even questioned why there would be a museum set up to [display] imagery and facts about that [time]." Okeowo said he understands that there are important, valid reasons to preserve memory for those who have been victims as well as survivors and to share the horrors of history with those who did not experience that era first hand, but he also understands the visceral reaction of Black South Africans like his friends who have no desire to re-experience the trauma. While

Okeowo's example centers on images of atrocities featured in a physical museum, social media platforms have, in many instances, become those museums' digital equivalent.

Ultimately, our reactions to graphic images may differ based on age, gender, geography, race, or other demographics; they can also differ based on whether we've had similar previous experiences to those depicted or may have even been present for the event we are now watching unfold over digital space. They also differ based on our political persuasions; graphic images of aborted fetuses weaponized by the anti-choice movement in the United States will produce very different reactions depending on where one falls across the abortion divide, just as the attacks on the United States Capitol on January 6 will be seen either as heroic acts of patriotism or horrific acts of terrorism depending on whether one believes the disinformation President Trump spread about the integrity of the 2020 presidential election. How we feel about a photo of dead soldiers in Ukraine may radically differ depending on whether we are Russian or Ukrainian.

Author John Durham Peters has underscored the various ways in which witnessing violent events play out.[9] He has theorized that forms of witnessing reside on a continuum, ranging from being physically present at an event, to watching live transmission of the event (such as on a livestream), to visiting the historic site of an event or a museum exhibit about it, to experiencing a retelling of the event in a written, visual or audio format – with the types varying with the witnesses' proximity to the time and space of the underlying event. Each of these forms can mediate our responses, as in each scenario, our relationship to the material differs.

Michael Shaw addresses another kind of witnessing, a variant of retelling, one that takes the form of a media ritual. Memorials of major events in the media have become a regular part of the news stream. He said that the one-year, ten-year, and twenty-five-year time intervals have become standard prompts for major anniversary features, in which media organizations revisit violent attacks, devastating natural disasters, and other prominent cultural concussions. Framed as memorializing, the ensuing narrative, especially the imagery, is often re-traumatizing. In the case of 9/11, the graphic material paraded out by media organizations will reawaken painful memories, especially among those who most suffered through it. "Whether we are talking about 9/11 visuals of the planes hitting the towers or the famous image of the falling man, the rehash is often as emotionally toxic as it is gratuitous," Shaw said.

How we respond to graphic accounts varies not only with our own experiences but also with our immediate contexts. Our current emotional state, unrelated to the online content itself, can have a profound impact on our emotional response to that content: Did we recently give birth? Are we stuck at home with a screaming child? Are we at work? Are we alone in bed, late at night? In a crowded workplace,

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[9] John Durham Peters, "Witnessing," 23 *Media Culture Society* 707 (2001) (discussed in Richardson 2020, 6).

surrounded by others? Staring down a final exam or other deadline? Unrelated stresses may prime us for a disproportionately strong or especially emotional response. Of course, our reactions may also be numbed or deadened. As Sontag explains, "For photographs to accuse … they must shock. [But] shock can become familiar. Shock can wear off."[10] We can also be so distracted by immediate, everyday concerns that the impact of graphic content may not fully register. Our reactions are identity specific but also context contingent.

Shaw shared several examples in which the context of living and working in a pandemic drastically affected peoples' reactions to visual media and their work with that media. Threatened by isolation, the loss of routine, or the fear of getting sick and left to fend for oneself, the pandemic upended the assuredness of some of the most skilled practitioners.

After losing a close family member to COVID, an academic he worked with – someone well versed in analyzing documentary imagery – could no longer work with imagery at all. "COVID completely broke down this person's defenses," said Shaw. "It was really kind of stunning. It wasn't just 'I need some distance.' It was 'I can't do this anymore.'"

Given this variation in what people find upsetting, and when they find it upsetting, how might we approach graphic media content more thoughtfully, with an eye to minimizing the negative effects? Everything mentioned above suggests the need to be flexible with ourselves and others, to recognize that our reactions can change, and sometimes rapidly. As discussed in greater detail in Chapter 4, we need to give ourselves and others opportunities to choose how and when we engage with graphic content, which can have a dramatic effect on our well-being.

IDENTITY AS A PROTECTIVE FORCE

Our unique identities don't just make us vulnerable, however. They can also be our greatest strength.

As with our student who investigated atrocities in Iran, identity can be harnessed in ways that support resilience, such as when it helps us draw meaning from our act of witnessing trauma. Scott, the woman who worked at YouTube in content moderation, explained how her identity as a white woman and as a team manager may have helped to protect her from some of the worst emotional reactions to the difficult content she and her team processed. "With the privileges that my identity affords

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[10] Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 81–82. Sontag has also explained that it can be a good thing when people don't have an emotional reaction to every piece of content they encounter. As Sontag has warned, "it is not necessarily better to be moved. Sentimentality, notoriously, is entirely compatible with a taste for brutality and worse. … People don't become inured to what they are shown … because of the quantity of images dumped on them. It is passivity that dulls feeling. The states descriptive as apathy, moral or emotional anesthesia are full of feelings; the feelings are rage and frustration." Ibid. at 102.

me, I maybe had more agency than others," said Scott – agency that would give her a degree of relative freedom to set the terms of her engagement with the material. As we know, that agency, that sense of control, can work as a protective force.

Meg Satterthwaite, a clinical professor of law at New York University who has conducted extensive research into the psychosocial impacts of human rights work, emphasized the importance of adopting a holistic approach to thinking about identity and our reactions to difficult material, including how mindfulness of the potential impact that specific kinds of content can have on us can help ensure that the triggers we experience are processed in a way that supports well-being. She noted the importance of "reminding yourself that you're a human being and that part of you is being triggered all the time, whether you know it or not." Acknowledging those triggers is important in order to not become numb to imagery and thus the cruelties of the world. "If you're not aware of it there could be a callousness that's building up over time."

Satterthwaite praised the work of Arianna Schindel, an activist social worker based in New York who has supported a range of survivors of various forms of trauma and abuse, from domestic workers in the United States to LGBTQ+ activists in Uganda. Schindel created and runs a program called "Fire That Fuels." The program focuses on how to connect with the internal fire that energizes versus the fire that burns you – and the importance of recognizing that the source is often the same. When we are fueled to make change, we have a greater sense of control than when we passively absorb horrific news. Ultimately, this helps us to stave off the anxiety and depression that could develop.

Of course, not all of us are fueled or burned by the same material. Satterthwaite also emphasized how important it is for all of us to be thoughtful and deliberate in what material we share, taking into consideration other peoples' identities and the fact that they may have very different reactions to the material than we do: What one person finds inspiring and empowering may leave another shaken. "[We need to] meaning-fully curate, not mindlessly forward stuff to people. Also not tag victims on Twitter. I'm thinking of the USA gymnastics team [and the lawsuit against Larry Nasser for chronic sexual abuse of young, female gymnasts]: I saw a Tweet from one of the elite gymnasts that said, 'Please stop tagging me on every Tweet about Larry Nasser.' It can be so retraumatizing for people. And for racist police violence, white people in particular need to be more aware about the impact of forwarding and linking [online content] in ways that make people click [on things] that they're not prepared to see."

Satterthwaite also stressed the need to move beyond trigger warnings that pre-suppose how certain groups may react to content and to give people explicit infor-mation that empowers people to make their own assessments. "The earlier trigger warnings we got were very much about who we *are* ('if you're a sexual violence victim, you may want to take care') versus what we'll *see* ('This contains images of X'). The latter seems so much more important." Ultimately, the more nuanced we are in telling what something we're sharing contains, the more viewers can prepare

themselves for processing the material and adopt whatever protections they need to avoid being scalded.

Michael Shaw's work in visual media – specifically investigating how visual information impacts individuals and communities – is fueled by an experience that might have harmed him. He told us in an interview that his mother had been an artist who traveled in elite circles in the creative world. When Shaw was young, she had a mental breakdown, sometimes slipping into psychosis. Rather than fearing her, "I got good at decoding her language: I had [developed] an empathic connection with a creative person who, at the time, became overly dependent on visual language and the safety of metaphor. From that experience, I found greater significance in the visual world."

As a father, Shaw's interest in using visual information to relay information took another turn. He had become increasingly concerned about civic and political consciousness and wanted to find a way for his two young sons to access the news. So he created a cartoon called "Bag News" designed to render the day's *New York Times* top story in a picture sketched on a lunch bag. "My goal was to capture the facts and personalities [in the story] in this one cartoon. It was kind of compulsive. I did it every single weekday for 12 or 13 years." In 2004, this effort led him online to the blogosphere and the analysis of news images. It was a unique period of transition in which "the media lost exclusive control" over the dissemination of news and images, with politicians, political organizations, and corporations suddenly able to [bypass established media channels and] and go direct to the consumer." He has spent the last couple of decades examining news and images for meaning, trends, context, and fairness, to impart that appreciation to news consumers and media professionals.

NOT LOOKING AS A PROTECTIVE FORCE

Finally, when identity and well-being are at issue, "not looking" can sometimes be a powerful choice and a protective force. While millions of people may have mindlessly – or mindfully – watched footage of the George Floyd video, for example, an untold number of those who regularly work with graphic content chose not to look, despite their deep dedication to social justice and despite their regular exposure to videos of atrocities. Their reasons varied.

Elena Martin had just graduated from UC Berkeley when George Floyd was murdered and the footage hit her newsfeed. Like Haley Willis, Martin had worked with the Human Rights Center's Investigations Lab and was no stranger to graphic content. In fact, she had spent the last three years finding and corroborating graphic imagery related to conflicts and protests in Syria and Hong Kong.

"I was aware of [the video] as soon as it started spreading, that a man had been killed and it had been recorded," said Martin. "As soon as I saw that it was graphic content, I decided not to watch it. It felt very disrespectful to watch when it could be commodified and commercialized. … As someone who was just a viewer, I didn't

think it was my [place] to watch this. Also, I wouldn't want to have someone watch me suffer."

Liz Scott responded similarly when asked about the video of George Floyd's killing. "I didn't watch it. I try not to watch that kind of thing. I find it sad. As a society, we have an appetite for seeing Black and brown bodies have violence [perpetrated] against them. During the Arab Spring, we had this whole thing, people just so comfortable watching [the violence]." She paused. "In America, I don't know if it's similar but, as a white person seeing responses to videos of attacks [in Europe people say] 'We need to take this down' and the whole human rights [conversation about how this content should stay up for social justice reasons] is just *done*," she said, emphasizing the word "done" with a wave of her hand. "I just wish we could move beyond this desperation to share these videos that are so traumatizing. If you are already like, 'I need to rise up and end white supremacy in this country' then [you] don't need to watch that video. Especially when a journalist can watch it and do a write up or find another way to share that information."

At UC Berkeley School of Law, students have flocked to a two-unit course created and taught by Mallika Kaur, a Berkeley Law instructor and human rights lawyer, that focuses on understanding and strengthening responses to trauma and burnout in the profession. Kaur emphasizes to her students that "personal wiring matters" and that it's not a sign of weakness or defeat to not watch something. She said that what interacts with our personal identities and experiences and therefore triggers us can easily shift and so awareness is key. "One size doesn't fit all and that size changes over time," she said. Kaur didn't watch the George Floyd video herself because, she said, "I have watched enough graphic videos for a lifetime." Her students were ultimately split between those who had seen the video and those who chose not to look. Not looking at graphic imagery is a choice Kaur wholeheartedly endorses and one that is beginning to prevail among younger people seeking to be more thoughtful about what they consume online, she said. A prevalent response among many of her students was that people of color may especially not want to watch the video of George Floyd's killing and that not watching might be the best approach for them, but that it was especially important for white people to watch.

Often, people feel that they *have* to look at challenging videos or posts. For those who have a deep dedication to social justice, they may look to express solidarity or to connect with a national or international movement. But as our interviewees repeatedly underscored, if you're already aware of how people like those depicted in a photo or video are being treated in the broader society, there may be little additive value in looking at that photo or video and a relatively high potential for distress.

AWARENESS AS A PROTECTIVE FORCE

The imperative to understand how our unique identities make us both more vulnerable and more resilient to traumatic content leads us to one of the most critical and

perhaps obvious ways we can maintain our health and well-being in the face of the world's traumatic events and conditions: by fostering greater awareness of ourselves and our reactions.

Studies on responses to trauma – including Satterthwaite et al's "A Culture of Unwellness,"[11] Dubberley et al's "Making Secondary Trauma a Primary Issue,"[12] and Baker et al's "Safer Viewing"[13] – note the importance of being aware of one's vulnerabilities and also of what constitutes vicarious trauma or burnout. Without cultivating this awareness, people can be left to suffer the effects: feeling distance from loved ones, irritability, reclusiveness, restlessness, depression, and more.

For "A Culture of Unwellness," Satterthwaite interviewed Alexa, who stressed the importance of awareness related to identity:

> I think on [the] awareness side, what we've tried to instill in the [Berkeley team] is that what's going to impact you is different from what impacts other people. So for some people it's seeing children killed. For others it may be beheadings. You don't know until you're in the material. So even in terms of the division of labor – to make sure you're not exposed to the stuff that's particularly challenging [for you] but for someone else who it doesn't affect as much can take that on. … But also making sure that you're aware that what affects you may change not only between people but within yourself from day to day, depending on what your context is and what you're going through in your personal life. So there may be times when, in our own personal lives, when we may be more vulnerable and really don't have the resources and reserves to deal with the trauma and that might be a point in time when it's good to take a break.[14]

What does cultivating awareness look like? What it doesn't look like is attending a one-off talk from a mental health expert who exhorts us to be aware of ourselves and colleagues. It takes sustained attention to – and an ability to repeatedly check in with – ourselves to know what works for us individually in terms of reducing distress, what works for our friends and colleagues, and what does not.

In the Human Rights Center's Investigations Lab, students would often start the semester taking stock: What is normal *for me?* How much do I sleep when I'm feeling healthy and balanced? How much do I exercise? What foods do I normally eat? Identifying this baseline and having awareness of what's normal or optimal for us (something that changes over time) is essential to being able to identify if something shifts within us.

[11] Margaret Satterthwaite, Sarah Knuckey, Ria Singh Sawhney, Katie Wightman, Rohini Bagrodia, and Adam Brown, "From a Culture of Unwellness to Sustainable Advocacy: Organizational Responses to Mental Health Risks in the Human Rights Field," 28 *Review of Law and Social Justice* 443 (2018).

[12] Sam Dubberley, Elizabeth Griffin, and Haluk Mert Bal, "Making Secondary Trauma a Primary Issue: A Study of Eyewitness Media and Vicarious Trauma on the Digital Frontlines," *First Draft* (2015).

[13] Elise Baker, Eric Stover, Rohini Haar, Andrea Lampros, and Alexa Koenig, "Safer Viewing: A Study of Secondary Trauma Mitigation Techniques in Open Source Investigations," 22 *Health and Human Rights Journal* 293 (2020).

[14] Satterthwaite et al, "Culture of Unwellness," at 530.

As the *New York Times*' Haley Willis recounted in the introduction, her response to traumatic imagery while working in the Investigations Lab as a student was, at first, to sleep a lot. She didn't realize that this was a trauma response until she realized that sleeping so much wasn't normal for her.

This awareness of self has to transfer to an awareness of others if we are to protect ourselves, our families, and our colleagues. Mindlessly sharing traumatic imagery or hateful content without an awareness of another person's vulnerabilities can be similarly problematic. As several content moderators told us: Don't just share troubling content because *you think* it will somehow educate people. What affects you may not affect someone else in the same way, and vice versa.

Ultimately, what came through in the interviews and from our research is that it's better to be thoughtful about whether or not to watch a video than to do so reflexively, or to do so *because* we identify with the content. One of the most salient considerations is whether some graphic content might be more palatable if consumed through news gathering sources that provide context and analysis. There is inestimable value in high-quality journalism. Professional media organizations may package an incident in a way that communicates the underlying facts without the same level of toxicity and immediacy of a single, unedited video, which can leave a viewer feeling raw.

Our hope is that awareness of the harms of the world can lead to empowerment and help people mobilize to contribute to positive change. Rawness or depression rarely results in productive action. The goal is to be able to engage with this kind of content as needed over the long haul, without adding to layers of trauma that may have already accumulated. Journalistic reporting – which rarely if ever relies on a single photo or video, but usually pulls together multiple human perspectives – may also tell a more complete story than a single video or photo ever could, challenging the misinformation that we know is prevalent online and weaving in the critical context that helps us place a person's story in the world.