

The Hidden Threat: Journalism and Resilience in the Age of “Information Disorder”

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Drawing on research from the fields of media literacy, trauma and journalism and our own work at the intersection of these disciplines, this chapter considers how journalists experience first-hand trauma through reporting within a media ecosystem that is toxified by mis- and disinformation.

Society needs resilient journalism—journalism that is healthy and diverse—to function effectively. Robust, effective, and accurate communication and media are fundamental to trust in institutions, to informing publics, to encouraging ethical behaviours and to mitigating risk. Hence, resilient journalism plays a vital part in sustainable societies, but in March 2020, the precarious state that journalism and journalists had occupied for some time was starkly highlighted by the onset of a global pandemic. An “info-demic” of coronavirus misinformation and conspiracy theories compounded growing distrust in the media, exacerbated by online abuse and mirroring social trends that tend towards dissonance and lack of cohesion. First Draft was set up in 2015 to develop online resources and tools to combat mis- and disinformation; as its founder, Clare Wardle (2020) explains:

Information disorder is complex. Some of it could be described as low-level information pollution—clickbait headlines, sloppy captions or satire that fools—but some of it is sophisticated and deeply deceptive. (First Draft, 2020)

This multilayered, challenging context has a profound impact on journalists. In an international survey of journalists conducted in the first year of the pandemic (Posetti et al., 2020), an alarming 81% cited mis- and disinformation as a key stressor, triggering anxiety and liable to cause moral injury when reporting, for example, a public health crisis (Seeva & Feinstein, 2020). This moral injury can be defined as journalists experiencing a sense of helplessness as they bear witness to something that transgresses their ethics and sense of “normality” (Shale, 2020). These feelings were exacerbated by working in an increasingly polarised context: since 2016, media have been subjected to attack as “the opposition” by Trump, and his supporters and journalists have been seen as part of an elite (Snow,

2017). In 2022, the Reporters Without Borders World Press Freedom Index identified the “globalised and unregulated online information space” as an important factor contributing to polarisation “amplified by information chaos” (RSF, 2022).

Journalism inhabits a precarious space in which journalists need resilience to navigate this age of “information disorder” (Donovan & Wardle, 2020) with its often subliminal obstacles and anxiety-inducing threats. Across the world, the professional work of journalists is now conducted in unhealthy information ecosystems, and for those covering traumatic events first-hand, the impact of this difficult context should not be underestimated.

Situated in this context of precarity, our chapter investigates the interrelationship of factors that have led journalists to experience a sense of moral injury. We examine how the fragility of journalists’ working and living situations combines with anxiety about a lack of trust in their work, with the aim of devising strategies and tools to build resilience when dealing with trauma, to foster responsible journalism (and healthy societies) and to engender self-care.

Through eliciting the lived experiences of journalists, we engage with two key questions:

- What is the impact of information disorder on the trauma experienced by journalists seeking to report with truth, accuracy and fairness?
- What strategies are required to combat these challenges to build resilience in journalists and journalism practice?

The chapter concludes with some tentative ideas for journalism practitioners, educators and students seeking to build trauma and resilience awareness into their practice and to strengthen their professional identities *as* journalists working in unhealthy information ecosystems.

Hidden Threats

Unhealthy Media Ecosystems

Information disorder,¹ the polluted media ecosystem discerned by the verification experts at First Draft and others, presents a hidden threat to journalists seeking to report according to the normative values of truth, accuracy and fairness and to journalism practice situated in a fractured civic society: As Michiko Kakutani notes in *The Death of Truth*: “Without truth, democracy is hobbled ... those seeking democracy must recognise it” (2018, p. 173).

Trust levels in the media have sunk again during and since the pandemic. Data from the 2022 Edelman Trust Survey² indicated that nearly 70% of people believe that journalists intentionally mislead them. Three-quarters of survey respondents expressed anxiety about “information war”.³ This research was conducted prior to Putin’s “hybrid war” strategy for the invasion of Ukraine, so we can reasonably assume that this fear has since grown.

In seeking to understand “information disorder” and how journalists are experiencing at best challenge and at worst trauma as they attempt to work in such an environment—but also how they offer the hope of a remedy—it is most useful to think of this as an information ecosystem. This information ecosystem⁴ is currently unhealthy to the point of toxicity, but like the natural environment, it can be restored to better health through human agency.

For example, BBC Media Action’s stated objectives for improving the health of media and information ecosystems in fragile societies and vulnerable democracies include the following:

providing audiences with accurate, trusted and engaging information and strengthening media ecosystems by supporting the wide availability of relevant, engaging and trusted public-interest content,

creating or supporting networks and coalitions of media and civil society organisations working to tackle information disorder and increasing the capacity of media to produce content that tackles information disorder on an ongoing basis. (2021, p. 2)

The relative health of a media and information ecosystem is contingent on the ratio of trustworthy and credible information, professionally generated journalism, pluralism and democracy. However, currently it is also an environment which is polluted, and could be made cleaner, by the media and information behaviours of publics. In a healthy ecosystem, people care more about diverse and inclusive media representation, they access public interest media more and access broader information sources, and they make healthier and safer decisions about media, online access and data. Most importantly, in functioning democracies, people *expect* to have access to a healthy media ecosystem. The most concerning feature of “information disorder” and the kinds of findings generated by Edelman is when trust reduces but the desire for a better media gives way to apathy and cynicism.

Trauma and Moral Injury

Against the backdrop of threats and challenges posed by information disorders, news organisations have made headway over the past 10 years in developing protocols to safeguard the mental health of journalists covering traumatic events (CPJ, 2022; Redfern, 2022; Wilman, 2020). However, this support remains patchy, particularly for freelancers. Since the pandemic, the onset of remote working and another swathe of budgetary cutbacks in the industry have reduced support networks further, with journalists often working alone. Moreover, many of the journalists drafted in to report the pandemic were not hardened war reporters, used to covering conflict, crisis and human suffering. Our research conducted at the heart of the coronavirus crisis, exploring the “emotional labour”⁵ (Hochschild, 1983; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2020) of journalists covering first-hand trauma “on their own doorstep”, indicates the following:

The psychological and emotional impacts of dealing with the COVID-19 crisis constitute the most difficult aspects 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. (Jukes, Fowler-Watt & Rees, 2022, p. 24)

The relentlessness of covering the story, the fear of falling prey to misinformation, navigating the minefield of social media (e.g., anti-vaxxer conspiracy theories) and the imperative of assessing risk for themselves and their families presented the journalists interviewed for our study with an insurmountable set of challenges. Their “emotional labour” weighed heavily, with some mitigation offered by a heightened sense of mission and civic responsibility.

In the post-pandemic context, what, if anything, can we learn from these experiences? Currently, journalists are navigating, for example, the context of political chaos in the UK with the intensification of “culture wars” and the deepening crisis in Ukraine, with its extreme examples of the weaponisation of information. The dangers of moral injury have not dissipated, as journalists are constantly required to step outside their normal roles to cover stories of conflict, crisis and chaos (Redfern, 2022), and they continue to operate within a toxified environment.

Resilience and Self-care

Hence, equipping journalists to become more resilient and training them in self-care are now matters of urgency. Global charity, the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma, recognises the role of journalists as aligned to that of first responders. Its website, packed with useful resources for journalists to access, states that:

Like emergency workers and first responders, journalists have begun to recognise the need for safeguards and increased peer support to ensure their health, well-being and ability to do their jobs effectively. (Self-care and Peer Support section, Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma website)

Organisations such as The Rory Peck Trust also provide resources to support journalists covering difficult stories, urging “safer storytelling” and highlighting issues that journalists are often unaware of (or see as a sign of weakness to acknowledge), such as moral injury.

In the UK, the National Council for the Training of Journalists (NCTJ) has identified the importance of building resilience in working journalists and for journalism students prior to entering newsroom environments. They have developed a free e-learning resource aimed at raising awareness and providing support (NCTJ, 2023).

As already noted, the context of political polarisation and low levels of trust in mainstream media have intensified the need for journalists to focus on their own self-care, as there is evidence of “a troubling trend of journalists experiencing harassment, intimidation and assault in the field” (RSE, 2022). A rise in online abuse as well as threats to the physical safety of journalists prompted the publication of a government-backed National Action Plan for the Safety of Journalists in the UK in March 2021 and led to the appointment of Dr Rebecca Whittington by *Reach plc* as the industry’s first online safety editor.

Delivering a university masterclass in March 2023, Angelina Fusco, Chair of Dart Centre (Europe) identified a key challenge for journalists within the online environment—the fact that they are never able to switch off, that they are often “wired” by the need to be “always on”, scrolling to verify stories and/or ensure that they had not missed a lead. As we explain in the next section, this issue constituted an overwhelming theme of research that we conducted during the pandemic, where journalists felt that putting away their phone was somehow to neglect their moral responsibility to report 24/7. However, as Fusco explains, this puts journalists between a rock and a hard place, since “bad journalism can compound the trauma experience”.

Journalists’ Lived Experiences

This section engages with the first of our questions: What is the impact of information disorder on the trauma experienced by journalists seeking to report with truth, accuracy and fairness? It does so through sharing two of our research projects, where we elicit the lived experiences of journalists:

1. focused on the impact of “fake news” and declining trust,
2. focused on the experience of reporting “trauma on our own doorstep” in the heart of the COVID-19 pandemic.

This section concludes with a case study: a first person account from a journalist subjected to extreme abuse as a result of disinformation, who provides a series of action points.

Journalists and “Fake news”

Pre-pandemic, we conducted a field ethnography through a series of iterative workshops funded by the US Embassy in London to investigate lived experiences of working in the era of “fake news” among journalists, educators, students and librarians (see McDougall, 2019; Fowler-Watt & McDougall, 2019). The first-person accounts that this work generated from journalists, in what now appears to be “the before times”, already spoke to the hostile environment for the profession we are now accepting as the status quo. One journalist observed an “information fight” online where “you have extremely

cynical opportunistic millennials in Gen-Z who know they can culture jam”. This is challenging for the young journalist, who needs “to understand you’re going into a world which is pretty much constantly having its own referendum about something all of the time”. Another posited that the relationship between journalism and misinformation is complex; there is “a reliance on fake news by mainstream media, both to support its discursive position but also financially, it might need it to exist?”

We also heard “it was ever thus”, several accounts that highlighted the difficulties of relying on journalists resolving the crisis from within the profession, for example:

I just have this sense of a mainstream media that is absolutely not seeing itself as a solution because they know that nobody’s truly listening, for me it’s a very different space that we’re now in, but as a result of something that has been around since the beginning of time. (Journalist interview)

Moving onto coping mechanisms or, at least, judgement calls about how to be a journalist in this context—and a re-emphasis on the normative values of journalism:

Since social media, it’s more important to truly drill down further to the source. Shaking down a bit, down the line, the survivors from all this will be the ones who can carry trust. It’s coming back down to credibility, and that is built up over many years. Accuracy, responsibility and trust what it will come down to. (Journalist interview)

When covering potentially traumatic stories, journalists (generally arriving as “first responders”) often have to grapple with different versions of events circulating on social media as they strive to report what they are witnessing first-hand. This journalist covered the Grenfell Fire tragedy in the UK, in which 72 people lost their lives.⁶

We were told by the police that there were a specific number who had died. It was clearly going to be more, but that was the number confirmed at that stage, so we reported that faithfully. However, on social media, a much higher number was being reported and instantly you are part of the conspiracy, the media, the police and the state are deliberately understating the tragedy. So here are multiple versions of events, multiple opposing “truths” and ours becomes one of them.

Grenfell exposed the inherent dangers of information-poor communities: an absence of media in the area of London where the tower block was located meant rampaging rumour and conspiracy theories impeded the reporting of journalists when they did arrive on the scene. They were also met with suspicion, attacked as elitist, absentee and uncaring (Snow, 2017).

As we filmed, people said “Where is the media? Where has the media been?” So we are working to the rules—find sources, establish facts, but on social media those rules don’t apply and we are accused of taking the side of the state, part of a conspiracy. I would say that, in my career, something is changing that means it is just so much more difficult to operate ethically as a professional journalist. (Journalist interview)

Trauma on Our Doorstep: Journalists and Moral Injury

In the heart of the pandemic, working closely with Dart Centre (Europe), we conducted research into the auto/biographical lived experiences of journalists reporting on COVID-19 (see Jukes, Fowler-Watt & Rees, 2022). This was not a “far-away” conflict with journalists parachuting in to bear witness; it was a protracted story that they were living in while reporting on—a public health crisis that presented intense challenges to their professional focus on reporting with due accuracy and to their personal resilience in the midst of information overload.

The theme of moral injury was evident in all of the journalists we interviewed, who felt helpless and guilty when faced with the grief, economic hardship and emotional fragility of those whose stories they were telling. One broadcast 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. (Jukes, Fowler-Watt & Rees, 2022, p. 17)

For broadcast journalists in particular, the unnatural experience of interviewing people at a 2-metre distance or over Zoom exacerbated the journalists’ *“injurious sense that they were witnessing and involved in something ‘unnatural’”*. They had to assess risk for themselves and their interviewees.

Another female journalist was exhausted by navigating social media and the imperative to verify information: *“The day job is hard enough, but having to read everything that everyone sends you, a lot of it unsubstantiated.. it is overwhelming”* (Journalist interview).

The relentless nature of the story, the moral responsibility and the sense of mission to report accurate information discussed earlier in this chapter were summarised by the broadcast journalist working in a regional bureau:

It has also been very pressured and relentless, and it is a story like no other that affects your professional life, as well as your personal life. 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 is very difficult to switch off. (Journalist interview)

Lone working was also very challenging for journalists’ mental health—this was evident in the young community journalists we interviewed, usually working from their bedrooms, who felt a sense of responsibility to the people in the community who they would normally have been able to sit with in person, after conducting their interview, and talk to over a cup of tea:

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? (Journalist interview)

The normal job of the journalist was overlaid with:

Extra burden[s] to the stress of working on such a fast moving and important story where your sense of responsibility here as a journalist is truly heightened because you suddenly have this responsibility to shine a light on aspects of public life that are affected by this pandemic ... all of this adds to the pressure of how you cover such a story that has such an impact on everyone’s day to day life. (Journalist interview)

One positive development for the journalists in our study was that they felt that journalism had earned greater respect—even if momentarily. This emphasis on the civic, public interest role of journalism mitigated to some extent the stress and trauma, bestowing meaning on their professional lives and integral to their *“emotional labour”*.

Disinformation and Online Threats: A First-person Account of Lived Experience

A recent and notably extreme example of disinformation impacting a journalist’s safety, which illustrates the remarkably high level of resilience that can be demanded of a journalist amid an incessant barrage of online abuse and threats of physical harm, is the harrowing experience of reporter Amy Fenton:

In May 2020, as chief reporter for Newsquest’s South Cumbria daily *The Mail*, Fenton routinely covered the posting on Facebook of allegations by a young woman from Barrow-in-Furness, Eleanor Williams, that she had been trafficked by an Asian grooming gang. Explosively, however, the allegations went viral online, with shareability boosted by photos of injuries she claimed were inflicted as a victim of grooming, trafficking and assault. They were “shared more than 100 000 times”, “sparked demonstrations in her hometown” and led to English Defence League founder Tommy Robinson “visiting the town to ‘investigate’ the claims” (Barlow & Hughes, 2023). In a dramatic twist to the shocking story, it subsequently emerged that Williams was lying. Her photographed injuries, including a black eye and partly severed finger, were self-inflicted using a hammer. Nearly three years later, on 3 January 2023, 22-year-old Williams was found guilty at the Preston Crown Court on “eight counts of doing acts tending and intended to pervert the course of justice”, having pleaded guilty at an earlier hearing to one count of perverting the course of justice (Barlow & Hughes, 2023). The court had heard that Williams also “falsely claimed she was raped by multiple men—three of whom subsequently tried to take their own lives” (Sharman, 2023a). On 14 March 2023, Williams was sentenced to imprisonment for eight-and-a-half years.

The scale of the impact of the spread of this disinformation was elaborated in a report in *The Guardian* on the sentencing. Williams’ lies had “soon spread far beyond Cumbria and sparked a global solidarity campaign, Justice for Ellie, with more than 100 000 Facebook members. It prompted rallies all over the UK, amid allegations of a police cover-up” and sparked hate crimes. The judge, Mr Justice Altham, described Williams’ allegations as “complete fiction” (Pidd, 2023). The sentence was respectfully criticised as insufficient, however, by Fenton, who had, following the guilty verdict, recounted her ordeal as the original reporter of the allegations in a piece for her current employer, Reach plc, on *LancsLive*. Fenton described having had to flee her home—on police advice—with her young daughter, late on a Sunday night at the height of the first COVID lockdown. The “straw that broke the camel’s back”, she wrote, was the Cumbria Police being informed “that someone had vowed to rape me and make me listen to Muslim prayers while he did so”. This threat had been preceded for several days by a pile-on of “countless death and rape threats” after Fenton had reported, accurately and legitimately in the public interest, on the allegations. A number of Williams’ victims who denied the allegations were also in jeopardy, suffering attacks “both physically and relentlessly on social media” (Fenton, 2023).

“All hell broke loose,” Fenton recalled, after Williams’ claims began to crumble under police investigation, and it was reported that she had been charged with several counts of perverting the course of justice. Fenton was targeted, nevertheless, by outraged conspiracy theorists: “I was made a scapegoat. A section of society, mostly fuelled by far-right extremism and racism, accused me of being ‘in cahoots’ with not only the ‘corrupt police’ but also ‘Asian grooming gangs’” (Fenton, 2023). As reported by *HoldtheFrontPage.co.uk*, this extended to abuse of her colleagues at *The Mail* by a “gang of men... after some readers wrongly claimed there was a ‘conspiracy between the press and the police to cover up crimes’”. Following Williams’ conviction, Fenton said it was “an enormous sense of relief to all of her victims as well as to myself”. She added: “From my perspective, being targeted simply for reporting accurately and within the constraints of the laws which govern news publishers, was incredibly tough and I only hoped that justice would prevail, which it now has” (Sharman, 2023a). Following the sentencing of Williams, Fenton’s traumatic experience was palpable in her response: “I didn’t expect to find today so incredibly overwhelming but I did... I think of myself as being something of a tough cookie but I cried as I heard the judge refer to what happened to me.” She added: “While I will always have respect for the police and appreciate the often impossible task they have faced over the last three years, I will never forget or forgive the way in which my young daughter and I were left to fend for ourselves and offered no place of sanctuary when, at the same time, the defendant was accommodated in a

safe house.” Fenton also addressed the public: “I just hope that all those individuals who threatened to kill the true victims in this case will now reflect on their actions and feel utterly ashamed. In addition, perhaps they will appreciate that professionals with knowledge of the law, including the police and journalists, acted in such a way to uphold the criminal justice system” (Sharman, 2023b).

Building Resilience in Journalists and Journalism Practice

The Eleanor Williams story was, of course, just one of many hard news stories covered by Amy Fenton in her career thus far. For the purposes of this chapter and to help us address our second question:

What strategies are required to combat these challenges to build resilience in journalists and journalism practice?

Fenton kindly provided a range of additional action points that might help trainee journalists, with the support of journalism educators, to become better prepared for the realities of first-hand trauma—in their case via disinformation and related safety threats:

Online Violence

Fenton says she is “certainly less trusting”. What would she advise trainee journalists to do (or not do) in dealing with online violence?

Acknowledge it for what it is. People act in this way because they want a reaction. In my case, I was determined to not allow these people to believe or know that I was scared or threatened by what they were saying. Nor would I allow it to prevent me from continuing to do the job I love so much.

Disinformation and Conspiracy Theorists

Fenton provided further advice for trainee journalists on dealing with disinformation:

Talk—don’t keep things to yourself. There will always be people out there who don’t like you and what you do. However, I have found that in sharing experiences with other people, reporters or otherwise, you will be supported and backed up.

Consider everything—whether that’s a press release, tip-off or even a poster about a fundraiser, by asking what is missing. Is there something you’re not being told? Is there a reason for this information being given to you? Can you trust the source?

Threat Escalation

What would Fenton advise trainee journalists to do (or not do) in situations where online violence appears to be escalating to physical danger? “Make sure you know how your employer is able to deal with situations like this,” she warned.

Remember—if this ever happens, and it’s because of your job, then it’s their responsibility to keep you safe.

It is very rare for these types of people to actually do anything in person. Their aim is to instil fear. In any face-to-face situation, I would always advise having your phone at hand, constantly being aware of your surroundings in case you need to escape, not putting yourself in a situation where your location is publicised and you are alone.

Resilience

Fenton reflected that she “instinctively” dealt with the stressful circumstances arising from the Williams story. Her sense of mission was heightened, as she “remained resolute that in no way would I allow it to affect my commitment to reporting the truth...I refused to allow myself to be seen as a victim”. She considered herself naturally quite resilient and was supported by friends, family, GP and counselling.

In terms of strategies that might help trainee journalists build resilience and cope with trauma, Fenton offers this advice:

Know that there will come a time when you write something that will make people hate you—it’s inevitable. What happened to me was the extreme, but reporters everywhere, every day, are criticised simply for doing their job. All you can do in response is remind yourself of why you are doing this job. To tell the truth—although sometimes it’s not what people want to hear.

Conclusion

In this age of “information disorder”, despite the clear responsibilities of news organisations to support and protect their employees, the route to building resilience appears to rest mainly with individual journalists. The testimonies we have elicited and shared within this chapter indicate that the strategies at the end of this chapter might also be useful in order to focus on self-care in retaining a healthy balance, to mitigate first-hand trauma and to ensure that the weight of “emotional labour” of journalism remains in check.

For all of the journalists interviewed, faced with the “hidden threat” of information disorder, that sense of mission is a key motivator and potential shield from distress, as Amy Fenton emphasises:

You can make a difference, you can implement change and you can be a voice for the silenced...Never underestimate the power you have.

They all believe, passionately, that journalism can still be an agent for positive change, even in an unhealthy—often toxic, and sometimes threatening—media ecosystem. We would go further to argue that every piece of credible, trustworthy journalism makes a positive contribution to making the ecosystem less polluted. Credible journalism is *the* essential antidote.

Next Steps You Could Take...

Tips

- Switch off from social media and email when not on shift
- The sense of mission and “doing a good job” can offer a shield from distress
- Anchor self and practice in the normative values of journalism
- See yourself as an agent for positive change within the unhealthy media ecosystem
- Check in on yourself and others
- Seek support and demand it if it is not forthcoming (from employers and other agencies, such as police).

Task

- Read through the strategies above and decide which resonate with you. Either in a group or alone create a digital vision board you can keep to hand to look and reflect on during difficult moments of your professional practice. This could include images of news stories or journalists that inspire you, wellbeing reminders and tips for self protection from online abuse.

Notes

1. First Draft defines information disorder as a collective noun for false information that is shared either with or without intent. Hence, disinformation, misinformation and mal-information can be termed collectively as “information disorder” For more detail see: <<https://firstdraftnews.org/long-form-article/understanding-information-disorder/>>
2. In 2022, the Edelman Trust Survey: The Cycle of Distrust, sampled more than 36,000 respondents across 28 countries.
3. Information war can be defined as the use of information to achieve national objectives. According to NATO, information war can be waged to gain an information advantage over the opponent.
4. The information ecosystem is understood to be complex adaptive systems that include information infrastructure, tools, media, producers, consumers, curators, and sharers. They are complex organisations of dynamic social relationships through which information moves and transforms in flows.
5. Emotional labour is the process of managing feelings and emotions in order to be able to fulfil the emotional requirements of a job—in this case of working as a journalist.
6. On 14 June 2017 a deadly fire broke out in the Grenfell Tower, a 24 storey block of flats in one of London’s wealthiest areas. Seventy-two people died, 70 were injured. It was the worst residential fire in the UK since the Second World War. The rapid spread of the fire was attributed to the building’s external cladding. Residents had been campaigning for some time that the building was at risk of fire and the lack of any local journalism in the area was seen as an added impediment to their voices being heard.

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