A commentary: Who's looking out for journalists?

Comentário: Quem toma conta dos jornalistas?

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Abstract

Most people spend a large part of their lives working. It is, perhaps, inevitable that workplace environments help to shape people's well-being and happiness. As we reflect on the past 20 years of *Media & Jornalismo* research we must also look forward to the future of journalism and consider how research can contribute to that future. We also should consider a possible paradigmatic shift in journalism studies and practice that de-focuses journalism and considers the humanity of journalism workers, seeing them less as commodities or commodifiable and more as complex individuals calling for and deserving of personal and professional well-being.

Keywords

Media and journalism studies, journalism practice, mental-health and well-being, humanity of journalism workers

Resumo

A maioria das pessoas passa uma grande parte das suas vidas a trabalhar. É, talvez, inevitável que os ambientes de trabalho ajudem a moldar o bem-estar e a felicidade das pessoas. Ao refletirmos sobre os últimos 20 anos da revista *Media & Jornalismo*, devemos também olhar para o futuro do jornalismo e ponderar o modo como a pesquisa académica pode contribuir para esse futuro. Argumentamos que é necessário considerar uma possível mudança paradigmática nos estudos e práticas jornalísticas que desloque o olhar do jornalismo e considere também a humanidade dos profissionais, vendo-os menos como mercadorias e mais como indivíduos complexos que merecem o bem-estar pessoal e profissional.

Palavras-chave

Estudos dos *media* e do jornalismo, práticas jornalísticas, saúde mental e bem--estar, humanidade dos jornalistas

A call for action in journalism research

Journalism as a profession has recently experienced a wave of professionals leaving or reconsidering the field, many in public ways through platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, and Medium (Mathews et al., 2021). Journalists have long reckoned with issues related to mental health and well-being in the workplace, but these have been exacerbated by the rise of social media, the Covid-19 pandemic, easier access to journalists, political polarization, and, as Waisbord (2020) puts it, the "populist demonization of the mainstream press" (p. 1037).

Journalists have noted several contributors to these departures, including declining mental health related to burnout, harassment and abuse (Jamil, 2020; Reinardy, 2013), more competition throughout news outlets, job insecurity and precarity, pressures to combine personal and professional work (Badran & Smets, 2021; Deuze & Witschge, 2020), and a lack of systemic support within organizations (Holton et al., 2021), though there is a breath and wealth of civil society organizations from centers, foundations, help lines to training focused-organizations. These include Columbia's Dart Center[1], Headlines Network[2], International Women's Media Foundation[3], the International Center for Journalism[4], TrollBusters[5], and VitaActiva[6] taking a share of the work.

Dialogue about journalists' happiness also has a long history in journalism studies research, often nested in discussions of trauma, resilience, and crisis reporting. Columbia University's Dart Center has been a notable leader on the topic (Dworznik & Grubb, 2007; Feinstein, 2012; Ogunyemi & Akanuwe, 2021). In recent years, scholars have increasingly examined issues of happiness (and perhaps unhappiness) alongside financial challenges for news organizations and the need to find sustainable business models for news. These have included: a professional culture glorifying productivity; rising workloads; a lack of work-life balance as well as intensified work demands that are not questioned (Ferrucci & Perreault, 2021; Rantanen et al., 2021); a culture encouraging individualist approaches to solving organizational problems (Holton et al., 2021); a lack of resources for preventative and palliative care related to harassment, burnout, and disconnection (Bossio & Holton, 2019; MacDonald et al., 2016); an erasure or ignoring of diverse and inclusive views especially for women and BIPOC (Walker, 2018); policies focusing on reputation and liability rather than the laborer (Salamon, 2020); increasing pressure to brand and engage with audiences, which can lead to toxicity (Molyneux, 2019; Nelson, 2021); concerns about "what is news," misinformation and fake news along with a lack of trust in institutions (Tumber & Waisbord, 2021); the "in" or "out" belief that workers are replaceable; and increasing emotional work (Jukes, 2020; Pantti & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2021; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2020).

To the latter issue, media and communication scholars have pointed to a rise in emotional labor for journalists, noting that journalism emotions and passions have

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[1] https://dartcenter.org/.

[2] https://headlines-network.com/.

[3] https://www.iwmf.org/attacks-and-harassment/.

[4] https://www.icfj.org/.

[5] http://www.troll-busters.com/.

[6] https://vita-activa.org/.

become a commodity (Lindén, Lehtisaari, Grönlund & Villi, 2021; Šimunjak, 2022) and advocating that journalists and their emotions be considered part of the profession (Jukes, 2020; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2020). Concurrently, journalists have dealt with increasing pressures to use digital technology in their work with a number of social media platforms and web metrics and analytics, to ambiently engage with audiences in these spaces, and to work remotely (Bélair-Gagnon & Steinke, 2020; Petre, 2020). Collectively, these changing expectations have raised expectations that journalists become "on demand" professionals, while driving a rise in harassment among journalists, particularly along identity lines such as gender, race, ethnicity and sexuality (Bélair-Gagnon et al., 2022). This takes place with little institutional regard to the social and personal impacts of communication technologies on professionals' well-being.

The point here is that practice and research have highlighted different dynamics that shape the labor of journalism. They have shown that various shifts are challenging journalists' well-being and mental health, often with little to no support from news organizations. And perhaps most significantly, they suggest that institutional journalism norms must consider the humanity of their journalists–their mental health and well-being included–if journalism is to be sustainable.

Putting the human at the center of journalism practice

Building on research as well as engagement with a number of journalists, news organizations and journalistic allies, we propose research on and professional recognition (and concerted efforts) of improved systemic approaches in newsrooms that holistically involves challenges and opportunities presented by the heightened awareness of journalists' mental health and well-being.

First, journalism and the emotions tied to the profession by those who engage on its front lines, has become more precarious. Yet, even as more journalists are transparent about their needs and why they choose to, or not to, express these needs with news organizations, systemic responses have been slow to nil. Journalists, particularly women and people of color, report concerns over professional stigmatization and blacklisting if they discuss their workplace happiness (Chen et al., 2020; Holton et al., 2021; Koirala, 2020).

For their part, some news organizations have given more resources to interorganizational harassment and acute forms of online audience harassment (i.e., one-time calls from upset readers, one-off tweets, etc.). But most news organizations have given little time off for journalists to recover from trauma, or directed journalists to share their experiences with others or "enjoy a glass of wine" to forget about troubling experiences (see Holton et al., 2021). These examples suggest management that has not been trained in addressing journalistic mental health and well-being while also placing an unnecessary burden on those who are already experiencing anxiety and stress.

Those who have attempted such dialogue have been met with little support or support that is vague and human resources driven (Holton et al., 2021). While human resources may help journalists set up their 401k or their insurance plans, they are not wellness or well-being experts. The suggestion that they may be the only line of support for journalists in news organizations itself implies that leadership and manage-

ment could benefit from support and guidance when it comes to journalistic mental health and well-being. And while support from in-house psychologists has been welcomed by some news organizations, it is not a collective solution.

A system-level approach–conceptualized through a rethinking of policy, procedures, training and sustainable follow-ups–is increasingly needed. Such approaches consider the issues at stake without diminishing personal experiences from the individual, the institutional (including the systems of oppression, bias, structures of organizations, business models, connection with tech industry which may have diverging goals, etc.) and the societal (including the politico-economic differences, media systems, audiences).

Second, a systemic approach may fail if there is no push to rethink the ways that labor has changed in the context described above (Deuze & Witschge, 2018; Salamon, 2020). There is work and labor related to social engagement that is yet to be fully recognized by some newsroom leaders. One example are the disconnective practices–such as blocking or muting users on Instagram or Twitter, taking microbreaks, or turning off social media altogether–that come with digital work and labor and that are identity-dependent (see Bélair-Gagnon et al., 2022).

While such practices may come with privilege, not just on the part of journalists but also newsrooms who may be concerned with the bottom line, they are essential to the work and labor of contemporary journalism. News organizations must take this into account when considering how personal and professional elements in public spaces impact journalists' mental health and well-being.

As we previously argued (see Bélair-Gagnon et al., 2022), it is essential for scholars and practitioners to stay attuned to how to create intentional spaces for strategic forms of disconnections and other labor like emotional work (Lindén et al., 2021). They must also take the time to learn the affordances of digital safety systems (Henrichsen, 2020) and how to address issues of mental health and well-being raised by journalists. This comes with a recasting of journalism practice alongside the changing media, political and social contexts in which a range of "journalisms" are practiced and put the human first rather than asking journalists to simply adapt. As such, values, norms, practices, the types of possible changes (like the environment, policies, structuries) and the conscious (what is recognized, said, or not said) and subconscious need to be considered in efforts to put the human at the center of journalism norms, practices, and studies.

Looking ahead

Scholars and practitioners should continue to rethink what journalism ought to be as societies evolve. They need to consider the cultural differences in which mental health, well-being and perhaps happiness are discussed and experienced. And they should do so by decentering institutional journalism and focusing on the perspectives and lived experiences of journalistic actors. Such an approach could help to develop common knowledge on the topic. In fact, just as emotion has become embedded in journalism processes and products (Pantti & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2021), well-being and happiness are, too, part of journalism and should be constructed as such within in-

stitutional expectations, practices, politics, social classes and inequalities (e.g., free-lance) of journalism.

This is significant for many reasons beyond the well-being of individuals and communities or simply "doing good." News organizations need to recruit and hire new talents. They need to improve retention. They also need to encourage a new generation of journalists to enter the field. In doing so, they should consider portioning some of the vast resources they are spending to address individual issues of mental-health and well-being in more systemic and sustainable ways.

This call and suggested pathways are built from the work from scholars and practitioners in journalism and across a number of disciplines who, too, have argued for a community- and human-driven approach. Suggesting that journalists, and perhaps digital workers more broadly, continue to rely on individual resilience ignores their pleas, dismisses the resources and time they may need for healing and more significantly mutes awareness and action around mental health and well-being at a time when both are needed most.

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