

The Crisis of Journalism and the Health of Journalists

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Abstract

The greatest public health emergency of recent years, the COVID-19 pandemic, wars, economic and climatic crises at local level have threatened to "wipe out" many of the journalistic newsrooms present throughout the world, causing feelings of psycho-physical discomfort among journalists. Events that have a strong impact on media behaviour and the effectiveness of building clear narratives while controlling personal problems, stress and anxiety. The study will analyse, through qualitative methods, a local Italian case on how difficult it is to work for those who provide information during a natural disaster.

Keywords: journalism, health crisis, newsrooms, emergency

1. Introduction

The main efforts in the production of emergency information have focused on local journalism, a publishing sector that is even more in crisis after the pandemic event. Indeed, local media have a smaller advertising pool to draw on and are the ones most affected by the crisis.

The World Health Organisation recently estimated that around 15% of working-age adults suffer from anxiety, stress and depression. In the case of the journalism market, symptoms such as stress and fatigue tend to be associated with certain types of journalism, such as covering wars and pandemics. The delicate link between mental wellbeing and the labour market, which is also linked to the world of publishing and information, is a growing concern at a global level (Radcliffe, Wallace 2021).

In Spain, where this issue has been of particular interest to researchers and trade unions, numerous studies have identified chronic job insecurity as a significant factor in journalists' mental health, with a direct impact on the quality of journalism and public information.

For Agustín Yanel, general secretary of the Federación de Sindicatos de Periodistas (FeSP), "it is not the same to work with a minimum decent salary, in conditions of safety and freedom of reporting, as it is to work with the sword of Damocles hanging over your head (...) The mental health of journalists has deteriorated in recent years and job insecurity is one of the causes".

According to the latest report on professional journalism published by the Madrid Press Association (APM), 70% of the 1328 professionals who took part in the survey recognise the existence of a mental health problem in their sector. Respondents identified symptoms such as stress, anxiety and fatigue, and blamed low salaries, persistent unemployment and the media's lack of political and economic independence.

The APM report (2022) also identified intrusion, lack of professional ethics and long working hours as issues to be addressed in the sector. It is estimated that between 47% and 61% of contract and freelance journalists work more than 40 hours a week.

Alfonso Bauluz, president of Reporters Without Borders (RSF-Spain), agrees, saying that "the economic context in which journalists and journalistic companies work is very difficult and, unfortunately, precariousness is king. It makes sense that this affects people's emotional and mental health".

Bauluz himself highlighted poor labour relations and corporate responsibility as evidence of the industry's constant volatility. The industry, he said, is plagued by a lack of transparency in the election of executives, financing, the distribution of institutional advertising and its ideological, political and economic interests. All this creates a climate that is not conducive to journalistic practice and quality.

It seems, therefore, that the effect on mental well-being also affects the quality of journalism. A journalist who cannot

work in complete freedom, without pressure and with a minimum of decent working conditions will see the product he offers suffer, despite his best intentions.

Mental health expert Cecilia Martínez has highlighted in numerous studies how mental disorders have a marked impact on all aspects of a person's life, to the point where they are unable to carry out their daily lives in a normal way. Within the profession, trade unions warn that the outlook for journalism in Spain is bleak, but point out that improving economic conditions could revitalise the sector, easing the pressure of current job insecurity and its impact on journalists' psychological well-being (RFS 2022).

In Italy, 40% of journalists say they suffer from burnout.

The first in a series of studies by IrpiMedia (2020), restores the image of a sector in which precarious work is one of the main causes of anxiety and stress. Discrimination and harassment affect one in three people, mainly women.

558 journalists replied to the first questionnaire on the psychological well-being of journalists, both employed and freelance. Among the most common disorders, 87% say they suffer from stress, 73% from anxiety and 68% from feelings of inadequacy.

More than 40% report burnout, unmotivated rages and addiction to the internet and social networks. One in three explicitly mentions depression. Problems that manifest themselves in eating disorders (28% of respondents), panic attacks (27%), relationship difficulties (26%). 15% say they have suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder.

The results of the research were collected by IrpiMedia in a three-part investigation, in which we talk about the results, personal stories and possible solutions. Casagit, the independent integration fund for journalists' healthcare, and the National Council of Psychologists (CNOP) are conducting research on similar issues among contracted journalists.

However, freelancers who responded to the IrpiMedia survey were excluded. In fact, it was mainly freelancers who filled in the questionnaire: mostly women (55%) and the vast majority under the age of 45 (77%). Among the factors that influence the conditions of psychological well-being "quite a lot" or "a lot", inadequate remuneration is in first place, followed by job insecurity (83%) and, in third place, the obligation to be constantly connected and available (76%).

Clearly, this is still an open question, but it is by no means a trivial one.

It is certainly a submerged issue, little addressed, sometimes underestimated, even in Italy (the context on which the research will focus).

Good information depends not only on the ability to verify news and access to sources, but also on the state of health of editors and journalists, who are often victims of information overload and an out-of-control information economy.

2. Method

The study analyses the behaviour and socio-emotional state of local journalists during the recent floods that hit the Emilia-Romagna region in central Italy in May 2023.

To answer these questions and to best represent the topic analysed, a qualitative methodology was used: the semi-structured interview. Twenty-five interviews were conducted between July and November 2023, including journalists (professional and otherwise) in the sample with different roles within local newsrooms: professionals, trainees, retired or independent journalists.

The exploratory nature of the research and the qualitative approach chosen allowed us to focus more on the depth of the information collected and to capture in detail the motivations of the interviewees in their own words (Vettehen et al., 1996).

The semi-structured interview is the most widely used technique in qualitative research, as it combines rigour in the themes and topics covered with flexibility in the exchange, offering the possibility of delving into specific points that emerge during the discussion with the interviewee. The aim is to gather opinions and comments that may not have been detected during the preparation phase and that will have a definitive impact on the continuation of the project (Corbetta, 2014).

This methodological choice therefore seemed to be the most appropriate in terms of openness and flexibility, with the freedom to expand the questions and ask for further clarification if necessary.

The interviews lasted between forty-five and sixty minutes and were conducted by appointment, meeting the journalists both in person and online (via the Teams platform, in the case of newsrooms located in the flood-affected areas and only partially accessible in July 2023).

The content of the interview was videotaped and then transcribed in full (Bloor et al., 2001). The textual corpus resulting from the interviews was processed following an inductive procedure aimed at identifying, on the basis of the interview outline, the most relevant and significant thematic categories (Ryan, Bernard, 2003) to describe the perceptions, opinions and behaviours of the journalists during the flood emergency. The interview extracts were then reorganised according to

these categories. Specifically, two main dimensions of analysis were identified in relation to the local journalism field and the journalism profession during emergencies:

- socio-biographical. This first dimension concerned the professional life of the Romagna journalists involved in the research and their vision of local journalism in the digital age (reflection on how and if the journalistic field has changed according to their experience);
- relational and "self-care". This second dimension analysed the relationship with sources and the level of collaboration between journalists, as well as the level of stress in crisis situations and the role of emotions, which profoundly affect the profession by touching the journalist's private and professional spheres.

These categories of analysis also considered some specific criteria of "newsability", which clearly emerged from the interviews with journalists in relation to their way of working during the emergency.

In particular:

- Timeliness and timeliness of the fact: a criterion that takes into account the immediacy of a fact or its novelty;
- The (public) relevance of the protagonists: the attention and visibility of the subjects affected by a specific event;
- Public interest: the level of interest in the event and the consequent level of commitment;
- Physical proximity: the involvement of a geographically close place in relation to a major and unexpected crisis that is being narrated.

3. Professional Life

Information about the territory, interest in what is culturally and spatially close, but also the usefulness of obtaining precise information that allows one to better manage daily life - from transport to work, from the schedule of evening shows to strikes in public services - are all elements that confirm the necessity and importance of the presence of journalism that knows and "serves" the community in which it lives.

Local news was probably also the first place where journalistic information was more open to the diversity of the social system, to represent realities previously unknown (Sorrentino, Bianda, 2013).

Local newspapers have managed to expand the scope of news coverage, also following the acceleration of information, and have managed to better satisfy the wide range of actions, social issues and opportunities that make up each local reality.

As some of the interviewees in the study said:

"I have always worked in local information. First of all, I don't think it's possible to talk about a real model of local journalism in Italy. Every local newspaper has its own 'sensibility'. What I have noticed is that in the last few years, after the recent crises, local information has strengthened the bond with the community, there is no doubt about it (...) What distinguishes us from Repubblica, Sky and "everything that world there" are the themes and the possibility/ability to delve deeply into what happens close to us, what we ourselves experience. It is an ability and a privilege that colleagues who work on a national level do not have" (I, 10).

Local information has the exclusivity on much information from the area, especially in cases of serious emergencies, when the news value of territoriality takes on great importance. The more limited the context in which the newspaper is distributed, the more relevant what is happening in that context (Tierney et al., 2006).

Technological development has also made it possible to produce local information in an incredibly short time (Ryfe, 2012). The dynamics imposed by the medium and the new digital environment make it necessary in many cases to be essential, short, dry and telegraphic (Schudson, 2013).

The result, as the interviewees themselves acknowledge, is the dissemination of fragments of information, produced in a variety of ways and widely distributed thanks to the reticular developments that the platforms allow:

"Especially in these last weeks of emergency, we have thought a lot about the value of local paper or digital information, and the strategy we are adopting now can be summed up in one key word: "territory". On the online pages, we include everything that can be useful and that happens at the last moment, often even uploading a live picture or video. Even on issues that do not fully concern the city or the Emilia-Romagna region. In the newspaper we print, the priority is the community. In digital, the priority - and the problem - is news time" (I, 16)

The choice of format affects not only the quantity of news published, but also the identity of each local newspaper and the quality of its relationship with its audience.

A "historic", "known", "loyal" and "close" audience that buys and reads the local paper; an unknown, diverse and "distant" audience that uses the version of the same digital newspaper in an uncritical and careless way, commenting on the article without knowing the subject:

“When we have received, and still receive, reports on what has been published in the newspaper, we often recognise the name of our reader because he has been following us for a long time, or has already written to us, or we have even met him by chance in the square or in a bar (..) and they are comments, useful, understandable, constructive observations (...) Those who write to us via Facebook are unknown subjects, sometimes not even from Romagna (...) maybe they have been to Forlì once and claim to know how local politics work or how some events are organised (I, 13).

The field of local journalism thus seems "renewed".

Not only hypertextuality, multimedia, immediacy, but also personalisation, contextualisation and ubiquity (Deuze, 2003; Pavlik, 2007). However, there is a difficulty in managing information and its audience on the part of local journalists, which is increasing and changing, sometimes with the risk of producing or fuelling incivility, understood as a set of behaviours and discourses that they violate the customs and norms of the public sphere, or rather, a communication method that has become a strategic resource for seeking online consensus (Bentivegna, Rega, 2022).

This is exactly what happened during the first week of the floods. The information overload and the numerous rumours circulating in the media environment risk affecting journalistic styles and forms, as well as the most consolidated personal and professional values, thus jeopardising their positioning in the field and their reputation (Paulussen, Harder, 2014).

As two journalists who took part in the research pointed out:

“In the first days of the disaster, in addition to publishing the various institutional and emergency press releases, we found ourselves acting as moderators on our online page. We were often insulted and criticised by readers on issues that had nothing to do with the ongoing emergency (...) In these circumstances, the most difficult thing is to maintain calm and professionalism” (I, 2).

4. Journalism Between Relationships And “Self-Care”

The second part of the interview explored two aspects that are only apparently unrelated: the relationship between journalists and sources, and the issue of the "state of health" of the local journalist working in the emergency (what kind of physical and psychological impact it can have on the profession in terms of quality and organisation of work).

Journalism must be considered first and foremost as part of the field of cultural production, which, like others, is partly constituted by its relations with the political and economic field (Sorrentino, Splendore, 2022). Its structure depends on the distribution of capitals that construct the possible positions of the actors.

In the context of this research, the positions that structure the field are those of the local media as an organisation and of the journalists who produce content that is recognised as information, both inside and outside these same organisations.

We have already seen how the conditions under which the journalistic activities of any organisation take place in an emergency situation are, of course, altered compared to 'normality'. In this context, the external and backstage communication of the emergency, the latter understood as the relational process that concerns and in which only the "insiders" of the same or different sector operate, is more crucial than ever for a more decisive response and a better public management of the disaster (Saoutal et al., 2014).

In the case of Romagna, this becomes the main tool for building and strengthening relationships outside and inside journalistic newsrooms with various institutional actors, creating greater cohesion and cooperation at all levels. In this sense, the journalist, while seeking and activating collaboration with national colleagues, for the treatment of topics and news of a specific nature, organises professional tools of direct information, capable of giving a voice to the citizens administered or, in any case, going in the direction of reducing the distance (and the noise) between institutions and the community (De Vincentiis, 2018).

During the flood, according to the interviewees, the importance not only of territorial knowledge, but also of the ability and willingness to network, guaranteed greater transparency and accuracy in the dissemination of information, sometimes causing a little tension:

“Often the town councillor or the fire chief are your friends or acquaintances (...) You know, with children or a passion for the same sport, etc... it's a small world (...) This kind of pre-existing contact, beyond everything, is necessary and fundamental. It would be impossible to set up networks once the emergency had begun. Working on the news ... would be impossible, so when something happens that you can't reach or understand on your own, you already know who you need to hear from” (I,5).

“Sometimes it is the councillors, the mayors or the prefecture itself who contact you, as well as some editorial colleagues from the nearest municipality. They know us, they know how we move and work in the area (...) Cooperation was good even during the floods. In some cases, however, the balance tends to be broken when you are forced to publicly highlight an institutional error in your article (...) Personally, I happened to argue with the prefect's spokeswoman about the fact that the names of the victims of the flood could not be published. Something without sense” (I,3)

“If we had not already been in contact, it would have been difficult not only to follow but also to deny some institutional press releases, which would soon have turned into disinformation (...) The prefecture, two days after the flood, gives the news of a dead man near Solarolo, if I remember correctly. The next day, this dead man was "resurrected". In other words, an institution gave us a dead man who wasn't dead. We had to interview the victim's wife, who actually told us about a very specific situation (...) her husband was saved by a miracle (...) Perhaps during the checks it was discovered that the area was completely submerged and probably no further checks were carried out (...) The tension and the rush to communicate produce this, in the meantime panic has been created in this community” (I, 11).

Journalistic information, like political and institutional communication, functions in a similar way to interpersonal relationships: it selects, hierarchises and reports (Cook, 2006; Gieber, 1960).

Of course, in journalism, the multiplicity of topics, subjects and models of expression makes everything more complex, but it does not change the structure of the path. Journalists select the things to say from their own knowledge, emotions and feelings, and decide how to say them according to the nature of the context (McNair, 2006). In this sense, especially in a moment of tension and uncertainty, communication error, or rather distortion, can be understood as a category specific to journalism.

In an emergency, the work of transforming information changes and local journalists suffer the same stresses and run the same risks and dangers as other citizens, with obvious difficulties in managing both their personal and professional lives at the same time.

This is a little discussed topic in journalism studies, but it is certainly not new (Hoak, 2021).

For the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (2020), already during Covid-19, 70% of the journalists participating in the study showed some degree of psychological distress; 26% showed signs of generalised anxiety, with worry, sleeplessness, poor concentration and fatigue. 11% showed post-traumatic stress disorder, with a tendency to avoid Covid-related memories, feelings of guilt, fear, anger, horror and shame.

Similarly, in interviews, journalists repeatedly compared the weeks of the floods to those of the pandemic, using terms and expressions that seem to belong to the semantic sphere of health, such as "stress", "unease", "anger", "crisis", "trauma", "fatigue".

Coping with the flood of information, listening to tragic stories, the daily news of the number of deaths recorded in one's country of residence, not being able to reach family members or colleagues from where one was during the flood, are all news situations that have characterised these days:

“We are talking about different experiences, of course (...) but having to communicate the number of deaths, listening to people on the phone who were frightened and begging us to call the ambulance or the police because they had an elderly parent and the road to leave the area where they lived was completely blocked, was devastating. It felt like we were almost back in 2020” (I, 6).

“We have a duty to be in the field and report what people tell us and the inconveniences that we could record at a territorial level (...) But many of us also have a family (...) While you're worrying about posting emergency infographics or bringing back the mayor's press releases and it's pouring rain, it's almost impossible to just concentrate on work” (I, 9).

“Covid has 'trained' us to work remotely (...) But this time, stuck at home working, I felt an almost angry feeling (...) I collected the voices of some friends and colleagues trapped in their homes via WhatsApp (...) I wrote an article about the difficulties of reaching some homes (...) I felt guilty in the first few days for not having done more” (I, 15).

“Some colleagues were very touched by this story (...) As editor of the paper, I gave them the opportunity to tell their story in the first person. I know it's not done, it's not politically correct, let's say, journalistically speaking. But from their worried looks, it seemed to me the only way to help them get out of this "block" through their own profession, which became self-therapy, writing (...) On the other hand, to give our readers a true, detailed story” (I,7).

5. Conclusion

Crises and events occur on a global scale, but relationships and identities are formed on the basis of shared interests, lifestyles and political beliefs that transcend geographical boundaries and "constitute the infrastructure that supports the world and makes it habitable, manageable, explorable and, more importantly, reducible to the contingencies and uncertainties that characterise everyday community life" (Silverstone, 2002, p. 16).

Information technology acts as a "bridge to the world", defining a new cultural framework in which images, narratives, chats, homepages facilitate the transcending of traditional notions of boundaries, contributing to the creation of creative exchanges between sameness and difference, heroes and anti-heroes, friends and strangers, and the participation in events and circumstances in distant and remote places within media spaces that become part of society and our local experience of life.

For this reason, despite the importance of (inter)national media, local media still allow communities to tell their stories and shape their identity by discussing political, economic and cultural issues relevant to their daily lives (Rodríguez, 2011).

From this point of view, local information confirms that it can summarise the various policies aimed at managing the emergency and the living conditions of the citizens in the area, but it seems to be unable to do without a national perspective, which helps it to go into more depth on issues that it would not be able to talk about due to a lack of human resources or the amount of institutional or service content that it is forced to cover. The "information dialogue" and cooperation between local and national media and the public could therefore improve "journalism in emergencies" by involving citizens and redefining the information priorities of the mainstream media.

And this is essential to do a good job of shaping information, but also to work in a clear and orderly way.

Work-related stress is nothing new for journalists like Hill who have worked in conflict zones, but the stress is different, she said.

For Lewis (2019), going from a fairly stressful environment, but stressful because you're in a conflict zone or a climate change zone, and being in an environment like the newsroom where you have nothing to do but sit and brood with those worries, actually becomes a very different kind of mental stress, a more prolonged and driftless kind of mental stress. Especially for small local newsrooms.

Without the ability to get out, journalists have to get creative about how they keep up with what's happening. Their reliance on social networks means they are constantly bombarded with information, which can have a negative impact.

As a journalist, you have to consume news all day long, which means being hooked up to the fire hose of Twitter. It's a bit like putting your face over the Chernobyl reactor and staring at the radiation for 10-12 hours a day because you're sitting at home (Lewis, 2021).

During a webinar hosted by Investigative Reporters and Editors, Poynter's Al Tompkins said his biggest concern is that journalists don't spend enough time relaxing outside of work. Most people check their phones before they go to sleep, sometimes in the middle of the night and usually as soon as they wake up, he said, causing stress and exhaustion.

In addition to professional stress, there is also concern for family members, who are often involved in the causes and stories of the reported events, which then become haunting news (for those who write it and those who read it).

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