

Chapter 3

Reporting and Feeling: Considerations on the Mental Health of Journalists During the Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the mental health challenges faced by journalists through a review of existing literature and a brief survey of journalists in Brazil. The study suggests that more research is needed on the mental health of journalists and calls for preventive measures such as mental health training in journalism schools and news organizations, as well as identifying and addressing the root causes of mental health issues in the industry. The chapter also highlights various strategies and best practices for journalists to maintain their mental well-being, including techniques for managing stress, establishing boundaries between work and personal life, and seeking support from colleagues. The study emphasizes that addressing the mental health challenges faced by journalists is important for the well-being of individual journalists and the quality of journalism and its role in serving society. The study concludes that, by promoting mental health practices and awareness, the journalism industry can improve the lives of its professionals and better serve the public.

INTRODUCTION

Threats (in an Already Nebulous Horizon)

The theme of mental health has taken advantage of the increasing attention to well-being in contemporary western and urban societies. However, even today, despite the attention given to the subject, investment in mental health care for the population remains insufficient. According to a report by the World Health Organization (2021), the levels of public spending on mental health are low (a global average of 2.1%

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Reporting and Feeling

of government health spending) and particularly scarce in low- and middle-income countries. There is an extreme variation between rich and poor countries (less than two workers per 100,000 inhabitants in low-income countries and more than 60 in high-income countries).

Among the various classes of professionals who report being affected by mental health, journalists are highly susceptible to activities and content that can jeopardize their mental well-being. During the pandemic period of 2020, 61% of journalists surveyed in Brazil reported increased anxiety and stress (FENAJ, as cited in Valadares, 2020). During the same period, the International Center for Journalists (ICFJ, as cited in Posetti, Bell, & Brown, 2020) identified exhausted journalists, with mental health crises, and fearful of losing their jobs.

In 2021, after more than a year of telecommuting, Brazilian journalistic companies began to discuss the return to face-to-face work, albeit gradually - while Covid-19 cases continued to multiply in the country, bringing a new factor of anxiety to the sector. Part of this feeling was captured by support surveys submitted to journalists from two of the largest newsrooms in the country: the newspapers *Folha de S. Paulo* and *O Estado de S. Paulo*.

Responses, submitted by 19 journalists, indicate signs of stress. Conducted between the last week of August and the first week of September 2021, the surveys sought to record, as quickly as possible, journalists' feelings in a very specific context. While daily confirmations of Covid-19 cases in the country began to drop from more than 60,000 in July to just under 30,000 by the end of September that year, journalistic companies were discussing the end of remote work, which had become the standard in major Brazilian newsrooms since March 2020.

The possibility of returning to face-to-face work, however, in the midst of an uncertain public health scenario, presumably would generate insecurity among workers. In addition, vaccination against Covid-19 at the time had reached less than 50% of the national population.

As early as July 2021, a survey conducted by the consulting firm Korn Ferry showed that 70% of all professionals working remotely in Brazil believed that remote work was indeed a "new normal" and that returning to the office would be "difficult" and "strange" (Cavallini, 2021), a conclusion corroborated by a study by Essenfelder et al. (2021) specifically with journalists.

To reach the respondents of the brief survey, which contained ten objective questions and an open-ended question, the directors of the two publications were initially contacted. The collaboration of the companies was then requested to distribute the surveys to their journalists, which was done without reservations or pre-conditions in both companies. Participation was spontaneous, not incentivized, and open for a period of ten days.

At the end of a period, which was restrictive precisely because of the intention to capture the temperature of that specific moment in two of the country's most traditional newspapers, we used this survey to stimulate theoretical reflection on the theme of journalists' mental health. The average profile of respondents was men (58%) aged between 31 and 40 years old (47%) with an income between R\$ 4,000 and R\$ 10,000 (56%), or about 700 to 1700 euros. Regarding the length of time they had been working at their respective companies, 69% indicated that they had been employed for more than five years in the same company - in other words, a typical mid-career profile.

When asked about their evaluation of remote work, the overwhelming majority considered the work model to be positive. Of the possible responses - "excellent," "good," "indifferent," "bad," or "terrible" - almost all respondents (95%) chose "excellent" or "good" as their overall evaluation of the experience. Only 5.3% said that working from home was a bad experience, and no respondent evaluated this production model outside the newsroom as "terrible."

Reporting and Feeling

Despite the initial approval of the work-from-home experience, the professionals' evaluations changed when they commented on the support offered by the two companies to perform their functions outside the newsrooms. In questions regarding support for better internet connections at home, the provision of ergonomic chairs and a time-tracking system (electronic clock), as well as the supply of protection masks and hand sanitizer, protective material against Covid-19 for interviews and other activities that required forays outside the home, the percentage of respondents who considered this support terrible was 42.1%. Those who considered the support bad accounted for 21.1%, while 36.8% answered "regular". No one considered it "excellent" or even "good".

The relationship between precarious labor, which in turn affects mental health, and the crisis in the journalism business was already foreshadowed by Salaverría in 2015: "When the media was doing well, the reporters were doing tolerably poorly", he writes. "But when the media is doing very poorly, the situation of journalists could not be worse" (2015, 79).

Mental health issues related to this precariousness also stand out in responses to the surveys conducted in São Paulo in 2021. Among the main problems of the new work-from-home model, journalists cited issues related to increased anxiety, loneliness, depression, a sense of loss of work purpose, and burnout syndrome. Half of the participants reported feeling more anxiety (50%) during remote work, followed by "lack of willingness or energy for work" (33%), and irritability (17%). In addition to affecting the quality of life, mental health problems can also affect professional productivity.

In addition to affecting quality of life, mental health problems can also affect professional productivity. Task fragmentation, labor precariousness, and constant interruptions caused by an excess of communication channels also affect the well-being of professionals. It is estimated that it takes more than 20 minutes for a distracted individual to recompose their attention on an original task (Cabra, 2022). Furthermore, each interruption and restart (context switching) of a task can generate mental fatigue and a work routine with successive fragmented activities can lead to exhaustion. In this context, changing work systems, grouping tasks, and defining specific moments for interruptions can contribute to the well-being of workers.

Considering the complexity of this scenario, this paper presents a debate on the theme – partially illustrated by surveys of journalists – through a literature review of the concept of mental health and its relationship with journalists and journalism, framing the discussion in the pandemic period.

DEVELOPMENT

Reporting and Feeling: Effects of Pandemic Coverage

Among the various definitions of mental health is "emotional, psychological, and social well-being" (Health and Human Services, 2022); "a state of well-being in which individuals realize their own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and are able to make a contribution to their community" (WHO, 2022). Dictionaries describe the phenomenon as a synonym for mental hygiene and a state of psychological well-being according to Campbell's Psychiatric Dictionary (Campbell, 2004), or as a state preserved by mental hygiene in the Oxford English Dictionary (Dictionary, 1993).

The concept originated from a conference in 1946 when the World Health Organization (WHO) was established. Before that, the closest term was "mental hygiene," dating back to 1843 (in Mateus Stef-

Reporting and Feeling

fens & Rojas Gualdrón, 2009). In the second session of the WHO Mental Health Expert Committee in 1950, the difference between the two terms was established: mental hygiene refers to all activities and techniques that promote and maintain mental health. Mental health is a condition subject to fluctuations due to biological and social factors that allow individuals to achieve a satisfactory synthesis of their own potentially conflicting instincts, form and maintain harmonious relationships with others, and participate in constructive changes in their social and physical environment (2009).

Although mental health problems affect all careers and individuals, a literature review on journalists' mental health published by MacDonald et al. in 2023 concluded that journalists reported higher levels of depression than other professionals. The research identified the main occupational risks leading to an increased incidence of mood disorders: (1) greater exposure to work-related and personal trauma, (2) experience threats to themselves or their family, and (3) reduced levels of family and peer support, social acknowledgment, and education. In 2019, Seely's research indicated that journalists were at a higher risk of experiencing symptoms of anxiety and depression compared to the general population, especially those involved in the coverage of traumatic incidents.

In Brazil, other processes and factors that triggered journalists' mental health loss were identified, such as suffering, stress, depression, mental disorders, occupational health conditions, environment, and management, psychological conflicts, and social and family relationships (Penteado & Gastaldello, 2016). However, the relationship between the exercise of the profession and mental health - and the lack thereof - was usually related to war coverage. However, interest in journalists' mental health has increased since the COVID-19 pandemic (Osman et al., 2021; Simunjak, 2021).

Class reports such as the Brazilian Journalist Profile (Lima & Mick, 2013) have pointed out that the work environment is more toxic than expected in the country. For example, an analysis of 80 Brazilian reports between 2001 and 2016 found that several practices worsened journalists' mental health, such as invasion of privacy, surveillance, threats, and other violations of journalists' digital rights, beyond physical assaults, deaths, and persecution (Christofolletti & Torres, 2018). Another study, delving into symptoms of 57% of respondents who declare themselves stressed, found that 37% of them were diagnosed with stress, 16% were diagnosed with mental disorder, 24% were diagnosed with RSI (Repetitive Strain Injury) and WRULD (Work-Related Upper Limb Disorder), and 26% regularly use antidepressants (Pontes & Lima, 2019).

During the social isolation and distancing period due to the pandemic (Capoano & Barros, 2021), it was also reported that journalists were prevented from carrying out their activities in full and that there was a lack of barriers between work and personal life (de Souza et al., 2022). During the same period, information recipients reported negative emotions caused by news consumption, including sadness, anger, fear, and shame (Capoano et al., 2021; Capoano & Costa, 2021).

In spontaneous responses to the open-ended question "How does being away from other reporters and editors affect your work?" journalists who responded to the survey we proposed in 2021 reported both more practical issues and others of a psychological nature, such as "Decreased sense of team and creativity," "Lack of dialogue about current issues and agendas," "Feedback and idea exchange processes have been compromised," "Increased prevalence of work in routine," "A certain loneliness. I miss exchanging ideas and experiences with colleagues", "More noise, with people doing the same task, for example".

This problem lies not only in the mental consequences of the pandemic. In the US, a study confirmed that journalists, being the first to respond and eyewitnesses of violent acts, are also among the professionals who carry the most post-traumatic stress disorder and its symptoms (Seely, 2019). By broadening the spectrum of research to English-language journalism, one study identified that journalists who had

Reporting and Feeling

depressive symptoms had greater exposure to work-related and personal trauma, experienced threats to themselves or their families, and obtained reduced levels of family and peer support, social recognition, and education (MacDonald et al., 2023).

Even in Canada, a country that ranks among the best in the world in terms of quality of life, there are problems, as demonstrated by the Taking Care Report (Lonsdale, 2022): two-thirds of young people aged 20 to 29 and half of professionals aged 50 to 59 emerged from the acute period of the pandemic with difficulty coping with social isolation; two-thirds of those surveyed had problems balancing personal and professional life; two-thirds were negatively affected by covering traumatic events (death, violence, disasters, etc.); in addition to journalists, other professionals declare themselves exposed to traumatic content, such as editors, producers, camera operators, presenters, and librarians; and between 85% and 90% of respondents stated that they received no training to deal with coverage that could affect their mental health (2022).

Globally, Amnesty International recognizes that there is a danger of secondary or vicarious trauma (2019, p.2) in the consumption of images of violence by news workers or social media managers. Signs such as anger, rage, and sadness should be monitored carefully to avoid extreme cases of anxiety, stress, burnout, and post-traumatic disorder. This is due to the brain's ability to experience emotional symptoms similarly if the individual is to experience the same trauma or violence consumed by images in person.

Precarization and Reconfiguration of the Field

The mental health of journalists is also affected by the so-called precarization of work, specifically among journalists (Bulhões & Renault, 2016; Nicoletti & Mick, 2018; Heloani & Silva, 2021), where there is a deregulation of professional practice, an increase in working hours, a breakdown of the boundary between personal and professional life, and a loss of physical environment and relationships with other professionals due to digitized/remote work, among other phenomena. Studies such as those by Roseli Fígaro (2011; et al., 2021) and Roberto Heloani (2005; 2006; & Pinto, 2007) document these and other transformations of journalistic ethos, which can undermine journalists' mental health; however, this field is still underexplored in scientific studies, especially in so-called Global South countries.

In addition to pioneering work scattered across the five continents, several articles have addressed mental health, but as a subject of reporting, relegating the well-being of journalists to a secondary objective of studies. A systematic review carried out in Brazil, for example, identified that national articles on journalists' mental health reached 50% of the collected sample. Of these, 87.5% came from reports carried out by the professionals themselves, while only 12.5% came from the academic community, including journalism students, professors, and Higher Education Institutions (Penteado & Gastaldello, 2016).

Regarding the organizational and business constraints already identified by Max Weber (in Serra & Bergamoba, 2020), which pressure journalists between meeting the demands of the journalistic business and the social function of journalism, it affects not only the credibility of journalism but also the self-esteem and quality of life of journalists. Today, structural changes in the information universe mean that the value of news is spread among niche audiences and customized advertising, which alters the social role of journalism and its professionals' relevance (Fígaro, 2020, 27).

Thus, the transnational interpretative community that Traquina (2002) identified in journalists, based on their reference frames for news production, becomes a group increasingly questioned by other social fields. The distrust with which citizens currently receive information reflects a crisis of journalism's

Reporting and Feeling

legitimacy and journalists' identity (Fidalgo, 2004). An increasingly competitive and demanding market (2004, 70) accentuates the profession's malaise.

Currently, the journalistic profession and, as a consequence, journalists' routine are in full transformation. The reasons for this were identified by both market professionals and field researchers. Salaverría (2015) highlights at least two simultaneous crises: the economic crisis stemming from the 2007 crisis and the resulting decrease in the purchasing power of information consumers; and the structural crisis resulting from the technological transformation that forces journalistic companies to adapt to a digital ecosystem (2015, 80-81). Neveu (2019) identifies economic (willingness of the public to pay for news), structural (organization of newsrooms and production processes in general), identity (distinction between journalists and other content producers), political (balance of power between sources and journalists), and generational (change in journalists' behavior) dimensions (2019, 198-199).

The crisis of the journalistic business model has also led journalists to seek new forms of work organization, such as virtual newsrooms, independent productive arrangements, and increasingly fragile labor ties with communication companies (Fígaro, 2018; Silva, 2019). Such labor transition is not exclusive to journalists or communicators, but rather the result of the advancement of productive forces and the restructuring of the capitalist system towards the digital, platform, and knowledge economy (2020, 109). In this context, information workers in general are constrained by many limitations, according to Neveu (2021), such as the size and format of their work being defined by computers, without a defined workspace, and where phones and screens replace face-to-face work (2021, 43).

Digital convergence has also caused disruptions in the media business, thanks to the relativization of national borders (content travels globally), commercial barriers (companies compete for the same sectors), editorial cycles (production processes are altered by technology), information monopoly (decreasing the importance of newspapers as public interlocutors), and the business model in general. Moreover, convergence has changed the routine of journalists and their relationship with work, such as the agglomeration of functions, production on numerous platforms, the precariousness of work relationships, and the loss of credibility of the products generated by professionals (Fígaro, 2020, 107).

The digitalization of the profession, an inevitable and welcome process for the performance of professionals, also generates apprehension due to the increasing technicisation of work, lack of time for adaptation, increased speed, and information intermediation tasks (Deuze, 2006, 28). Such changes cause a deterioration in the quality of work life (Heloani, 2005) in a framework where professionals "naturalize" stress and accept constant substitution in their jobs (2003, 77-80).

The latest threats to journalists come from the platformization of information, where users produce data without the need for professionals, and from algorithms and conversation robots, which generate content independent of human action. These and other structural threats generate the hypothesis of journalism without journalists, where the prosumer is the protagonist of the entire information process (Fígaro, 2020, 34), or information workers (Neveu, 2010), "a conglomerate of jobs and activities with the common dimension of offering news and information to audiences" (2010, 33).

The perfect storm over journalists' mental health is complemented by real dangers to the physical integrity of professionals, promoted by extremist groups, coverage of wars, or improper sanitary conditions. The organization Reporters Without Borders (RSF) recorded 1,668 journalists killed in the exercise of their profession over 19 years, with an average of 80 professionals from 2003 to 2022.

The Covid-19 pandemic has already claimed the lives of 2,000 journalists between 2000 and 2022, according to the Press Emblem Campaign - PEC. In addition to the health issue, the pandemic has also forced the adoption of home offices (Capoano & Barros, 2020; Capoano et al., 2021), abruptly altering

Reporting and Feeling

the work routine of professionals (Sousa et al., 2020), as well as information consumers, generating negative effects on their mental health (Capoano & Costa, 2021; Capoano et al., 2021). This issue is so important to the journalistic field that UNESCO (2020) requested a study on the work of journalists, mental health, and concerns in the early months of the Covid-19 outbreak.

PERSPECTIVES AND REDEFINITIONS

The responses obtained in the support surveys are in line with the literature on the subject and are especially relevant when we consider that journalists are generally more susceptible to mental health issues. Such studies provide evidence that journalists may be very prone to anxiety and other mental health problems due to the nature of their work and the high levels of stress and pressure they may face. In the context of the pandemic, the situation has become especially serious for those who had to do their job in the midst of the coronavirus outbreak, like all other professional categories, but rather about the coronavirus itself, supplying the media industry and society at large with news 24 hours a day.

Therefore, to survive in the new informational ecosystem with mental health, it is necessary to pay attention to the bodily and behavioral signals that each individual emits. However, it also seems necessary to follow the recommendations of researchers in the field, who have identified the causes of the journalistic crisis and therefore have the conditions to identify how to overcome it. All recommendations to follow respond to the demands of the professionals surveyed in our case study, journalists who worked from home during Covid-19.

Neveu (2019) suggests cooperation between journalists and newsrooms to create innovative networks and new partnerships (2019, 200). In fact, the horizontalization of work among different professionals and between them and new information actors (e.g., youtubers and podcasters) can reduce pressure on journalists and make the professional environment healthier. The sociologist also suggests five paths for future communicators to remain more journalists than data bureaucrats - a surprisingly current forecast in times of algorithms and chatbots: obtaining public support and resources for news business sustainability; leveraging new partners in the journalistic chain, such as viewers, prosumers, and amateur journalists; applying techniques from Social Sciences to increase the accuracy of the journalistic product; understanding what the new audiences are and what they want; creativity, innovation, and experimentation to break with exhausted styles and genres (2010, pp. 44-50).

Finally, maintaining the relevance of journalists and journalism for the new configurations of society. Perhaps this is the best recommendation for professionals' mental health, in addition to safeguarding life, employment, and health threats. The perception that the chosen career will not exist, or that it no longer serves to perform it, can generate enormous personal dilemmas. Therefore, it is correct to conclude that renewing oneself professionally protects one's mental health. Salaverría (2015) realized that the modernization of the journalistic business involves the renewal of journalists: "It is about redefining the ways of informing to continue fulfilling a function that society needs. This redefinition also falls to journalists who have their part to do" (2015, p. 82).

The same Salaverría suggests paths for this: technological dexterity, for the renewal of instrumental skills, working on information processing, in addition to filling informational scarcity, which is increasingly rare, moving with ease between media and languages, redefining new routines and workflows, and reorganizing editorial work.

Final Considerations

Therefore, it is important that research in the Global South focus more on this matter, as has already been done by researchers in the Anglo-Saxon and Nordic cultural axes, as well as by professional journalistic entities that publish reports on how journalists can deal with this issue. Our contribution has the limitation of a very small sample, which is still under composition. Nevertheless, it highlights the challenges to journalists' mental health, as identified by reports from the journalistic profession and researchers in the field.

In addition to journalism researchers, sector entities have begun to offer information on how to generate self-care, thus improving the quality of life of these professionals. Among them are manuals, guides, and courses that teach relaxation and stress reduction techniques, focusing on breathing, establishing boundaries between professional and personal life, increasing and improving relationships with other professionals, engaging in physical activity, and practicing techniques for quality sleep (Storm & Crowley, 2022). Regarding practices focused on journalism, there are procedures for dealing with traumatic content, identifying increased stress, and moral and mental harm (Lonsdale, 2022).

Among the recommendations of the Evidence Lab from the Amnesty Internacional Digital Verification team (Amnesty International, 2019) are: turning off automatic playback and download of digital content on social networks or conversation groups; avoiding consumption of photos, audio, or videos in their entirety if they can be identified as traumatic; muting the volume of violent videos, which can attenuate the distress of consumption, limiting the time of contact with explicit images, with periodic breaks, identifying bodily stress reactions during such contact, and talking about possible anxieties with colleagues who understand the experience to which the communication professional may be exposed.

Maintaining well-being through mental health practices can contribute not only to professionals, but also to the outcome of their work and their relationship with the societies they serve. Emotional training and self-awareness practices, for example, can provide relief from psychological problems and cultivate more pro-social behaviors. A study that applied Emotional Balance Cultivation training (Ekman & Ekman, 2013) to teachers, for instance, identified that positive emotional results lasted up to five months, such as the reduction of negative affect traits such as rumination, depression, and anxiety, and an increase in positive affect traits such as mindfulness and compassion – the recognition of emotions in other people.

Considering the picture of journalists' mental health revisited in this article through theoretical review and supportive inquiry, it is necessary to increase research on the phenomenon, both in preventive issues – through courses and training in communication colleges and journalistic companies – and in the causes and effects that generate the loss of well-being and mental health of professionals.

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Reporting and Feeling

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