

THE VIEWING ROOM

HOW JOURNALISTS PREPARE FOR AND RESPOND TO WITNESSING EXECUTIONS

The United States executed 46 people in 2010. These legalized deaths consisted of 43 lethal injections, 2 electrocutions and 1 firing squad. At least one journalist was present to witness and document each of the deaths, attending out of a professional obligation to report the happenings to the public, regardless of the potential impact on their emotional well-being.

PURPOSE / RATIONALE

This study explores execution coverage in an attempt to explain how a group of journalists prepared for witnessing executions, processed witnessing the executions and responded emotionally to covering them. The study extends existing knowledge of the impact of routines and organizational support before, during and after journalists' exposure to traumatic events. In doing so, it explains how these journalists used their professional identities to help make sense of what they witnessed. It also explains their views on the levels of organizational support they received or desired.

KEY CONCEPTS

TRAUMA EXPOSURE - witnessing a death or near-death experience

ORGANIZATIONAL SUPPORT - the extent to which supervisors value their employees' contributions to the organization and care about their workers' personal well-being

PROFESSIONAL ROUTINES - methods professionals learn and adopt to organize and control the flow of their work

PROFESSIONALISM - theoretical knowledge and shared values and norms that create a common purpose among people performing a job

PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY - beliefs, values and an understanding of roles that professionals adopt regarding their work

TRAUMA SYMPTOMS - responses — including nightmares, flashbacks, angry outbursts, numbness, avoidance, or hyper vigilance — that may result from trauma exposure

METHOD

In-depth interviews via telephone with 33 journalists (23 males, 10 females), representing 10 of 12 states that performed executions.

The radio, television, newspaper, and wire journalists had a median age of 48 and an average of 25 years of experience.

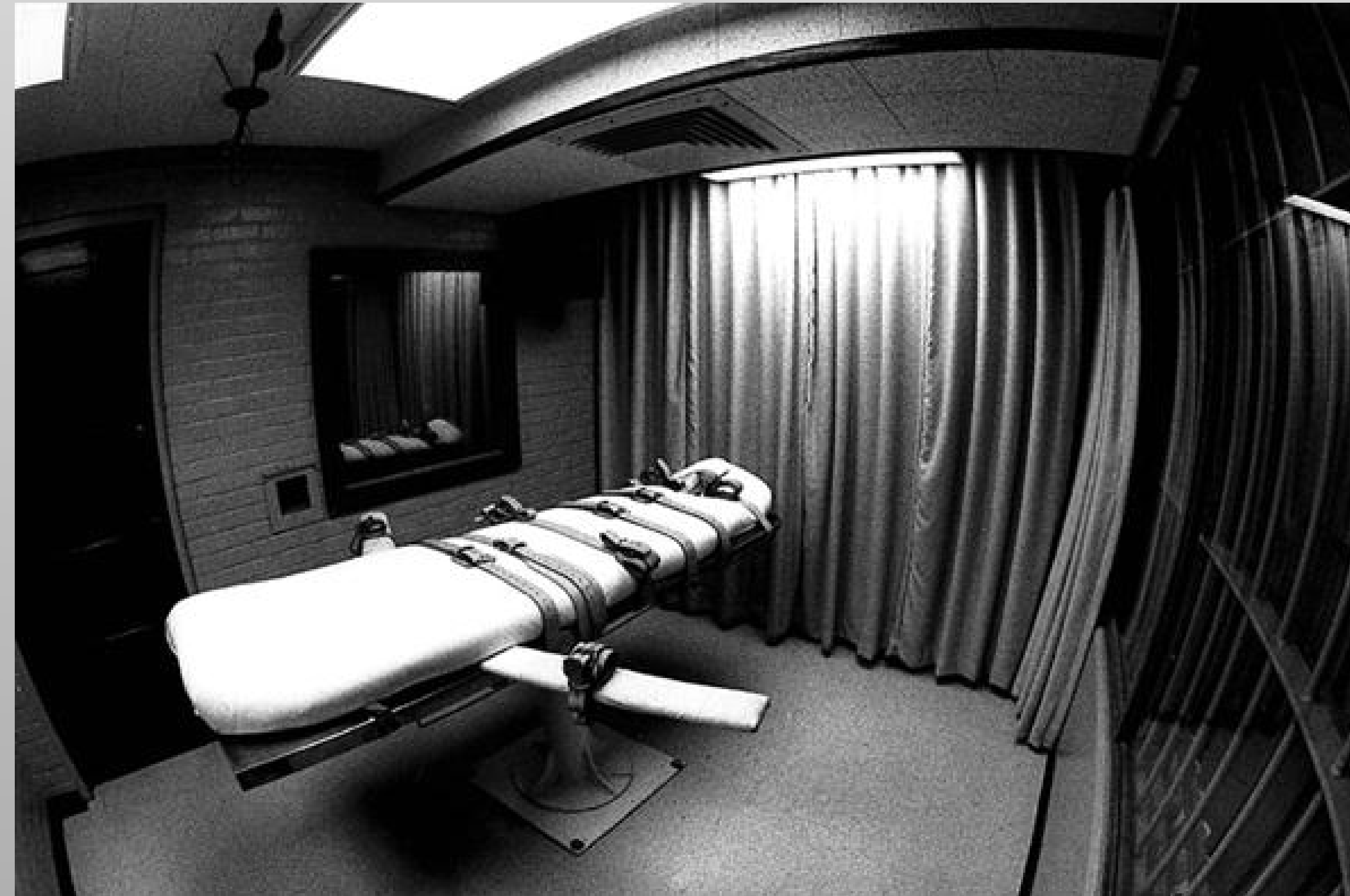


Photo source: Citizens United for Rehabilitation of Errants

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

RQ1: How do journalists report preparing to witness executions?

RQ2: What organizational support, if any, do journalists report receiving before witnessing an execution?

RQ3: How do journalists describe the execution?

RQ4: What do journalists report doing immediately after witnessing an execution?

RQ5: What organizational support, if any, do journalists report receiving after witnessing an execution?

RQ6: Do journalists who witness executions report symptoms consistent with emotional trauma?

RESULTS

PREPARATION

To prepare for the executions, journalists read archive stories, reviewed court transcripts and interview sources. Some reporters interviewed the condemned, while others did not.

ORGANIZATIONAL SUPPORT

The majority of the journalists interviewed did not receive help from colleagues or editors when preparing for the execution. They also were not asked about their well-being following the execution. Most of the journalists had counseling services available through their news organizations, but did not use them.

WITNESSING

Some reporters described negative emotional or physical responses when witnessing the execution. One reporter said:

“About the only part of me that wasn’t in a near panic was my feet.”

Other reporters described the executions as “sterile” and “methodical,” much like observing a medical procedure.

TRAUMA SYMPTOMS

Many of the journalists reported symptoms indicative of emotional trauma, although they all claimed to be functioning normally. One reporter said:

“I can’t have someone else see me as a last person before they die. I don’t want another image like that burned into my head. I can’t let it go.”

DISCUSSION

Journalists interviewed for this study reported relying on professional routines like reviewing archive stories and clarifying supervisors' expectations to prepare for witnessing executions.

The journalists reported little or no organizational support before or after the execution. They also did not seek out this support within their organizations, although some sought help from fellow journalists at other news agencies who previously had witnessed executions, creating a sort of network of execution reporters.

The journalists routinized capital punishment coverage, focusing on documenting details instead of thinking about what they were witnessing. One journalist said:

“I was that detached observer that I’m paid to be.”

Most of the journalists reported symptoms indicative of emotional trauma, usually as the result of relating to the emotional suffering of the inmate or another witness.

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