Reporting the Covid-19 pandemic: trauma on our own doorstep

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Abstract:	The political and media rhetoric of the pandemic is that of conflict and a call to arms in face of a hidden enemy. But this is not a distant war where journalists are parachuted in to report on the action for a few weeks and then fly home. It is on our own doorstep. Many of those covering the global crisis do not correspond to the popular image of hardened conflict reporters and may have little experience in dealing with distressing stories of death, grief and mourning. How are journalists coping with the everyday diet of trauma when the corona frontline may be affecting their families, friends and colleagues? This paper explores these issues through narrative interviews with UK-based journalists covering the pandemic for broadcast, print and digital media. It seeks to capture their 'emotional labour' and explore possible differences in their practice and the coping strategies they employ. The paper locates this discussion within the context of an industry that has paid relatively little heed to these issues and considers what long-term implications the coronavirus may have for the next generation of digital journalists.

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ABSTRACT

The political and media rhetoric of the pandemic is that of conflict and a call to arms in face of a hidden enemy. But this is not a distant war where journalists are parachuted in to report on the action for a few weeks and then fly home. It is on our own doorstep. Many of those covering the global crisis do not correspond to the popular image of hardened conflict reporters and may have little experience in dealing with distressing stories of death, grief and mourning. How are journalists coping with the everyday diet of trauma when the corona frontline may be affecting their families, friends and colleagues? This paper explores these issues through narrative interviews with UK-based journalists covering the pandemic for broadcast, print and digital media. It seeks to capture their 'emotional labour' and explore possible differences in their practice and the coping strategies they employ. The paper locates this discussion within the context of an industry that has paid relatively little heed to these issues and considers what long-term implications the coronavirus may have for the next generation of digital journalists.

Keywords: pandemic; trauma; emotional labour; empathy; resilience; journalism education

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REPORTING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: TRAUMA ON OUR OWN DOORSTEP

Introduction

Over the past decade, media organisations have made considerable progress in safeguarding the mental wellbeing of journalists assigned to covering traumatic news stories and in offering support mechanisms. In parallel to this, issues of emotion and trauma, long neglected in academic research, are beginning to be explored through the field of journalism studies, particularly as social media and digital platforms harvest raw emotion to increase audience engagement and as normative values of objectivity are called into question. Recent studies have recognised that the risk of trauma has moved into the newsroom, creating a 'digital frontline' (Eyewitness Media Hub, 2015) as journalists sift through often distressing user-generated images of conflict and terror. Now, the Covid-19 pandemic, that has dominated global headlines for well over a year, has added a further dimension to the mental health risks faced by working journalists.

This paper explores the distinct challenges the pandemic poses for the journalists who are trying to capture its immediacy and working within a context where the political and media rhetoric of the pandemic is that of conflict. In Britain, Prime Minister Boris Johnson has labelled the virus an 'invisible enemy'; former US President Donald Trump called himself a 'wartime president'. But this is not a distant conflict where journalists are parachuted in to report on the action for a few weeks and then fly home. It is on our own front doorstep. Many of those journalists drafted in to cover the global health crisis do not correspond to the popular image of the hardened war correspondent and may have little experience in dealing with the deeply distressing stories of death, grief and mourning that result from covering the pandemic.

We set out to investigate how covering the pandemic might be different from other crises, what that means for the practice of journalism and whether the coping strategies journalists normally employ work in this context. Can they maintain a sense of appropriate professional detachment which might otherwise help to shield them from trauma when the story is so close to home? Can they separate their professional and personal identities and to what extent does an 'always on' digital news environment make a difference?

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Journalism, emotion and trauma

Both in the practical world of day-to-day journalism and the academic world, issues of emotion, emotional literacy, emotional labour and trauma have been largely neglected. It is only in the recent past that what has been posited as an 'emotional turn' in journalism studies has developed alongside the technological changes driven by social media, which, in turn, have ushered in a greater role for emotion in journalism (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2020: 175).

In journalism practice, after the September 11 attacks of 2001, the BBC and the international news agency Reuters made a decisive move to introduce psychological safety training for its staff (Jukes, 2020: 122). Recognition of the need for such training has grown internationally, due to continuing conflict in the Middle East and the work of media support charities, including the Dart Centre for Journalism & Trauma[1]. Mental health related education has also developed in the industry, but more specialist trauma-related training remains sporadic, and usually focused on preventing psychological injury among high-risk groups of media workers.

The word *trauma* derives from the Greek noun meaning 'wound', but also has connotations with the piercing that inflicts a wound. In the context of mental health, this relates to how an event can 'pierce' a person's psyche and then occasion continuing complications. Contemporary scientific formulations of what trauma involves can be traced back to the 1970s when clinicians noted similarities in the condition of Vietnam combat veterans and women who had been subjected to sexual violence (Rees, 2013: 412). A new condition was diagnosed in 1980, post-traumatic stress disorder or, as it is now commonly known, PTSD. Today, the primary usage is reserved for situations which involve actual death, injury and sexual assault, or the threat of those things. Crucially, when it comes to journalists, *indirect* exposure, for example, repeated exposure to witnessing and reporting on traumatic events, is recognised in the medical literature as a potential vector for harm.

Studies over the last twenty years demonstrate that the majority of journalists do exhibit high levels of resilience when working on 'traumatic news' assignments, but also flag up significant mental health risks, including PTSD, depression, anxiety, and related difficulties. The first study to gain widespread attention in the international news industry was South African

[1] Footnote removed for anonymous version.

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psychiatrist Anthony Feinstein's discovery of high rates of PTSD among war correspondents (Feinstein et al., 2002). In recent years, focus on secondary or vicarious impact has increased – for example, the implications of viewing user-generated content depicting death or injury for media workers (Eyewitness Media Hub, 2015).

The concept of moral injury is also important. It denotes the harm that may arise when people witness things that transgress their expectations of a just and morally ordered society. The concept has been gaining traction during the pandemic as a way of understanding the impact of mass death and health system failure on medical workers. (Williamson et al., 2020)[2] and it takes on particular significance because of the nature of journalism (Browne, Evangeli, & Greenberg, 2012: 207):

> "Journalists … are a unique cohort, distinct from other high-risk groups in that they often experience or witness traumatic events, but are not expected to intervene. Not having a direct, helping role when attending to traumatic incidents may present journalists with complex ethical dilemmas. For example, morally believing the right thing to do is to provide aid, versus the knowledge that one should remain objective."

The concept of moral injury has since been applied to US journalists (Drevo, 2016), reporters covering the refugee crisis in Europe (Feinstein & Storm, 2017) and UK production staff working in factual and reality TV (Rees, 2019).

In the journalism studies field, there has also been a delay in exploring how emotion, trauma and journalism interrelate. Here, the recent impetus was provided not by war and disaster, but by the technological revolution wrought by social media and the impact of the digital media world on today's news. As Wahl-Jorgensen notes, the relative scarcity of research in this field can be attributed in large part to journalism's adherence to a model of liberal democracy and the associated ideal of objectivity (2020: 176). Although objectivity and emotion are clearly not binary opposites (Peters, 2011; Jukes, 2020) it has been argued that for some journalists, objectivity had until recently enjoyed a talismanic status and that talk of emotion in journalism had been taboo (Richards & Rees, 2011). Emotional journalism (for example sensationalist

[2] Moral injury is not a mental health condition per se but rather an index of harm, one that is a potential catalyst for PTSD, burnout and other difficulties. It is associated with strong feelings of shame and guilt.

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tabloid journalism) was often therefore labelled 'bad' journalism (Zelizer, 2000: ix) as a consensual occupational ideology and value system based on objectivity was firmly established among journalists (Deuze, 2005: 3). This tended to obscure the emotional labour at the heart of journalism practice (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2020: 188). The term emotional labour was first coined by American sociologist Arlie Hochschild in 1983, Her influential study focused on flight attendants and the fact that as part of their job they had to smile and display other signs of emotional positivity in their dealings with passengers. Since then, academics including Richards (2007) Wahl-Jorgensen (2019a, 2020) and Jukes (2020) have extended the concept into the field of journalism. Whether knowingly or not, journalists use their emotional responses to the world in the course of their professional practice. The product, or news story, will reflect these responses and in turn have a direct impact on those for whom it has been produced (Richards, 2007: 65).

The concept of precarity threads through issues of emotion in journalism. In the context of this study, precarity is applied in two senses: firstly, to the precarious nature of journalists' job security during the pandemic, as many newsrooms are slimmed down and offices closed in favour of working from home; and secondly to the health risks of infection and illness faced by journalists reporting on the pandemic. Wahl-Jorgensen argues that it is essential to consider ways in which journalists are emotionally affected by the pressures of their profession (2019b: 674). Through our interviews, we explored the subjective dimension of precarity, how issues of job security and health might affect the journalists' work and whether such precarity is a potential cause of stress.

Emotional management in journalism

The unusual nature – and specifically exceptional length - of the pandemic story is important when it comes to considering how journalists cope with emotions at play in their work. Large scale natural or man-made disasters can typically dominate news coverage for several days and become 'media events'(Dayan and Katz, 1992). The development of 24/7 news since Dayan and Katz coined the phrase has led to an almost uninterrupted diet of disaster, tragedy and personal grief in what Liebes has subsequently called a 'disaster marathon' (1998). But despite this, news coverage of one single crisis is not normally sustained for such a long time (Houston et al., 2012: 608). In their study of major US disasters, Houston, Pfefferbaum and Rosenholtz

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found that a story might span 12 months from start to finish but observed that the overall pattern of coverage comes right after the event, followed by a rapid decline (2012: 612). In terms of geographic reach, the pandemic is a global crisis, that has barely left the headlines, with, at the time of writing, more than 190 million infections and 4.0 million deaths. Clearly, in terms of news values, the pandemic has an enduring appeal due to its relevance to the audience and its magnitude (Harcup & O'Neill, 2001, 2017).[3]

Literature on journalists' management of emotions and coping mechanisms has tended to focus on conflict and disaster journalism when reporters fly in to cover distant news stories and, by extension, 'distant others' or 'distant suffering' (Chouliaraki, 2006; Pantti, Wahl-Jorgensen & Cottle, 2012; Jukes, 2020). Less attention has been paid to the potentially distressing nature of news when journalists are working on their local 'beat' close to home - as is the case with the pandemic. One exception to this is a body of academic work focusing on what has become known in journalism as the 'death knock', when journalists are sent to interview relatives of the victim of a tragedy (often in the context of local news stories such as road accidents or serious crime). Despite the importance and sensitivity of the task, it is one for which most journalists are ill prepared (Duncan & Newton, 2010: 439). Such interviews can be a disconcerting experience for a reporter, particularly if inexperienced, who has to balance the emotional experience of facing bereaved relatives with the professional challenge of getting the story (ibid: 440).

Given the increasing recognition that journalists can be exposed to sources of trauma, studies have started to explore how journalists manage their emotions and their coping strategies. One of these strategies includes, critically in the context of this paper, the ability to disconnect or distance oneself from work and being able to compartmentalise the professional and personal (Seeley, 2019: 252). In Seeley's survey of 254 US daily newspaper reporters, the phrase "getting away from work" arose frequently. One spoke of never checking work e-mails at home; another spoke of varying assignments so that he was not always covering victims of trauma (ibid: 253). Another coping mechanism is immersion in the task of journalism, focusing on the importance of its value, with phrases such as "serving society" and "doing this for the greater good" (ibid: 253). This sense of public service journalism is often seen at times of

[3] In their 2017 reappraisal of news values, Harcup and O'Neill defined 'magnitude' as follows: Magnitude: Stories perceived as sufficiently significant in the large numbers of people involved or in potential impact, or involving a degree of extreme behaviour or extreme occurrence (2016: 1482).

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national crisis when journalists feel they are providing vital information to the population and constitutes one of the strands of our inquiry in this research paper. Such behaviour can also have an unintended consequence of watering down the traditional watchdog role of journalism. Schudson has identified what he calls a trend to a 'pastoral' form of journalism at times of crisis, with an emphasis on public service information (2002). After the September 11 attacks, Schudson defined criteria that led journalists to move into what Hallin has called a 'sphere of consensus' in which they cast aside the more normal reporting behaviour or the 'sphere of legitimate controversy' (Hallin, 1986). According to Schudson, this can be a times of tragedy, (for example the assassination of President Kennedy in 1963) or in moments of pubic danger, whether from attacks such as those on September 11 or natural disasters. In these circumstances, journalists disseminate public health information and may even communicate a sense of solidarity (Schudson, 2002:20).

The concepts of *distancing* and *detachment* are complex and addressed differently in the separate research traditions of journalism studies and trauma psychology. There is not space here for the thorough disambiguation the terms merit, however a distinction does need to be made between forms of conscious, professional detachment that are likely to be protective; and denial and avoidance, which are more automatic emotional flight reactions, often associated with less positive outcomes (Newman & Nelson, 2012). Adaptive forms of detachment or distancing would include the abilities to disentangle one's personal story from those of others and to down-regulate personal distress by scheduling in rest and recovery time, limiting exposure to traumatic stressors and switching off from work (McMahon, 2010). Maladaptive patterns would include: emotional blunting and numbing, gallows humour, compartmentalisation and self-medication through the use of substances, and compulsive over-working – all features identified by Buchannan and Keats in their study of Canadian newsrooms (2011).

Studies have identified other methods through which journalists consciously or unconsciously shield themselves from trauma. In a study of journalists covering the refugee crisis and November 2015 Paris terror attacks, Kotišová discerned what she called an emotional culture of cynicism as a prerequisite of being able to do the job in the face of witnessing and reporting the intense emotions of a disaster or crisis (2017: 250). The need to focus on the facts and detail of a breaking news story (rather than its emotional impact) and to make sure that the technology

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of processing the story works also emerged as coping strategies in Kotišová's study (ibid: 251). In this case, it is a journalist's immersion in the practice or craft of journalism that affords protection from trauma.

To date, some preliminary thoughts about the pandemic have emerged from journalism charities and media think tanks. In discussing best practice, each has identified the lack of distance from the subject matter as a critical issue. Cait McMahon, the Dart Center's Asia Pacific Director, argues that journalists covering the pandemic need to be more in tune with their own anxieties and those of their interviewees. In an interview with GIJN she says (2020):

> "While many of the same risks apply, the current coronavirus pandemic also differs from a traumatic event like a tsunami or a bomb blast. This is a creeping, invisible thing that everyone in the world is experiencing…"

A preliminary survey[4] by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (RISJ) found that even experienced reporters working for large, well-funded media organisations have often been struggling to cope with the demands on reporting on the pandemic (RISJ, 2020). Around 70% of respondents reported experiencing some levels of psychological distress, with 11% reporting prominent reactions found in PTSD. These included "recurrent intrusive thoughts and memories of a traumatic Covid-19-related event, a desire to avoid recollections of the event, and feelings of guilt, fear, anger, horror and shame" (ibid). A survey conducted by the International Center for Journalists (ICFJ) and the Tow Center for Digital Journalism at Columbia University (Posetti et al., 2020) raised 'red flags' for journalism. It collated responses from 1,400 English speaking journalists in 125 countries. 70% rated the psychological and emotional impacts of dealing with the Covid-19 crisis as the most difficult aspect of their work. 30% said that their news organisations had not provided them with a single piece of protective equipment during the first wave of the pandemic. 81% were working in a context where dis/misinformation was a key issue, a factor liable to exacerbate moral injury.[5]

[4] 73 journalists from international news organisations were asked in June 2020 about their working conditions and emotional state. All journalists have worked on stories directly related to the pandemic. The survey had a 63% response rate.

[5] The ICFJ/Tow Center study is the first in a data driven series addressing the challenges of reporting the pandemic.

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This paper seeks to build on these academic studies into journalists' emotional labour and initial observations on Covid-19 by addressing the following research questions aimed at teasing out the changes in practice emerging during coverage of the pandemic:

- RQ 1: What is different about covering the pandemic for journalists and their practice?
- RQ 2**:** What coping strategies do journalists employ in reporting on the pandemic?

Methodology

In order to build a rich experiential picture of reporting the pandemic, we adopted elements of a narrative inquiry approach (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004), to gain insights to the individual journalist's storied lives during this time and to identify themes, deductively and inductively As Brooks reminds us (1984: 3):

> "Our lives are ceaselessly intertwined with narrative, with the stories that we tell and hear told … or would like to tell, all of which are reworked in that story of our own lives that we narrate to ourselves in an episodic, sometimes semi-conscious but virtually uninterrupted monologue."

Within the realm of journalism studies, Wahl-Jorgensen notes how "we may helpfully draw on life history interviews focusing on journalists' emotional labor" (2019b: 672). As researchers (and former journalists) we are also living in the pandemic, whilst conducting semi-structured narrative interviews with working journalists, so it is important to acknowledge the dynamic and unfinished quality of the narratives. Ethically, it is also important to acknowledge our presence in the process of enabling others' voices to be heard (Fowler-Watt, 2013). Human identity is narrational, and telling stories offers a way of making sense of our lives, so a narrative inquiry approach to analysis of the accounts arising from the interview experience offered an 'authentic fit' for this study. This immersive approach also envisages the interview as discourse, as an observational encounter (Denzin,1970: 133 in Silverman, 2001),

In October-November 2020, we conducted eleven semi-structured interviews over Zoom with journalists from a range of news organisations in the UK. They were all located in their own homes: four work for national public service broadcasters; three are young community reporters from different parts of the UK, one is a freelance features journalist, two work for

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national broadcasters outside of London and one is from a regional newspaper. Their ages ranged from 20 – late 50s; there were five males and six females and two were from minority backgrounds. The interviewees were selected on the basis of their sustained engagement in reporting the crisis across a range of job titles and platforms. Although a small sample, each of the interviews lasted up to 90 minutes and was recorded and transcribed. Whilst the study cannot capture every element of the in-depth interviews, it focuses on the responses which are central to the research questions. The project was granted ethics approval by xxxxxxxx University's Research Ethics Panel for Humanities and Social Sciences. Each participant signed a consent form and was offered anonymity. Hence the interviewees have been given pseudonyms, with an indicative job title e.g., broadcast news journalist, at first mention.

As indicated by the research questions above, primary objectives of the research project were to learn about how journalists living in and reporting on the pandemic felt about that experience (and implications for their 'emotional labour'), how they came to do their normal work in the context of crisis and how they functioned (coped) in changed working conditions. The interview process also embraced the constraints imposed by time, the vagaries of our powers of recall and the temporal quality of memory. These constraints shape the stories that are shared. The time frame for sharing stories spanned the participants' recall of the start of the Covid-19 crisis (February/March 2020); the experience of lockdown (March – May/June 2020); adjustment to new rules and government guidance in the post-lockdown summer months and reflections in 'real time' on the socio-economic impact of the pandemic and looming lockdown 2.0 in November 2020.

We analysed each interview in the context of the research questions and the journalists' sharing of their lived experiences covering the pandemic contextualises our findings. We discerned these themes, which map to the research questions: the personal impact on journalists living in a digital 'always on' environment – including the assessment and focus on risk, precarity and moral injury; changing practices – notably the death knock (RQ1); coping mechanisms, such as distancing (both physical and mental), the ability to switch off and distractions (RQ2).

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Findings:

As a study informed by narrative inquiry, the journalists' descriptions of their lived experiences map out the landscape for our investigation of the research questions. All of the journalists interviewed felt the relentlessness of covering the pandemic, the sense that this was not a normal short-term crisis that disappeared from the headlines after a routine news cycle or followed usual patterns; they were 'always on' and acutely aware of the personal impact of the story. Local TV news reporter, Claudia was told to "just head out and find out how people are feeling. And that hasn't stopped, that's been pretty much every day". She found "it really difficult not to carry the stories home with me" and talked about feeling that "there is a lot of weight to carry." Anna, a regional newspaper reporter, said that: "there is not the same switching off mechanism at home … there is no end to the shift" and that "we are all in this together … because of the nature of working from home". Others felt that working on one story offered a shared experience. Adam, a national broadcast news journalist working in a regional bureau said:

> "I've never covered a story like this, where you have been focused for so long on one issue or one world event non-stop… it has also been very pressured and relentless…It's a story like no other, which affects your personal life and your professional life".

The digital environment made journalists accessible to the public, but also accentuated the sense of 'always on'. They found themselves fielding approaches on social media and following up links sent to their mobile phones. These journalists painted a picture of emotional labour that is relentless and exhausting, where professional and personal boundaries no longer existed and where feelings of personal vulnerability were intensified. The sense of precarity was most marked for those with fewer economic resources, for example, those from minority backgrounds or with underlying mental health issues. Some were concerned about job security. Rob, a trainee journalist, felt "glad that I still have a job … because we've had to make cuts." For Sarah, contact with vulnerable interviewees "opens up the question of your own potential vulnerability."

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1. Moral injury:

The strain inflicted by the context of mis/disinformation highlighted by the recent ICFJ/Tow Center survey (2020) was borne out in the interviews and raised the issue of moral injury. Harry, a broadcast news journalist working outside of London, was concerned that broadcasting video of "very burnt-out people" working in the NHS was exposing them "to social media grief" from anti-vaxxers who might allege that they were fabricating the crisis to make "money from the vaccine." Here, moral injury was evident in the sense that certain members of the public are agents of moral harm, and in a fear that one's own actions could be enabling it. The discussion of this was tinged with a note of betrayal: how could sections of an audience that are journalists trying to serve behave in this way? Claudia felt that navigating social media was exhausting: "The day job is hard enough, but having to read everything that everyone sends you, a lot of it unsubstantiated … it is overwhelming." All of the journalists interviewed conveyed feelings of guilt and helplessness when confronted by the grief, economic hardship or emotional fragility of others. This reflected the moral dilemma faced by journalists covering traumatic news and the tension between the normative expectation not to intervene (Browne, Evangeli, & Greenberg, 2012: 207) and an acute awareness expressed by the journalists we interviewed of their duty of care to those whose stories they were telling. Louise's focus on poverty led her to look at those who had just started a new job and were missing out on furlough:

> "Their income literally disappeared, it disappeared at a stroke. You talk about trauma, these were people who had never been unemployed, they were people that the government would regard exactly as 'doing the right thing' … it was like a sinkhole had been created in their lives … people who had no money at all and were starting for the first time in their lives to rely on food banks".

The theme of potential moral injury also emerged in the assessment of risk. Journalists' like Adam who were allowed into hospitals at a time when PPE was in short supply for medical workers and family members were prohibited from visiting dying relatives had to "wrestle with" additional ethical considerations to what would normally have been simple safety decisions:

> "Do you go into the hospital and accept PPE … when it's in short supply? I spent a whole day driving around my town to find some scrubs … Do you accept scrubs, or do you go in with your own PPE? Do you go into a hospital to film when relatives aren't

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> allowed in? Do you go and film people who are vulnerable, when you might be exposing them to risk?"

At the same time, journalists also had to assess risk for themselves, their families and even for members of the public who contacted them for advice. Community reporter Seb, described the process of risk assessment in this way: "You've got to put different hats on really, you've got to think about yourself and your job and it's all connected obviously - but it's multi-faceted". The extended microphone boom used by the broadcast journalists to maintain social distancing emphasised not only the disruption to normal reporting methods but also the underlying danger in carrying out a basic interview.

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2. The death knock

Just how interviews with the bereaved were conducted varied widely and illustrated how the ritual of the 'death knock' has been disrupted. Some of the journalists tried to conduct such interviews in a traditional way; others capitalised on recent innovations which centre on using social media as a mechanism for harvesting contributions from the public. Both methods presented particular challenges. Claudia has made a point of visiting families in person but for her social distancing has changed the dynamic of interviews dramatically.

> "The two-metre thing is awful," she said. "There was a woman who lost her mum and she had said goodbye to her through wearing gloves. And I sat in her garden. And she was so distraught, so grateful that we told her mum's story…. (she) was so distraught and I was two metres away from her … That closeness has gone, you are two metres away, you are sanitising everything you touch, you're thinking of so many things because of the Covid restrictions that actually you're almost losing that human interaction where you are just a human and not a journalist."

For Claudia, the ability to conduct an empathic interview has been lost. For Harry the restrictions imposed by social distancing changed the dynamic, not least since the facial expressions of an interviewee are difficult to pick up behind a mask:

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> "Physically being at a distance from somebody changes the way you speak to them, if you are wearing a mask or they're wearing a mask, it changes the way you speak, speak to them … that whole sort of sit-down cup of tea – it's all over."

Some have been conducting interviews with the bereaved over the phone. Community reporter Will also found it difficult not being able to see people, pick up facial signals and anticipate their feelings. As it became a weekly occurrence, so it became harder to avoid, for example, the cliché that 'tributes are flooding in' and to do justice to each interviewee, treating them as a distinct individual. "It's quite difficult to change it up every time," he said. "It's all about that one person you are writing about. You have to be so careful, I think - more than ever at the moment."

Others have reimagined the task, using social media and employing what is tantamount to a 'digital death knock.' Sarah has put out calls on Facebook for people seeking to tell their story or that of their relatives who have died. She was very conscious of the danger of alienating people and the ethical challenges. Instead of trawling through social media in response to breaking news or looking for key phrases such as 'father dead' or 'brother RIP, it has also been possible to wait for contributors to volunteer information on a dedicated webpage. The information that has been volunteered can then be made into tributes but has to be checked carefully.

But whatever its form, the death knock interview has been a staple of reporting on the pandemic and remains the disconcerting experience Duncan and Newton observed a decade ago (2010). If anything, it has had a distinct and renewed mission. Harry said he had been wary of interviewing survivors of natural disasters or terror attacks when "swarms' of journalists descended on them. But the past months had been different:

> "What's been slightly different with coronaviruses is that some of those family members … have felt that there was a purpose in in speaking out, you know, there is a public service message, a need to make people understand that this virus for some people could be very, very dangerous."

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3. Coping mechanisms

The idea that we are all in the same boat during this pandemic has been a common refrain in the public discourse, even though it is only true in a limited sense. In reality, everyone brings their own constellation of circumstances and resources - and if they have direct contact with the virus, health outcomes - to the pandemic. Just as there is no *average citizen*, there is no *average journalist*. But these twin abstractions are useful here because the journalists interviewed are exposed to two-loadings of impact: first as private individuals with their own stories, and secondly as professionals who are spending a considerable proportion of working time in close proximity to the suffering of strangers. And so how did the journalists cope with this double dosage of direct and vicarious exposure? What helped them to feel more solid, in a personal sense?

The strongest theme that emerged was the importance of needing to do a good job, a sense of duty to 'do the right thing' by vulnerable interviewees who had been bereaved or otherwise affected by the pandemic. This sense of mission, akin to the pastoral role detected by Schudson (2002) at times of national crisis, reflected the dominance of Covid-19 in the national discourse and emerged as a powerful coping mechanism helping journalists through the period.

A sense of responsibility extended across the range of reporting genres, with some of the journalists interviewed detecting (and gratified) that their role was once again being valued by society. Community reporter Seb said people were beginning to see how important journalists are and that he and his colleagues had received unprecedented levels of help and support. This heightened sense of responsibility was expressed by some of the journalists as a duty to capture people's stories impartially, accurately and to memorialise the lives of those who died as a result of the virus. Here the journalists were anchoring themselves in their normative practices as a way of coping with crisis through serving their audiences.
In some cases, this led to a step-change in how they approached contributors. Will said:

> "It has humanised my work a lot more. My style has completely changed. Waking up to what everyone else is feeling and reacting to. The pandemic has opened my eyes to other peoples' struggles."

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This sense of public service and doing a valuable job – again, the pastoral role - was a significant way in which journalists were able to shield themselves from distress and cope with the relentless nature of the pandemic story. Some of those with extensive prior experience of working on social and criminal justice stories had already gained a more sophisticated understanding of how to avoid inadvertently adding to the distress of vulnerable people; consequently, they had less need to evolve their approach. But nevertheless, the same theme emerged: it was being able to fall back on that competence, which helped ground them on a personal level. According to Harry, it was easier to "park" harrowing details to one side: "if the people you feel that you have interviewed feel that it has been beneficial."

Sarah, who as a social media specialist has been tracking hundreds of bereavements, also felt that she was: "making a bit of a difference in [people's] lives". She volunteered to cover the second wave, despite having to work in a tiny room in a household with vulnerable parents who needed to shield, because she wanted to use her experience of covering mass-casualty incidents. It was a role in which she could help her employer fulfil its duty of care responsibilities; and in which she could further develop her existing skills.

However, the comfort of being able to fall back on established craft routines was not invariably accessible. Generally, journalists from an online and print background found it easiest to adapt to working on Zoom or the telephone, even where they would have far preferred to meet up in person. The broadcast journalists sometimes found the social-distancing regulations starkly disruptive. They preferred face-to-face interviews over Zoom but sometimes struggled to negotiate the uncanny sense of separation that ensues when working with people who are masked or at an enforced two-metres.

Louise was visibly upset when recalling an interview with an acutely vulnerable teenager living in a situation of appalling deprivation and failed both by a mother with significant mental health issues and local social services.

> "We interviewed him and it was awful… it was the hopelessness of the whole bloody thing… He was speaking so quietly, that I had to get closer and closer to him and the closer I got, there were just huge tears dropping down his face…. In the end, I just gave

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> him a massive, massive hug… He was crying and I was crying… We had done this farrago of social distancing and then the cameraman came and hugged me…"

The restrictions imposed by Covid-19 rules meant some of the usual coping mechanisms were no longer available, and so innovations were needed. Harry decried the impossibility of sitting with someone and having a cup of tea or coffee after a harrowing interview, a simple ritual that in the past had usually helped effect a transition - for both parties - away from the traumatic detail, into something approaching the here and now. "The restorative … checking in" still has to happen somehow, and so for him it shifted to a later time point via 'phone or WhatsApp.

The crucial challenge for many was how much does a journalist engage; how much does he or she detach? And more to the point, how does a journalist tailor a response to different timeframes and circumstances? Helping others can also help oneself: but there is only so much that can be done. Rob was surprised that sources he had met in person on his local patch prior to Covid-19 would phone him up out of the blue to talk:

> "In some cases, it has been really easy, just talking to people. In some cases, it has been hard because you get a story where people get emotional over the phone. Then you just have to think on your feet… how do you help this person, away from being a journalist."

For the journalists specialising in tracking user-generated content and compiling data, the need to detach and separate manifested itself in distinct ways. Some were working with thousands of data points, which included details of medical treatment, first person testimony they had gathered themselves and pictures of the dead as they had once lived. The potential for overload made it impossible to treat all instances of that data as the bereaved might have treated it. At times, they had to find ways of laying aside the thought that these spreadsheet entries all referred to real people. Sometimes focusing on patterns in the data helped; at other times, what helped was a wry distancing humour about the strangeness of it all, a coping mechanism that echoed Kotišová's emotional culture of cynicism (2017: 250).

For Fiona, disengagement was only a temporary solution: she had discovered that engaging and acknowledging loss was also important to her own personal wellbeing. As a young reporter, she had been sent out on death-knocks and "hated it"; the intrusion across people's thresholds had made her feel "dirty". Now much later in her career and more accustomed to

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the work, her first approach to sifting through tribute pictures of the deceased, was to "make it deliberately unreal, like watching a TV drama." But that did not always work; at other times she found doing the opposite and that talking to the bereaved helped re-humanise the data and restore her belief in the purpose. "It is a slightly weird construct is not it?" she thought: "So, I put a barrier up to protect myself, but actually letting that barrier down was also useful."

Switching-off when not technically on shift was a challenge in the *always-on* working from home reality of the pandemic. Adam was strict about the need to switch off from devices, but nevertheless could not think of a time when he had been "so stuck" on [his] phone: "I've sort of caught myself at times thinking this is ridiculous. You know, I am constantly scanning for developments on my patch, and as much as I need to do that [I am] equally aware that I also need to actually take a break from it." Rob lamented the loss of the time driving back home from the office, a time when he would listen to music and restore a sense of balance as the commute put distance between work and home. In terms of support, most had understanding employers who allowed them to vary their routines and to buy-back some headspace from thinking about Covid-19. Several had moments when they suddenly detected the looming prospect of overload and felt impelled to slam the reset button and ask for an extended time away from the story.

Discussion and Conclusions

Three major findings emerged from the thematic analysis of the narrative interviews.

1. Prevalence of the pastoral role of media and the mission to inform

The refrain of 'we are all in it together', which characterises the pandemic in the UK, immediately places the journalist in a different space to the traditional role of society's guardian. It could even be seen as unpatriotic to hold power to account at a time of national crisis. As noted earlier, this phenomenon was evident in the aftermath of September 11, particularly in the United States, where journalists assumed a passive role focused on the suffering of survivors and memorialisation of the dead (Schudson, 2002). This observation was reinforced by our research on the reporting of Covid-19. The shift to a more supine, pastoral role was evident in the interviews we conducted, where journalists discern the communication

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of accurate information (guidelines, health precautions rules) and human stories of grief, loss and socio-economic precarity as central to their public service remit. As noted above, this sense of performing a duty for the public was, in itself, one of the ways the journalists we interviewed managed their emotions.

In a context of declining trust levels in media (although broadcasters have experienced an uplift in the pandemic)[6], political hostility towards public service broadcasting and a surge in dis/misinformation, critical scrutiny of authority seems subordinate to the drive to 'get the story out'. There is a tension here, between the burden of social responsibility felt by the journalists we interviewed for this paper and the need to hold power to account as central to journalism's public service remit. This is not to say that difficult questions are not being asked, but there is a notable shift towards a pastoral rather than watchdog role in the context of crisis.

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2. Demise of traditional framing of the death-knock

Ethical guidance is enshrined in the editorial codes and principles of journalism practice, but the suffering of others has often become a secondary consideration in the drive to 'get the story' (commercial considerations) and the need to be objective (constraints on emotion or empathy). This research project, albeit focused on a small sample of journalists, indicates that there has been a significant shift towards care and awareness of vulnerability, both of the self and of others. This reflects changes that have been emerging for some time within the wider context of a more fragmented media landscape and again, due to the emotional turn in journalism. However, the global pandemic and its unprecedented impact, whereby journalists in a digital environment are 'always on' and engaging with the grief and loss of others over a sustained period of time, lays this vulnerability bare. In sharing their experiences, the journalists in this study indicate that greater levels of care are being taken with the 'digital death-knock', where time has to be invested in building relationships remotely, over the 'phone or on social media platforms, or when interviewing those suffering grief and loss at a Covid-imposed artificial distance. As noted above, the pandemic also reminds us of the precarity of everyone's lives; several of the journalists interviewed felt that reporting the vulnerability of others had underlined their awareness of their own vulnerability, whether shielding with elderly relatives

[6] Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism Covid-19 research project: Fact Sheet 1, 28 April 2020. Available at: https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/news-media-broadly-trusted-source-coronavirus-information-views-uk-government-response-highly

or working from a bedroom on a makeshift desk. Whilst in this sense there has been a levelling effect. Covid-19 has shone a stark, bright light on the extreme precarity of those living at the margins of society. This is not typical crisis journalism. Journalists cannot 'fly in and fly out' of this pandemic, they cannot 'smash and grab' the stories of others, because they are living in it and face the same risks, share similar challenges, anxieties and fears as those whose stories they are telling (Kotisova, 2017; McMahon, 2020). Hence, a growing sense of the importance of empathy and a duty of care shapes the 'new' framing of the digital death-knock.

3. Intensity of the detachment-engagement cycle:

The constant diet of suffering and death, grief and loss require everyone, journalists included, to move in and out of phases of detachment and engagement. On a personal level, the journalists in this study talk about striving to switch off, as they struggled to deal with the emotional impact of reporting the human stories of the pandemic. But they found it almost impossible to stop scrolling through their phones or reading news feeds, due to the professional imperative to chase crucial leads and to report the story with truth and accuracy, i.e., to serve the audience. There were also professional fears about lagging behind or missing out. Some of those we interviewed expressed concerns, at an organisational level, of overloading the audience and as a result, eschewed victim narratives in the search for positive news stories. This 'flip-flopping' between intense engagement in 'traumatic news' stories and striving to find balance through periods of detachment emerges as a hallmark of the coping mechanisms employed by individuals and news outlets (McMahon, 2020; Buchannan et al, 2011). This also highlights, once again, a key theme of this paper, the challenges of imposed distance - the enforced shifts in *modus operandi* and the accompanying emotional strain.

An experiential picture of journalists' emotional labour

This paper set out to paint a picture of the lived experiences of digital journalists reporting the pandemic and of their emotional labour.

On one level the journalists we interviewed had never been more separate from their sources; on another level, they had never been closer. They all expressed the relentlessness of 'living the story' and felt that the volume of material on social media was challenging, particularly in

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a context of risk (assessment and focus) and precarity (health and socio-economic). Changes in normative practices, such as face-to-face interviewing (the digital death-knock) and social distancing intensified the challenges, emotionally and physically. This chimes with the recent findings of Posetti et al.'s survey (2020) that the psychological and emotional impacts of dealing with the Covid-19 crisis constitute the most difficult aspect of journalists' work. The pandemic is different from other stories, in that switching off is almost impossible and creative approaches to coping need to be developed and strictly adhered to, but the nature of the story and the fact it is on our own doorstep – daily - renders this difficult, if not impossible. According to the interviews conducted for this paper, public service values of journalism appear to have intensified, not least with a renewed focus and heightened sense of serving the public interest. This helped the journalists cope as they steered their way through the uncharted waters of what is first and foremost a medical story, covered mainly by general news reporters. The sense that they were performing a crucial civic role and fulfilling the public service duty of their profession seemed to afford them a sense of mission. In turn, these imperatives bestowed meaning on their own storied lives, forming an integral part of their emotional labour which mitigated the potential trauma of reporting on and living in the story at the same time.

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TITLE PAGE

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ABSTRACT

The political and media rhetoric of the pandemic is that of conflict and a call to arms in face of a hidden enemy. But this is not a distant war where journalists are parachuted in to report on the action for a few weeks and then fly home. It is on our own doorstep. Many of those covering the global crisis do not correspond to the popular image of hardened conflict reporters and may have little experience in dealing with distressing stories of death, grief and mourning. How are journalists coping with the everyday diet of trauma when the corona frontline may be affecting their families, friends and colleagues? This paper explores these

issues through narrative interviews with UK-based journalists covering the pandemic for broadcast, print and digital media. It seeks to capture their 'emotional labour' and explore possible differences in their practice and the coping strategies they employ. The paper locates this discussion within the context of an industry that has paid relatively little heed to these issues and considers what long-term implications the coronavirus may have for the next generation of digital journalists.

Keywords: pandemic; trauma; emotional labour; empathy; resilience; journalism education

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REPORTING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: TRAUMA ON OUR OWN DOORSTEP

Introduction

~~The political and media rhetoric of the Covid-19 pandemic is that of conflict and a call to arms in the face of a hidden enemy. In Britain, Prime Minister Boris Johnson has labelled the virus an 'invisible enemy'; former US President Donald Trump called himself a 'wartime president', likening the nation's response to the mobilisation during World War II. But this is not a distant conflict where journalists are parachuted in to report on the action for a few weeks and then fly home. It is on our own front doorstep. Many of those journalists drafted in to cover the global~~

~~health crisis do not correspond to the popular image of the hardened war correspondent and may have little experience in dealing with the deeply distressing stories of death, grief and mourning that are dominating the headlines. How are journalists coping with the everyday diet of trauma and what are their feelings when the corona frontline is in their hometown or when the virus may be affecting their own families, friends and colleagues? This paper explores these issues through a series of narrative interviews with UK-based journalists who are covering the pandemic, with a particular emphasis on those working in digital media. It takes a psychosocial approach and seeks to build a rich experiential picture of their 'emotional labour' (Hochschild, 1983) and the impact daily coverage is having on them and their colleagues.~~

Over the past ~~10 years~~decade, media organisations have made considerable progress in safeguarding the mental wellbeing of journalists assigned to covering traumatic news stories and in offering support mechanisms. In parallel to this, issues of emotion and trauma, long neglected in academic research, are beginning to be explored through the field of journalism studies, particularly as social media and digital platforms harvest raw emotion to increase audience engagement and as normative values of objectivity are called into question. ~~Most recently,~~Recent studies have recognised that the risk of trauma has moved into the newsroom, creating a 'digital frontline' (Eyewitness Media Hub, 2015) as journalists sift through often distressing user-generated images of conflict and terror. Now, t~~T~~he Covid-19 pandemic, that has dominated global headlines for well over a year, has added a further dimension to the mental health risks faced by working journalists.

This paper explores the distinct challenges the pandemic poses for the journalists who are trying to capture its immediacy and working within a context where~~.~~ t~~T~~he political and media rhetoric of the pandemic is that of conflict. ~~and a call to arms in the face of a hidden enemy. I~~ ~~in~~ Britain~~Britain~~, Prime Minister Boris Johnson has labelled the virus an 'invisible enemy'; former US President Donald Trump called himself a 'wartime president'~~', likening the nation's response to the mobilisation during World War II~~. But this is not a distant conflict where journalists are parachuted in to report on the action for a few weeks and then fly home. It is on our own front doorstep. Many of those journalists drafted in to cover the global health crisis do not correspond to the popular image of the hardened war correspondent and may have little experience in dealing with the deeply distressing stories of death, grief and mourning that result from covering the pandemic.

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~~Many of them will never have covered a story involving such suffering and one that also affects their own families and communities not just for several months but potentially years. The model of the conflict reporter who works far from home for short, delimited periods of time is clearly inadequate here.~~

We set out to investigate ~~explore~~ how covering the pandemic might be different from other crises, what that means for the practice of journalism and whether the coping strategies journalists normally employ work in this context. Can they maintain a sense of appropriate professional detachment which might otherwise help to shield them from trauma when the story is so close to home? Can they separate their professional and personal identities and to what extent does an 'always on' digital news environment make a difference?

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Journalism, emotion and trauma

Both in the practical world of day-to-day journalism and the academic world, issues of emotion, emotional literacy, emotional labour and trauma have been largely neglected. It is only in the recent past that what has been posited as an 'emotional turn' in journalism studies has developed alongside the technological changes driven by social media, which, in turn, have ushered in a greater role for emotion in journalism (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2020: 175).

In journalism practice~~the world of practical journalism~~, after the September 11 attacks of 2001, ~~and in anticipation of war against Iraq,~~ the BBC and the international news agency Reuters made a decisive move to introduce psychological safety training for its staff (Jukes, 2020: 122). ~~The~~ Re~~re~~cognition ~~t~~of the need for such training~~hat such training is needed~~ has grown internationally, due to continuing ~~impact of~~ conflict in the Middle East and the ~~advocacy and education~~ work of media support charities, including the Dart Centre for Journalism & Trauma[1]. Mental health related education has also developed ~~continued to grow~~ in the industry,

[1] Footnote removed for anonymous version.

but more specialist trauma-related training remains sporadic, and usually focused on preventing psychological injury among high-risk groups of media workers. ~~Recently some news organisations, have started to explore how a more detailed understanding of the impact of trauma on sources might reduce the risk of insensitive interview techniques or misrepresentation causing inadvertent harm to vulnerable contributors.~~

The word *trauma* derives from the Greek noun meaning ‘wound’, but also has connotations with the piercing that inflicts a wound. In the context of mental health, this relates to how an event can ‘pierce’ a person’s psyche and then occasion continuing complications. Contemporary scientific formulations of what trauma involves can be traced back to the 1970s when clinicians noted similarities in the condition of Vietnam combat veterans and women who had been subjected to sexual violence (Rees, 2013: 412). A new condition was diagnosed in 1980, post-traumatic stress disorder or, as it is now commonly known, PTSD. Today, ~~precise definitions of what constitute potentially traumatic experiences vary in different diagnostic frameworks, but~~ the primary usage is reserved for situations which involve actual death, injury and sexual assault, or the threat of those things. ~~The potential for adverse impact is not confined just to those *directly* caught up in such events.~~ Crucially, when it comes to journalists, *indirect* exposure, for example, repeated exposure to witnessing and reporting on traumatic events, is recognis~~z~~ed in the medical literature as a potential vector for harm.

Studies over the last twenty years demonstrate that the majority of journalists do exhibit high levels of resilience when working on ‘traumatic news’ assignments, but also flag up significant mental health risks, including PTSD, depression, anxiety, and related difficulties. The first study to gain widespread attention in the international news industry was South African psychiatrist Anthony Feinstein’s discovery of high rates of PTSD among war correspondents (Feinstein et al., 2002). ~~In the last decade, research into the mental health impacts on journalists has expanded to include, for example, covering events such as narco-crime in Mexico, school shootings in Finland, crime and social justice beats in the United States, and the Sewol Ferry tragedy in Korea (Smith et al., 2019). Early research concentrated on direct exposure, situations in which journalists were personally exposed to tragedy and violence, but in~~In recent years, focus on secondary or vicarious impact has increased – for example, the implications of viewing user-generated content depicting death or injury for media workers (Eyewitness Media Hub, 2015).

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The concept of ~~A related theme is~~ moral injury is also important. It denotes the harm that may arise when people witness things ~~that should not have happened, events~~ that transgress their ~~people's~~ expectations of a just and morally ordered society. T~~Originally developed from studies on the impact of ethical violation in the military, t~~he concept has been gaining traction during the pandemic as a way of understanding the impact of mass death and health system failure on medical workers. (Williamson et al., 2020)[2] a~~.~~nd it ~~The concept~~ takes on particular significance because of the nature of journalism (Browne, Evangeli, & Greenberg, 2012: 207):

> "Journalists … are a unique cohort, distinct from other high-risk groups in that they often experience or witness traumatic events, but are not expected to intervene. Not having a direct, helping role when attending to traumatic incidents may present journalists with complex ethical dilemmas. For example, morally believing the right thing to do is to provide aid, versus the knowledge that one should remain objective."

~~In their study of 73 UK journalists, the authors found that perceptions of guilt are positively associated with PTSD (ibid: 209)~~ The concept of moral injury has ~~also~~ since been applied to US journalists (Drevo, 2016), reporters covering the refugee crisis in Europe (Feinstein & Storm, 2017) and UK production staff working in factual and reality TV (Rees, 2019).

~~Precarity is a further factor that can increase stress, and potential trauma, in journalists. – define, how it can increase stress in journalists.~~

In the journalism studies field, ~~– as distinct to psycho-traumatology –~~ there has also been a delay in exploring how emotion, trauma and journalism interrelate. ~~There~~Here, the recent impetus was provided not by war and disaster, but by the technological revolution wrought by social media and the impact of the digital media world on today's news. As Wahl-Jorgensen notes, ~~in her description development of the notion of an 'emotional turn' in journalism studies,~~ the relative scarcity of research in this field can be attributed in large part to journalism's adherence to a model of liberal democracy and the associated ideal of objectivity (2020: 176). Although objectivity and emotion are clearly not binary opposites (Peters, 2011; Jukes, 2020) it has been argued that for some journalists, objectivity had until recently enjoyed a talismanic

[2] Moral injury is not a mental health condition per se but rather an index of harm, one that is a potential catalyst for PTSD, burnout and other difficulties. It is associated with strong feelings of shame and guilt.

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status and that talk of emotion in journalism had been taboo (Richards & Rees, 2011). Emotional journalism (for example sensationalist tabloid journalism) was often therefore labelled 'bad' journalism (Zelizer, 2000: ix) as a consensual occupational ideology and value system based on objectivity was firmly established among journalists (Deuze, 2005: 3). This tended to obscure the emotional labour at the heart of journalism practice (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2020: 188).

The ~~phrase~~term emotional labour was first coined by American sociologist Arlie Hochschild in 1983, Her influential study focused on flight attendants and the fact that as part of their job they had to smile and display other signs of emotional positivity in their dealings with passengers. Since then, academics including ~~Jukes (2020),~~ Richards (2007) ~~and~~ Wahl-Jorgensen (2019a, 2020) and Jukes (2020) have extended the concept into the field of journalism. Whether knowingly or not, journalists use their emotional responses to the world in the course of their professional practice. The product, or news story, will reflect these responses and in turn have a direct impact on those for whom it has been produced (Richards, 2007: 65).~~:~~

~~Link to~~The concept of precarity threads through ~~y, another theme that runs throughout our research, is also linked to in this paperDefine emotional labour.~~issues of emotion in journalism. In the context of this study, precarity is applied in two senses: firstly, to the precarious nature of journalists' job security during the pandemic, as many newsrooms are slimmed down and offices closed in favour of working from home; and secondly ~~to the danger~~to the health risks of infection and illness faced by ~~faced by~~ journalists reporting on the pandemic~~working on the pandemic of infection and illness~~. Wahl-Jorgensen argues that it is essential to consider ways in which journalists are emotionally affected by the pressures of their profession (2019b: 674). Through our interviews, we ~~have then~~ explored ~~focused on~~ the subjective dimension of precarity, ~~and~~ how issues of job security and health might affect the journalists' work~~, and their own perception of the work~~ and whether ~~they are~~such precarity is a -potential cause of stress.

~~However, the~~The past decade has ~~therefore~~ seen a ~~considerable~~ ~~increase in scholarship around issues of emotion and trauma, running in parallel to the 'affective turn' in the social sciences~~

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and humanities.[3] Scholars have, of course, consistently demonstrated that journalism has *always* relied on emotion to capture the immediacy of a story and to generate audience attention (Seaton, 2005: 231). But wWith the advent of social media and digital platforms, the use of emotive content in news has broken into the open; and with it, journalism's regime of emotional containment has broken down (Jukes, 2020: 160). Journalists are encouraged to express themselves on social media platforms such as Twitter and are more likely to cultivate a personal brand (Molyneux et al., 2018: 1386), while the rise of confessional journalism has been well documented (Coward, 2013). The public expects and wants to see not only emotion in a story but also the emotion of the journalist. The paradox is that journalists often still adhere to a narrative of objectivity and detachment. Jukes (2020:5) has written about:

"… [a] complex picture of individuals continually grappling with competing tensions – on the one hand a deeply ingrained, virtually hard-wired notion of what it is to be a professional journalist together with commercial or competitive pressures and, on the other hand, personal feelings, internal dilemmas and hesitancies."

Living the story and theThe management of emotion inby journalistsmsEmotional management in journalism

When considering coverage of the pandemic, it is important to relate the nature of the crisis to other crises that might make the news headlines.

The unusual nature – and specifically exceptional length - of the pandemic story is important when it comes to considering how journalists cope with the emotions at play in their work. Large scale natural or man-made disasters can typically dominate news coverage for several days and become 'media events', transcending the normal day-to-day reporting of the news (Dayan and Katz, 1992). The development of 24/7 news since Dayan and Katz coined the

[3] The phrase is generally credited to Patricia Clough who defined it as "a new configuration of bodies, technology, and matter instigating a shift in thought in critical theory" (Clough and Halley, 2007).

phrase has led to an almost uninterrupted diet of disaster, tragedy and personal grief in what Liebes has subsequently called a 'disaster marathon' (1998). But despite this, news coverage of one single crisis is not normally sustained for such a long time (Houston et al., 2012: 608). In ~~By contrast, China reported its first confirmed death from the Covid-19 virus, a 61-year-old male resident of Wuhan, on January 11, 2020. And the story has dominated the news since then with repeated waves of infection, punctuated only by coverage of the Black Lives Matter and US election stories. In~~ their study of major US disasters, Houston, Pfefferbaum and Rosenholtz found that a story might span 12 months from start to finish but observed that the overall pattern of coverage comes right after the event, followed by a rapid decline (2012: 612). ~~Almost 63% of the disaster stories they analysed occurred within 30 days of the event.~~ In terms of geographic reach, the pandemic is a global crisis, that has barely left the headlines, with, at the time of writing, more than ~~117~~ 190 million infections and ~~2.6~~4.0 million deaths. Clearly, in terms of news values, the pandemic has an enduring appeal due to its relevance to the audience and its magnitude (Harcup & O'Neill, 2001, 2017).[4]

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~~At times of crisis, journalists may sometimes shift their role, emphasising its role in disseminating vital information or acting in a 'public service' role. As will be seen later, this emphasis on public service can be part of a coping mechanism for journalists or a way of, managing their emotions. But it can also water down the traditional watchdog role of journalism. Schudson has identified what he calls a trend to a 'pastoral' form of journalism(Crises can also undermine one of the key roles of journalism, namely in holding authority to account. Expand / Schdudson / instead take on pastoral role – comforting, doing good?~~

Literature on journalists' management of emotions and coping mechanisms ~~when covering traumatic news stories~~ has tended to focus on conflict and disaster journalism when reporters fly in to cover distant news stories and, by extension, 'distant others' or 'distant suffering' (Chouliaraki, 2006; Pantti, ~~Cottle &~~ Wahl-Jorgensen & Cottle, 2012; Jukes, 2020). Less attention has been paid to the potentially distressing nature of news when journalists are working on their local 'beat' close to home - as is the case with the pandemic. One exception to this is a body of academic work focusing on what has become known in journalism as the

[4] In their 2017 reappraisal of news values, Harcup and O'Neill defined 'magnitude' as follows: Magnitude: Stories perceived as sufficiently significant in the large numbers of people involved or in potential impact, or involving a degree of extreme behaviour or extreme occurrence (2016: 1482).

'death knock', when journalists are sent to interview relatives of the victim of a tragedy (often in the context of local news stories such as road accidents or serious crime). Despite the importance and sensitivity of the task, it is one for which most journalists are ill prepared (Duncan & Newton, 2010: 439). Such interviews can be a disconcerting experience for a reporter, particularly if inexperienced, who has to balance the emotional experience of facing bereaved relatives with the professional challenge of getting the story (ibid: 440).

Given the increasing recognition that journalists can be exposed to sources of trauma, studies have started to explore ~~from a perspective of actual practice~~ how journalists manage their emotions and their coping strategies. One of these strategies includes, critically in the context of this paper, the ability to disconnect or distance oneself from work and being able to compartmentalise the professional and personal (Seeley, 2019: 252). In Seeley's survey of 254 US daily newspaper reporters, the phrase "getting away from work" arose frequently. One spoke of never checking work e-mails at home; another spoke of varying assignments so that he was not always covering victims of trauma (ibid: 253).

Another coping mechanism ~~often also cited by journalists in the Seeley survey~~ is ~~in fact of form of engagement~~immersion in the task of journalism, ~~was remembering~~focusing on the importance of ~~the~~ its value ~~of journalism~~, with phrases such as "serving society" and "doing this for the greater good" (ibid: 253). This sense of public service journalism is often seen at times of national crisis when journalists feel they are providing vital information to the population and ~~was~~constitutes~~became~~ one of the strands of our inquiry in this research paper. ~~But thisIt~~Such behaviour can also have an unintended ~~effect~~consequence of watering down the traditional watchdog role of journalism. Schudson ~~(2004)~~ has identified what he calls a trend to a 'pastoral' form of journalism at times of crisis, with an ~~and~~ emphasis on public service information (20024). ~~, citing as a prime example US coverage of the September 11 attacks.cites~~ After the September 11 attacks, Schudson ~~attempted to~~ defined criteria that led journalists to move into what Hallin has called a 'sphere of consensus' in which they cast aside the more normal reporting behaviour or the '"sphere of legitimate controversy'" (Hallin, 1986). According to Schudson, this can be a times of tragedy, (for example the assassination of President Kennedy in 1963) or in moments of pubic danger, whether from attacks such as those on September 11 or natural disasters. In these circumstances, journalists disseminate public health information and may even communicate a sense of solidarity (Schudson, 20024:20).

~~At the same time, studies of journalists have recognised that not all coping strategies are necessarily healthy, including, for example, higher rates of alcohol consumption found in studies by Feinstein (see Feinstein et al., 2002).~~

The concepts of *distancing* and *detachment* are ~~, however,~~ complex and addressed differently in the separate research traditions of journalism studies and trauma psychology. There is not space here for the thorough disambiguation the terms merit, however a distinction does need to be made between forms of conscious, professional detachment that are likely to be protective; and denial and avoidance, which are more automatic emotional flight reactions, often associated with less positive outcomes (Newman & Nelson, 2012). Adaptive forms of detachment or distancing would include the abilities to disentangle one's personal story from those of others and to down-regulate personal distress by scheduling in rest and recovery time, limiting exposure to traumatic stressors and switching off from work (McMahon, 2010). Maladaptive patterns would include: emotional blunting and numbing, gallows humour, compartmentalisation and self-medication through the use of substances, and compulsive over-working – all features identified by Buchannan and Keats in their study of Canadian newsrooms (2011).

L~~In addition to distancing and a sense of public duty, literature has~~Studies have identified other methods through which journalists consciously or unconsciously shield themselves from trauma. In a study of journalists covering the refugee crisis and November 2015 Paris terror attacks, Kotišová discerned what she called an emotional culture of cynicism as a prerequisite of being able to do the job in the face of witnessing and reporting the intense emotions of a disaster or crisis (2017: 250). The need to focus on the facts and detail of a breaking news story (rather than its emotional impact) and to make sure that the technology of processing the story works also emerged as coping strategies in Kotišová's study (ibid: 251). In this case, it is a journalist's immersion in the practice or craft of journalism that affords protection from trauma.

~~This paper explores what happens when the ability to create an appropriate form of distance is eroded, when professional and personal boundaries blur or when it becomes difficult for a journalist to engage in any type of emotional management.~~

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A recent case in point is illustrated by Feinstein and Storm's research into the emotional impact on journalists of covering the refugee crisis in what were also holiday resort areas of Europe (2017). There, journalists with prior experience of working with displaced civilians in Syria and Iraq found the jumbling of contexts – conflict-zone and domestic – particularly troubling. Under threat in a warzone, they had a sense of shared jeopardy; on the beaches of Greece, however, many felt compromised by their relative privilege and security. On returning home, geographic separation had made it easier to psychologically seal themselves off from the distress they had witnessed. Kotišová found similar dynamics in play in her study of Belgian conflict reporters called on to cover a terror attack in their hometown of Brussels, when three coordinated suicide bombings in March 2016 killed 32 people and injured more than 300 (2017: 2):

> "Those Belgian reporters who commonly travel to conflict zones and disaster sites were suddenly tasked with reporting on a 'combat zone event' that was occurring at the place where they, and their families and friends, lived … It was no longer possible to be a fly on the wall; the journalists' subjective experience of witnesses, actors, and even indirect victims merged with their professional tasks."

Kotisova found that geography made a crucial difference, as the space where the conflict reporters carried out their work merged with a space which was personally meaningful and relevant for them (2017: 8). When the threat enters one's own space, the rules change: as for example, it did in the Belgian case, where those close to some reporters (e.g., children, friends, siblings and parents) were directly or indirectly affected by the suicide-bombings.

Shorten

To date, some preliminary thoughts about the pandemic have emerged from specialist journalism charities, including the Dart Center for Journalism & Trauma and media think tanks. such as the Global Investigative Journalism Network (GIJN), the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (RISJ) and the Poynter Institute. In discussing best practice, each has identified the lack of distance from the subject matter as a critical issue. Cait McMahon, the Dart Center's Asia Pacific Director, argues that journalists covering the pandemic need to be more in tune

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with their own anxieties and those of their interviewees. ~~s to reduce the risk they inadvertently feed into each other.~~ In an interview with GIJN she says (2020):

> “While many of the same risks apply, the current coronavirus pandemic also differs from a traumatic event like a tsunami or a bomb blast. This is a creeping, invisible thing that everyone in the world is experiencing…”

~~Elana Newman, research director for the Dart Center and psychology professor at the University of Tulsa, has highlighted the risks related to the protracted length of the story (Poynter, 2020) which has now lasted for well over one year.~~

> ~~“Normally, we can pull it together for one event, or weeks,” she said. “This is an everyday dread. I think that the challenging thing about this event is that we have to… rally our resources.”~~

~~Newman says in the case of the pandemic journalists also have to keep their ‘anticipatory grief’ at bay, with the prospect of unknown losses. “Will they be our friends?” she asks (ibid).~~

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A preliminary survey[5] by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (RISJ)~~RISJ~~ found that even experienced reporters working for large, well-funded media organisations have often been struggling to cope with the demands on reporting on the pandemic (RISJ, 2020). Around 70% of respondents ~~those who replied~~ reported experiencing some levels of psychological distress, with 11% reporting prominent reactions found in PTSD. These included “recurrent intrusive thoughts and memories of a traumatic Covid-19-related event, a desire to avoid recollections of the event, and feelings of guilt, fear, anger, horror and shame” (ibid). ~~While only one of the journalists who responded had tested positive for Covid-19, 45% of the sample knew a journalist who had become ill from the virus while two said they knew of a journalist who had died from coronavirus. Another~~A survey conducted by the International Center for Journalists (ICFJ) and the Tow Center for Digital Journalism at Columbia University (Posetti et al., 2020)~~.~~ raised ‘red flags’ for journalism. It collated responses from 1,400 English speaking journalists in 125 countries. 70% rated the psychological and emotional impacts of dealing with the Covid-19 crisis as the most difficult aspect of their work. 30% said that their

[5] 73 journalists from international news organisations were asked in June 2020 about their working conditions and emotional state. All journalists have worked on stories directly related to the pandemic. The survey had a 63% response rate.

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news organisations had not provided them with a single piece of protective equipment during the first wave of the pandemic. 81% were working in a context where dis/misinformation was a key issue, a factor liable to exacerbate moral injury.[6]

This paper seeks to build on these academic studies into journalists' emotional labour and initial observations on Covid-19 by addressing the following research questions aimed at teasing out the changes in practice emerging during coverage of the pandemic:

- RQ 1: What is different about covering the pandemic for journalists and their practice?
- RQ 2**:** What coping strategies do journalists employ in reporting on the pandemic?

Methodology

In order to build a rich experiential picture of reporting the pandemic, we adopted elements of a narrative inquiry approach (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004), to gain insights to the individual journalist's storied lives during this time and to identify themes, deductively and inductively As Brooks reminds us (1984: 3):

> "Our lives are ceaselessly intertwined with narrative, with the stories that we tell and hear told … or would like to tell, all of which are reworked in that story of our own lives that we narrate to ourselves in an episodic, sometimes semi-conscious but virtually uninterrupted monologue."

Within the realm of journalism studies, Wahl-Jorgensen notes how "we may helpfully draw on life history interviews focusing on journalists' emotional labor" (2019b: 672). As researchers (and former journalists) we are also living in the pandemic, whilst conducting semi-structured narrative interviews with working journalists, so it is important to acknowledge the dynamic and unfinished quality of the narratives. Ethically, itIt is also important to acknowledge our presence in the process of enabling others' voices to be heard (Fowler-Watt, 2013). Human identity is narrational, and telling stories offers a way of making sense of our lives, so a

[6] The ICFJ/Tow Center study is the first in a data driven series addressing the challenges of reporting the pandemic.

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narrative inquiry approach to analysis of the accounts arising from the interview experience offered an ‘authentic fit’ for this study. This immersive approach also envisages the interview as discourse, as an observational encounter (Denzin,1970: 133 in Silverman, 2001),

In October-November 2020, we conducted eleven semi-structured interviews over Zoom with journalists from a range of news organisations in the UK. They were all located in their own homes: four work for national public service broadcasters; three are young community reporters from different parts of the UK, one is a freelance features journalist, two work for national broadcasters outside of London and one is from a regional newspaper. Their ages ranged from 20 – late 50s; there were five males and six females and two were from minority backgrounds.~~.~~ The interviewees were selected on the basis of their sustained engagement in reporting the crisis across a range of job titles and platforms ~~and in order to secure an age, race and gender mix~~. Although a small sample, each of the interviews lasted up to 90 minutes and was recorded and transcribed. Whilst the study cannot capture every element of the in-depth interviews, it focuses on the responses which are central to the research questions. The project was granted ethics approval by xxxxxxxx University’s Research Ethics Panel for Humanities and Social Sciences. Each participant signed a consent form and was offered anonymity. Hence the interviewees have been given pseudonyms, with an indicative job title e.g., broadcast news journalist, at first mention.

As indicated by the research questions above, primary objectives of the research project were to learn about how journalists living in and reporting on the pandemic felt about that experience (and implications for their ‘emotional labour’), how they came to do their normal work in the context of crisis and how they functioned (coped) in changed working conditions. The interview process also embraced the constraints imposed by time, the vagaries of our powers of recall and the temporal quality of memory. These constraints shape the stories that are shared. The time frame for sharing stories spanned the participants’ recall of the start of the Covid-19 crisis (February/March 2020); the experience of lockdown (March – May/June 2020); adjustment to new rules and government guidance in the post-lockdown summer months and reflections in ‘real time’ on the socio-economic impact of the pandemic and looming lockdown 2.0 in November 2020.

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We analysed each interview in the context of the research questions and the journalists' sharing of their lived experiences covering the pandemic contextualises our findings. We discerned these themes, which map to the research questions: the personal impact on journalists ~~living in~~living in a digital 'always on' environment – including the assessment and focus on risk, precarity and moral injury; changing practices – notably the death knock (RQ1); coping mechanisms, such as distancing (both physical and mental), the ability to switch off and distractions (RQ2).

Findings:

~~**"Always on"- The journalists' lived experiences**~~

As a study informed by narrative inquiry, the journalists' descriptions of their lived experiences map out the landscape for our investigation of the research questions. ~~This section outlines the ways in which the journalists we interviewed described their experiences of living in the story.~~

All of the journalists interviewed felt the relentlessness of covering the pandemic, the sense that this was not a normal short-term crisis that disappeared from the headlines after a routine news cycle or followed usual patterns; they were 'always on' and acutely aware of the personal impact of the story. Local TV news reporter, Claudia was told to "just head out and find out how people are feeling. And that hasn't stopped, that's been pretty much every day". She found "it really difficult not to carry the stories home with me" and talked about feeling that "there is a lot of weight to carry." Anna, a regional newspaper reporter, said that: "there is not the same switching off mechanism at home … there is no end to the shift" and that "we are all in this together … because of the nature of working from home". Others felt that working on one story offered a shared experience. Adam, a national broadcast news journalist working in a regional bureau said:

> "I've never covered a story like this, where you have been focused for so long on one issue or one world event non-stop… it has also been very pressured and relentless…It's a story like no other, which affects your personal life and your professional life".

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The relentlessness was evident: "you're trying to get a break from the news, but the news is reminding you of the job that you're supposed to be doing. It's very difficult to switch off," said Adam. The impact for journalists was captured by Sarah, a social media specialist, for whom Covid-19 "seeps into every element of storytelling, even if you don't realise it." There is no escape as they report on the story they are living in (Houston et al., 2012). At the start of lockdown, community reporter Rob was writing live blogs from home every day to inform people of infection rates: "for 6-8 weeks, it was just constant with the amount of cases … everything was coronavirus, no council stories, no sports stories. That's when it really hit." Others working a patch agreed that they felt driven to constantly scroll through their phones in search of new leads, fearful they might miss key developments and get left behind. Even when the Black Lives Matter protests temporarily shifted the news agenda, Claudia felt that, given the traumatic content, that felt more like a "double hit."[7] Young community reporters were often living and working in the same room. One of them, Will, said that: "sometimes I feel that you can't escape … you just get immersed in it all … even on the weekends, I'm checking my e-mail." The digital environment made journalists accessible to the public, but also accentuated the sense of '"always on'". They found themselves fielding approaches on social media and following up links sent to their mobile phones.

These journalists painted a picture of 'emotional labour' that is relentless and exhausting, where professional and personal boundaries no longer existed and where feelings of personal vulnerability were intensified.

This senseThe sense of precarity was most marked for those with fewer economic resources, for example, those from minority backgrounds or with underlying mental health issues. Fiona, editor for a national broadcaster, contrasted her relative domestic comfort (living in the country with a garden) with younger journalists who have been working for months, "sitting on their bed - because they're in a shared house - using an ironing table as their desk." Some were concerned about job security. Rob, a trainee journalist, felt "glad that I still have a job … because we've had to make cuts." For Sarah, contact with vulnerable interviewees "opens up the question of your own potential vulnerability." Many of their contributors were living in extremely precarious circumstances, fearful of the economic impact of the virus biting more

[7] A reference to the global Black Lives Matter protests in the wake of the killing of George Floyd in the United States on 26 May 2020.

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~~deeply. For Louise, reporting on people in poverty exposed a deep irony, when: “the first people I phoned up for a ‘poverty story’ were care workers…the very people we were going out and clapping for every Thursday were on poverty wages and in horrific housing.”~~

1. M~~M~~oral injury:

The strain inflicted by the context of mis/disinformation highlighted by the recent ICFJ/Tow Center survey (2020) was borne out in the~~se~~ interviews and raised the issue of moral injury. Harry, a broadcast news journalist working outside of London, was concerned that broadcasting video of “very burnt-out people” working in the NHS was exposing them “to social media grief” from anti-vaxxers who might allege that they were fabricating the crisis to make “money from the vaccine.” Here, moral injury was evident in the sense that certain members of the public are agents of moral harm, and in a fear that one’s own actions could be enabling it. The discussion of this was tinged with a note of betrayal: how could sections of an audience that are journalists trying to serve behave in this way? Claudia felt that navigating social media was exhausting: “The day job is hard enough, but having to read everything that everyone sends you, a lot of it unsubstantiated … it is overwhelming.” All of the journalists interviewed conveyed feelings of guilt and helplessness when confronted by the grief, economic hardship or emotional fragility of others. This reflected the moral dilemma faced by journalists covering traumatic news and the tension between the normative expectation not to intervene (Browne, Evangeli, & Greenberg, 2012: 207) and an acute awareness expressed by the journalists we interviewed of their duty of care to those whose stories they were telling. Louise’s focus on poverty led her to look at those who had just started a new job and were missing out on furlough:

> “Their income literally disappeared, it disappeared at a stroke. You talk about trauma, these were people who had never been unemployed, they were people that the government would regard exactly as ‘doing the right thing’ … it was like a sinkhole had been created in their lives … people who had no money at all and were starting for the first time in their lives to rely on food banks”.

The theme of potential moral injury also emerged in the assessment of risk. Journalists’ like Adam who were allowed into hospitals at a time when PPE was in short supply for medical workers and family members were prohibited from visiting dying relatives had to “wrestle

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with" additional ethical considerations to what would normally have been simple safety decisions:

> "Do you go into the hospital and accept PPE … when it's in short supply? I spent a whole day driving around my town to find some scrubs … Do you accept scrubs, or do you go in with your own PPE? Do you go into a hospital to film when relatives aren't allowed in? Do you go and film people who are vulnerable, when you might be exposing them to risk?"

At the same time, journalists also had to assess risk for themselves, their families and even for members of the public who contacted them for advice. Community reporter Seb, described the process of risk assessment in this way: "You've got to put different hats on really, you've got to think about yourself and your job and it's all connected obviously - but it's multi-faceted". The extended microphone boom used by the broadcast journalists to maintain social distancing emphasised not only the disruption to normal reporting methods but also the underlying danger in carrying out a basic interview.

2. 2. The death knock

Just how interviews with the bereaved were conducted varied widely and illustrated how the ritual of the 'death knock' has been disrupted. Some of the journalists tried to conduct such interviews in a traditional way; others capitalised on recent innovations which centre on using social media as a mechanism for harvesting contributions from the public. Both methods presented particular challenges. Claudia has made a point of visiting families in person but for her social distancing has changed the dynamic of interviews dramatically.

> "The two-metre thing is awful," she said. "There was a woman who lost her mum and she had said goodbye to her through wearing gloves. And I sat in her garden. And she was so distraught, so grateful that we told her mum's story…. (she) was so distraught and I was two metres away from her … That closeness has gone, you are two metres away, you are sanitising everything you touch, you're thinking of so many things

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> because of the Covid restrictions that actually you're almost losing that human interaction where you are just a human and not a journalist."

For Claudia, the ability to conduct an empathic interview has been lost. For Harry the restrictions imposed by social distancing changed the dynamic, not least since the facial expressions of an interviewee are difficult to pick up behind a mask:

> "Physically being at a distance from somebody changes the way you speak to them, if you are wearing a mask or they're wearing a mask, it changes the way you speak, speak to them … that whole sort of sit-down cup of tea – it's all over."

Some have been conducting interviews with the bereaved over the phone. Community reporter Will also found it difficult not being able to see people, pick up facial signals and anticipate their feelings. As it became a weekly occurrence, so it became harder to avoid, for example, the cliché that 'tributes are flooding in' and to do justice to each interviewee, treating them as a distinct individual. "It's quite difficult to change it up every time," he said. "It's all about that one person you are writing about. You have to be so careful, I think - more than ever at the moment."

Others have reimagined the task, using social media and employing what is tantamount to a 'digital death knock.' Sarah has put out calls on Facebook for people seeking to tell their story or that of their relatives who have died. She was very conscious of the danger of alienating people and the ethical challenges. Instead of trawling through social media in response to breaking news or looking for key phrases such as 'father dead' or 'brother RIP, it has also been possible to wait for contributors to volunteer information on a dedicated webpage. The information that has been volunteered can then be made into tributes but has to be checked carefully.

But whatever its form, the death knock interview has been a staple of reporting on the pandemic and remains the disconcerting experience Duncan and Newton observed a decade ago (2010). If anything, it has had a distinct and renewed mission. Harry said he had been wary of interviewing survivors of natural disasters or terror attacks when "swarms' of journalists descended on them. But the past months had been different:

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> "What's been slightly different with coronaviruses is that some of those family members … have felt that there was a purpose in in speaking out, you know, there is a public service message, a need to make people understand that this virus for some people could be very, very dangerous."

3. Coping mechanisms

The idea that we are all in the same boat during this pandemic has been a common refrain in the public discourse, even though it is only true in a limited sense. In reality, everyone brings their own constellation of circumstances and resources - and if they have direct contact with the virus, health outcomes - to the pandemic. Just as there is no *average citizen*, there is no *average journalist*. But these twin abstractions are useful here because the journalists interviewed are exposed to two-loadings of impact: first as private individuals with their own stories, and secondly as professionals who are spending a considerable proportion of working time in close proximity to the suffering of strangers. And so how did the journalists cope with this double dosage of direct and vicarious exposure? What helped them to feel more solid, in a personal sense?

The strongest theme that emerged was the importance of needing to do a good job, a sense of duty to 'do the right thing' by vulnerable interviewees who had been bereaved or otherwise affected by the pandemic. This ~~recalled the~~ sense of mission, akin to the pastoral role detected by Schudson (20024) at times of national crisis, reflected the dominance of Covid-19 in the national discourse and emerged as a powerful coping mechanism helping journalists through the period.

A sense of responsibility extended across the range of reporting genres, with some of the journalists interviewed detecting (and gratified) that their role was once again being valued by society. Community reporter Seb said people were beginning to see how important journalists are and that he and his colleagues had received unprecedented levels of help and support. This heightened sense of responsibility was expressed by some of the journalists as a duty to capture

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people's stories impartially, accurately and to memorialise the lives of those who died as a result of the virus. Here the journalists were anchoring themselves in their normative practices as a way of coping with crisis through serving their audiences.

In some cases, this led to a step-change in how they approached contributors. Will said:

> "It has humanised my work a lot more. My style has completely changed. Waking up to what everyone else is feeling and reacting to. The pandemic has opened my eyes to other peoples' struggles."

This sense of public service and doing a valuable job – again, the pastoral role - was a significant way in which journalists were able to shield themselves from distress and cope with the relentless nature of the pandemic story. Some of those with extensive prior experience of working on social and criminal justice stories had already gained a more sophisticated understanding of how to avoid inadvertently adding to the distress of vulnerable people; consequently, they had less need to evolve their approach. But nevertheless, the same theme emerged: it was being able to fall back on that competence, which helped ground them on a personal level. According to Harry, it was easier to "park" harrowing details to one side: "if the people you feel that you have interviewed feel that it has been beneficial."

Sarah, who as a social media specialist has been tracking hundreds of bereavements, also felt that she was: "making a bit of a difference in [people's] lives". She volunteered to cover the second wave, despite having to work in a tiny room in a household with vulnerable parents who needed to shield, because she wanted to use her experience of covering mass-casualty incidents. It was a role in which she could help her employer fulfil its duty of care responsibilities; and in which she could further develop her existing skills.

However, the comfort of being able to fall back on established craft routines was not invariably accessible. Generally, journalists from an online and print background found it easiest to adapt to working on Zoom or the telephone, even where they would have far preferred to meet up in person. The broadcast journalists sometimes found the social-distancing regulations starkly disruptive. They preferred face-to-face interviews over Zoom but sometimes struggled to negotiate the uncanny sense of separation that ensues when working with people who are masked or at an enforced two-metres.

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Louise was visibly upset when recalling an interview with an acutely vulnerable teenager living in a situation of appalling deprivation and failed both by a mother with significant mental health issues and local social services.

> "We interviewed him and it was awful… it was the hopelessness of the whole bloody thing… He was speaking so quietly, that I had to get closer and closer to him and the closer I got, there were just huge tears dropping down his face…. In the end, I just gave him a massive, massive hug… He was crying and I was crying… We had done this farrago of social distancing and then the cameraman came and hugged me…"

The restrictions imposed by Covid-19 rules meant some of the usual coping mechanisms were no longer available, and so innovations were needed. Harry decried the impossibility of sitting with someone and having a cup of tea or coffee after a harrowing interview, a simple ritual that in the past had usually helped effect a transition - for both parties - away from the traumatic detail, into something approaching the here and now. "The restorative … checking in" still has to happen somehow, and so for him it shifted to a later time point via 'phone or WhatsApp.

The crucial challenge for many was how much does a journalist engage; how much does he or she detach? And more to the point, how does a journalist tailor a response to different timeframes and circumstances? Helping others can also help oneself: but there is only so much that can be done. Rob was surprised that sources he had met in person on his local patch prior to Covid-19 would phone him up out of the blue to talk:

> "In some cases, it has been really easy, just talking to people. In some cases, it has been hard because you get a story where people get emotional over the phone. Then you just have to think on your feet… how do you help this person, away from being a journalist."

For the journalists specialising in tracking user-generated content and compiling data, the need to detach and separate manifested itself in distinct ways. Some were working with thousands of data points, which included details of medical treatment, first person testimony they had gathered themselves and pictures of the dead as they had once lived. The potential for overload made it impossible to treat all instances of that data as the bereaved might have treated it. At times, they had to find ways of laying aside the thought that these spreadsheet entries all

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referred to real people. Sometimes focusing on patterns in the data helped; at other times, what helped was a wry distancing humour about the strangeness of it all, a coping mechanism that echoed Kotišová's emotional culture of cynicism (2017: 250).

For Fiona, disengagement was only a temporary solution: she had discovered that engaging and acknowledging loss was also important to her own personal wellbeing. As a young reporter, she had been sent out on death-knocks and "hated it"; the intrusion across people's thresholds had made her feel "dirty". Now much later in her career and more accustomed to the work, her first approach to sifting through tribute pictures of the deceased, was to "make it deliberately unreal, like watching a TV drama." But that did not always work; at other times she found doing the opposite and that talking to the bereaved helped re-humanise the data and restore her belief in the purpose. "It is a slightly weird construct is not it?" she thought: "So, I put a barrier up to protect myself, but actually letting that barrier down was also useful."

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Switching-off when not technically on shift was a challenge in the *always-on* working from home reality of the pandemic. Adam was strict about the need to switch off from devices, but nevertheless could not think of a time when he had been "so stuck" on [his] phone: "I've sort of caught myself at times thinking this is ridiculous. You know, I am constantly scanning for developments on my patch, and as much as I need to do that [I am] equally aware that I also need to actually take a break from it." Rob lamented the loss of the time driving back home from the office, a time when he would listen to music and restore a sense of balance as the commute put distance between work and home. In terms of support, most had understanding employers who allowed them to vary their routines and to buy-back some headspace from thinking about Covid-19. Several had moments when they suddenly detected the looming prospect of overload and felt impelled to slam the reset button and ask for an extended time away from the story.

Discussion and Conclusions

Three major findings emerged from the thematic analysis of the ~~11~~ narrative interviews.

~~**1. Shift in journalists' traditional 'watchdog' role**~~

~~The deep sense of precarity felt by the journalists interviewed for this study fed an awareness of moral injury (of witnessing strange behaviours) but there was also a noticeable absence of criticism of authority (government).~~

1. Prevalence of the pastoral role of media and the mission to inform

The refrain of 'we are all in it together', which characterises the pandemic in the UK, immediately places the journalist in a different space to the traditional role of society's guardian. It could even be seen as 'unpatriotic' to hold power to account at a time of national crisis. As noted earlier, this phenomenon was evident in the aftermath of September 11, particularly in the United States, where journalists assumed a passive role focused on the suffering of survivors and memorialisation of the dead (Schudson, 20024). This observation was reinforced by our research on ~~project exploring~~ the reporting of Covid-19 ~~reinforced this observation~~. ~~This~~ The shift to a more supine, pastoral role ~~is also~~ was evident in ~~reporting the Covid-19 crisis~~the ~~research~~ interviews we conducted, where journalists discern the communication of accurate information (guidelines, health precautions rules) and human stories of grief, loss and socio-economic precarity as central to their public service remit. As noted ~~in the Findings section~~ above, tThis sense of ~~doing one's~~performing a duty ~~to~~for the public was, in itself, ~~In itself a~~one of the ways the journalists we iinterviewed ~~coping~~ed ~~mechanism with their work and was a means of~~ managinged their emotions.

In a context of declining trust levels in media (although broadcasters have experienced an uplift in the pandemic)[8], political hostility towards public service broadcasting and a surge in dis/misinformation, critical scrutiny of authority seems subordinate to the drive to 'get the story out'. There is a tension here, between the burden of social responsibility felt by the journalists we interviewed for this paper and the need to hold power to account as central to journalism's public service remit. This is not to say that difficult questions are not being asked, but there is a notable shift towards a pastoral rather than watchdog role in the context of crisis. ~~In part, this could be attributable to the fact that general news reporters are covering what is essentially a complex health story, and as a result, accountability has fallen between the silos of specialist journalism and news. The medical and health specialist reporters who have the in-depth knowledge and understanding of coronavirus are not at the forefront of reporting the crisis. The~~

[8] Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism Covid-19 research project: Fact Sheet 1, 28 April 2020. Available at: https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/news-media-broadly-trusted-source-coronavirus-information-views-uk-government-response-highly

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~~general consensus amongst news organisations appears to be that the story is most easily accessible and comprehensible to the audience if the key focus is human interest journalism (Seaton, 2005) – the experiences of victims and survivors reported from the new frontline of care homes, hospitals and failing businesses. This also chimes with the notion of an 'emotional turn' in journalism (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2020).~~

2. Demise of traditional framing of the death-knock

Ethical guidance is enshrined in the editorial codes and principles of journalism practice, but the suffering of others has often become a secondary consideration in the drive to 'get the story' (commercial considerations) and the need to be objective (constraints on emotion or empathy). This research project, albeit focused on a small sample of journalists, indicates that there has been a significant shift towards care and awareness of vulnerability, both of the self and of others. This reflects changes that have been emerging for some time within the wider context of a more fragmented media landscape and again, due to the emotional turn in journalism. However, the global pandemic and its unprecedented impact, whereby journalists in a digital environment are 'always on' and engaging with the grief and loss of others over a sustained period of time, lays this vulnerability bare. In sharing their experiences, the journalists in this study indicate that greater levels of care are being taken with the 'digital death-knock', where time has to be invested in building relationships remotely, over the 'phone or on social media platforms, or when interviewing those suffering grief and loss at a Covid-imposed artificial distance. As noted above, the pandemic also reminds us of the precarity of everyone's lives; several of the journalists interviewed felt that reporting the vulnerability of others had underlined their awareness of their own vulnerability, whether shielding with elderly relatives or working from a bedroom on a makeshift desk. Whilst in this sense there has been a levelling effect. Covid-19 has shone a stark, bright light on the extreme precarity of those living at the margins of society. This is not typical crisis journalism. Journalists cannot 'fly in and fly out' of this pandemic, they cannot 'smash and grab' the stories of others, because they are living in it and face the same risks, share similar challenges, anxieties and fears as those whose stories they are telling (Kotisova, 2017; McMahon, 2020). Hence, a growing sense of the importance of empathy and a duty of care shapes the 'new' framing of the digital death-knock.

3. Intensity of the detachment-engagement cycle:

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The constant diet of suffering and death, grief and loss require everyone, journalists included, to move in and out of phases of detachment and engagement. On a personal level, the journalists in this study talk about striving to switch off, as they struggled to deal with the emotional impact of reporting the human stories of the pandemic. But they found it almost impossible to stop scrolling through their phones or reading news feeds, due to the professional imperative to chase crucial leads and to report the story with truth and accuracy, i.e., to serve the audience. There were also professional fears about lagging behind or missing out. Some of those we interviewed expressed concerns, at an organisational level, of overloading the audience and as a result, eschewed victim narratives in the search for positive news stories. This 'flip-flopping' between intense engagement in 'traumatic news' stories and striving to find balance through periods of detachment emerges as a hallmark of the coping mechanisms employed by individuals and news outlets (McMahon, 2020; Buchannan et al, 2011). This also highlights, once again, a key theme of this paper, the challenges of imposed distance - the enforced shifts in *modus operandi* and the accompanying emotional strain.

An experiential picture of journalists' emotional labour

This paper set out to paint a picture of the lived experiences of digital journalists reporting the pandemic and of their ~~"~~emotional labour~~" (Hochschild, 1983; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2020)~~.

On one level the journalists we interviewed had never been more separate from their sources; on another level, they had never been closer. They all expressed the relentlessness of 'living the story' and felt that the volume of material on social media was challenging, particularly in a context of risk (assessment and focus) and precarity (health and socio-economic). Changes in normative practices, such as face-to-face interviewing (the digital death-knock) and social distancing intensified the challenges, emotionally and physically. This chimes with the recent findings of Posetti et al.'s survey (2020) that the psychological and emotional impacts of dealing with the Covid-19 crisis constitute the most difficult aspect of journalists' work. The pandemic is different from other stories, in that switching off is almost impossible and creative approaches to coping need to be developed and strictly adhered to, but the nature of the story and the fact it is on our own doorstep – daily - renders this difficult, if not impossible. According to the interviews conducted for this paper, public service values of journalism

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appear to have intensified, not least with a renewed focus and heightened sense of serving the public interest. This helped the journalists cope as they steered their way through the uncharted waters of what is first and foremost a medical story, covered mainly by general news reporters. The sense that they were performing a crucial civic role and fulfilling the public service duty of their profession seemed to afford them a sense of mission. In turn, these imperatives bestowed meaning on their own storied lives, forming an integral part of their 'emotional labour' which mitigated the potential trauma of reporting on and living in the story at the same time.

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21 July 2021

Article title: *Reporting the Covid-19 pandemic: trauma on our own doorstep*

The following revisions have been made in response to the reviews received:

1) Tightened literature review, removing some detail and defined better three key concepts used: emotional labour, precarity and the 'pastoral' mode of journalism;

2) Distinguished where language was not clear between what journalists feel about their experience of work and what is their emotional labour (they are clearly not the same);

3) Expanded on how key concepts (above) relate to our findings and vice versa;

4) Overall length, from author names, abstract, body of text to bibliography = 8,690 words. Actual body of text = 7,600 words;

5) Changed the Introduction so it no longer reads the same as the abstract;

6) Changed text in Methods section to address queries;

7) Tightened the analysis section.

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