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Psychological aid and training for journalists who face continued emotionally demanding environments: The case of Venezuelan journalists

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Journalists' professional life, especially when covering conflicts, has an emotional dimension (Stupart 2021). Many journalists are prone to post-traumatic stress disorder (e.g. Pyevich et al. 2003) and other types of trauma. However, most of the previous studies have only focused on disaster or war journalism, and only a few (e.g. Anderson 2018; Hughes et al. 2021) have examined how to support journalists who are at continual risk. This topic has gained even more importance during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to many journalists worrying about their own health (Perreault and Perreault 2021).

Journalists may reach out to organisational or informal aid to cope, remove or alleviate work-related emotional stress. Nevertheless, formal aid or training organised by media outlets is often scarce (e.g. Anderson 2018). Instead, journalists commonly resort to informal strategies to manage work-related emotions (e.g. Thomson 2021). For instance, Venezuelan and Cuban journalists have found many strategies to survive their perceived government repression (García Santamaría and Salojärvi 2020), such as peer support and solidarity among colleagues and forming a strong professional identity (Hughes et al. 2021; García Santamaría and Salojärvi 2020). In addition to support, journalists may care about their mental health through self-censorship and avoiding interviewing someone (García Santamaría and Salojärvi 2020; Chinweobo-Onuoha et al. 2021; Miller 2021), which inevitably impacts democracy.

The factors that may cause occupational emotional stress or trauma originate from various directions. For example, reports show how an increasing number of journalists are being arrested and imprisoned (e.g. cpj.org), or are suffering from aggression issues, such as online and offline harassment, which may come as intimidation (e.g. Löfgren Nilsson and Örnebring 2016) or 'outrage mob' (Waisbord 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic evidenced that press freedom was confronted, and journalists were attacked, with the consequent experiences of anxiety and frustration (Šimunjak 2022).

While most research has focused on the occupational side of journalists, their personal life is also impacted by stressful situations (Wolfe 2019). In fact, occupational and private lives should not be separated as professional stress may either be alleviated

through family and friends or affect journalists' personal sphere. Yet, despite the evident negative consequences of the emotional stress experienced by journalists in their daily professional life, research on the topic is scarce.

Against this backdrop, this study seeks to advance the understanding of the role of emotions in journalistic practice, the attitudes of journalists towards mental health care and external support and the potential necessity of including emotional literacy in journalists' education. In particular, it attempts to answer the following research questions (RQs):

RQ1: How do journalists living in challenging environments (within perceived emotionally demanding continued risk) deal with their mental health?

RQ2: Do such journalists have the need and access to receive mental health therapy for managing the emotional struggles originating from working in these emotionally demanding environments?

RQ3: What and how is psychological aid obtained or provided in such an environment?

To answer these RQs, we focus on Venezuelan journalists, who make an excellent case study for observing emotions as they are at continual risk. Journalists in Venezuela may experience stress due to the uncertain economic situation of the country, which extends to their professional practice (Pain and Korin 2021); the political tensions that affect all sectors of life (Bisbal 2009; Salojärvi 2016); their self-censorship (Pain and Korin 2021) or perceived repression (García Santamaría and Salojärvi 2020). Moreover, these journalists face difficult societal and economic situations, physical threats, occasional natural disasters and social unrest, all of which result in practicing journalism in an emotionally challenging environment. Nevertheless, Venezuelan journalists have a firm professional identity, including a strong sense of journalistic values, such as keeping people informed (García Santamaría and Salojärvi 2020).

This chapter is structured as follows. We first present the data, which are obtained from interviewing Venezuelan journalists and observed through an interpretative phenomenological lens and a thematic analysis (TA). Then, we discuss the results in the following aspects: coping with an environment that is at continual risk, aid for dealing with difficult emotional circumstances, the role of NGOs in improving journalists' mental health, training on emotional management, lessons learnt from the pandemic and mental health taboos. The chapter concludes with some recommendations on journalism practice or education and future research.

Data and Methodology

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with a sample of 20 Venezuelan journalists (13 female and 7 male) working for regional, national and international news agencies, newspapers, radio, television and digital media. We selected only the journalists who had more than 10 years of journalistic professional trajectory to ensure that they had experienced different emotional situations during their careers. The participants were recruited through the social circle of the researchers by using the

snowball sampling technique¹. The Mean_{Age} was 48.23 (Range_{Age} = 30–62) years. The data were collected during the pandemic in 2021–2022. An additional non-structured interview was conducted with a psychologist experienced in treating Venezuelan journalists both virtually and face-to-face.

The interviews were conducted through online conferencing applications and video-recorded for later verbatim transcription. Online conferencing applications enable interviewing diverse and geographically dispersed populations about personal topics in an accessible and time-saving manner (Gray et al. 2020), which would not be possible otherwise during the pandemic. The names of the interviewees were anonymised for their security².

We adopted an interpretative phenomenology approach (IPA), which is recommended for analysing the meanings that individuals attribute to their experiences (Pietkiewicz and Smith 2014), particularly daily life experiences that are not usually examined (Finlay 2011). Coherent with the IPA, the questions were open, exploratory and directed to make the participants talk about their emotions, cognitions and behaviours (Miller et al. 2018). The specific questions related to this chapter were as follows: Have you required psychological or spiritual advice in relation to your professional career? What kind? Why? When? A previous research demonstrated that an IPA is useful for exploring in detail how journalists describe their personal experiences related to work and make sense of them (Tandoc and Takahashi 2018).

TA was applied to the corpus with Atlas.ti software. TA can adequately describe participants' experiences in relation to the object of study, as it focuses on the main statements, which can lead to further generalisations (Stebbins 2001). The application of TA involves identifying and coding themes during successive corpus readings and later interpreting the underlying content (Guest et al. 2012). This analysis has been successfully applied to the study of journalists' experiences under emotionally demanding circumstances (Houston et al. 2019). The joint application of TA and IPA is recommended for observing individuals' mental health accounts, because of their complementarity in providing a multi-layered and plural description of the phenomenon (Spiers and Riley 2019).

Results

Coping with a continually challenging environment

The interviews highlighted the fact that the journalists were surrounded by a continual risk in both their professional and personal lives. Most of them agreed that psychological or spiritual healing is necessary not only for the inherent risks related to the journalistic profession (i.e. censorship and persecution) but also for dealing with the emotional affection caused by the difficult stories and topics they cover.

¹ The interviews are part of a larger research project.

² The research followed the ethical guidelines of the National University of Singapore for empirical works involving humans and was approved by the corresponding committee. Verbal and signed informed consents were obtained from participants.

A participant stated that journalists in Venezuela live in permanent anxiety and tiredness: ‘...one characteristic of the journalist profession in this country is not only the fear we experience but our exhaustion because every day there is transcendental new information’. The journalist added that she sometimes watches news from countries such as Norway, Finland or Canada and tells herself,

How cool it must be, to be a journalist there! ...but here [in Venezuela] you cannot disconnect; you must deal with such toxic environments, anxiety, fear, many events happening at the same time, and the horrible situations we must cover.

Another journalist stated that the Venezuelan crisis is not only economic, political or energetic but also social: ‘...There is a value crisis. All of them are parallel... and to some [journalists] those crises happen simultaneously’.

Moreover, all of them agreed that Venezuelan ordinary living circumstances are emotionally demanding and strongly impact their psychological wellbeing. For instance, one female journalist stated,

In Venezuela, there is structural violence. You may run out of water for days, you may have no electrical power for hours, you may not find cash, you may fear your car gets broken because you have no money for repairing it, you may not be able to buy meat or shoes for your children... But additionally, everything journalists do, the information that we deal with, the primary material we work with, affect us emotionally and psychologically.

Aid for dealing with difficult circumstances and emotions: Usually a personal and private matter

Most of the participants said that they had received psychological aid for dealing with their job as journalists at some point in their careers, either periodically or long-term. In therapy, journalists get, for example, ‘meditation exercises for relaxing, for sleeping... books, texts... videos and audios’. A few female journalists had also received religious comfort from their Catholic priests, religious communities and praying. This is important because, as stated by a journalist, ‘I arrive home after fieldwork in which I have seen such a dramatic event I cannot avoid affecting me... At the health protests, you see people who are not going to survive because the aid won’t arrive’.

Even though psychological help is essential for many to deal with anxiety and stress, most of the participants who had received psychological treatment related to their professional career had done it on their own initiative. In fact, they had covered the therapy expenses themselves. As a journalist stated,

I have seen a psychologist who is a friend of mine in the last three years because I was experiencing anxiety attacks. I woke up in the middle of the night, I could not breathe... She started to treat me on that... Thanks to the exercises she prescribed me, I have not had more such strong episodes as I used to.

As attending a therapy requires activeness and funds, not all can receive help, even if needed. A few journalists stated that they did not take psychological therapy because of a lack of budget. One of them stated,

My mother passed away... and we started to have economic problems... From having a regular middle-class life, our salaries [her and her partner who is also a journalist] are worth nothing. I had nothing to eat. My stomach hurt... So, I got deeply depressed... I could not afford to get psychological advice.

Psychological assistance, even though well-needed, is not commonly offered to journalists by the industry. Only one participant working for an international news agency and another working for digital newspapers were offered psychological assistance by their employer. This is so even though news agencies are aware of the necessity of psychological healing in difficult circumstances.

A journalist stated that the digital media she works for usually organises annual meetings or special events comprising workshops, particularly during the pandemic: 'We have been trained by psychologists, therapists, to deal with the stress, anxiety, and fear related to our job... they give you tools'.

Another journalist working for an international news agency stated that there is a crisis office in her company that treats journalists saturated by emotions or those who have burned out: 'It occurs with journalists from different parts of the world because of the many problems they face in the place they are covering... The journalist is sent away from that place and the psychological unity starts the treatment'.

However, this participant was not aware of the existence of similar units in the case of Venezuelan journalism. According to her, 'Venezuelan news media do not offer such kind of training nor have the kindness of calling their journalists to verify how they are'.

The role of NGOs in improving journalists' mental health

A few journalists in the sample had received psychological aid from international and national NGOs and organisations, such as Free Press International and journalists' unions, during their professional careers. A female participant contacted an NGO and asked for mental health support for herself due to the emotionally loaded situations related to the massive Venezuelan protests against the governments of 2014 and 2017:

I used to move forward, no matter what happened. I would die for my country. Later I thought it was not worth being killed because the country was going to continue that way so I changed my attitude... Psychologists without borders helped me. It provided me psychological aid for 4 or 5 sessions free of charge. I was in a very bad shape. They gave me some tools. After this, I went to psychiatric therapy.

Likewise, another female stated that the Venezuelan branch of the NGO Press and Society Institute, the national union of journalists (Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Prensa) and the NGO Espacio Público provide journalists different tools for facing the emotionally demanding situation of the country and, in her particular case, political persecution. Accordingly, she stated,

Luckily, the union had signed an agreement with Psychologists without Borders and I was assigned a psychologist who accompanied me for 2 and a half months... Twice a week we had therapy... She said I had post-traumatic stress

disorder and was depressed. Her help was very important because I learned to deal with anguish and the feeling of being persecuted.

Training on emotional management: A rarity although a necessity

Training that provides preventive tools to deal with emotionally demanding professional situations is scarce. Only one female journalist stated that she had attended a talk on emotions and how they can be somatised.

A few journalists stated that some national news media and international news agencies train their journalists on experiencing hostile environments. For example, a journalist attended courses every three or five years, where she was taught how to act in dangerous situations, such as shootings, assaults, robberies, earthquakes or tsunamis. They were trained on how to avoid such situations and react. This journalist also stated that the pandemic provoked news agencies to offer some courses on emotional management, too.

Even though Venezuelan media do not offer such training, according to almost all participants, it is a necessity. Most of the journalists in the sample believed that colleges, professional unions and media outlets should regularly train their professionals on emotion management not only in dangerous or hostile environments but also as part of the implications of their jobs. For instance, a male journalist stated,

That's not done. The editor-in-chief and the directors of the media should promote meetings and reunions with the journalistic team to teach them how to deal with [difficult] situations... media should have a department or unit for these matters. The same way there are industrial safety departments at enterprises, there should be mental health aid for journalists.

Now instead, the employers 'ask you to go to cover events and they tell you: go on, do it, learn the hard way...', as phrased by a female journalist.

Likewise, a male journalist mentioned that journalists are trained at college to determine the emotions or behaviour of their audiences through courses such as social psychology, but they ignore their own emotions:

We are never trained [at college] on how to deal with anxiety, sadness, desperation, concerns... That is not taught. Nobody tells you how to deal with the emotions, how to deal with your mental health... And [journalism] is overwhelming.

Moreover, some participants mentioned that it is necessary to teach journalists how to deal with their egos and modesty, as the journalistic profession may provoke them to overestimate their own capacities and personal values. For example, a female journalist stated,

I got into the Presidential Palace and called my mother: mom, I am at the Palace. I couldn't contain the emotion in my chest... That emotion of feeling like privileged people... People ask for autographs from journalists who appear on TV. One ends up feeling almighty... I think we must work on our ego. The same way we take care of back pains.

Along the same line, a female participant said that journalism schools should teach students about the risks of the journalistic profession: ‘We [journalists] tend to think we are Supermen. If we cover the economy, we think that information does not affect us. If we cover crimes, the same... But we take those situations home’.

The pandemic: Some lessons and new routes for emotional training

The COVID-19 pandemic provoked not only an increase in job-related emotional demands but also the appearance of new problematic affective circumstances for journalists. Consequently, some media houses not only started to acknowledge the necessity of providing psychological support to their workers but also implemented support services through virtual technologies. The interactive nature of these technologies (e.g. WhatsApp groups, Instagram and Zoom) was highly valuable for some of them. For instance, one journalist stated that his professional union offered psychological aid to its affiliates right before the pandemic because many journalists suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder after facing three years of continuous protests in Tachira state. Unfortunately, only after three of these sessions, the pandemic was declared. Nevertheless, the union immediately started a programme of virtual assistance through chat forums: ‘We had two chat-forums to talk about our fears... A colleague that I know, who is also a friend, had panic attacks. It was good: people started to share their own emotional problems publicly’.

However, some of the media outlets were not immediately aware of the new circumstances that the pandemic was imposing until their journalists started to manifest loudly. Then, the media companies offered psychological services to their employees, as a female journalist stated,

We suddenly needed to wear masks, use gloves, and keep a safe distance. But, for a journalist, it is very difficult to be away from an interviewee... We had a reporter who was about to die. We all got into panic. I called one of the owners of my TV channel and shouted at him: I am not going to leave home. I am not going to be exposed to COVID because no TV channel is going to pay me for the loss of a loved one! All of us [the journalists] were very aggressive... And our bosses decided to ask for help. They said we all had to get emotional support. It turned out to be very good for all.

A similar scenario was reported by another female journalist, stating that she had individual virtual conversations on Zoom with a therapist as an initiative of the media outlets she works for. This was important because during the pandemic, journalists had to not only deal with emotions thriven by health risks but also learn to do ‘journalism stuck at home’.

However, the technologies that the journalists were forced to use to practice their profession from home also had some positive aspects and possibilities that would not have occurred otherwise. For instance, virtual technologies allowed emotional exchanges among them, which would not have been otherwise possible due to geographical distance. One journalist who had a leading role in organising some of the psychological support groups provided by NGOs highlighted that sharing grief and

sorrow with colleagues from distant regions of the country through Zoom meetings was hard, although necessary.

Technology, which was used from the personal domestic area (often showing the professionals' home in the background)—together with the shared crisis that impacted everyone personally—enabled the mixing of personal and professional lives. A journalist said,

I cried... I had to help my colleagues to understand that we are not superheroes... With this project of emotional support, we have understood that before journalists, we are human beings, fathers, mothers, wives, and husbands... We live in Venezuela where everything is intended to affect us emotionally and psychologically. So, we must abandon the myth of us being superheroes.

During the pandemic, a particular programme of psychological support through social networking sites was created, organised and promoted by two journalists and a psychologist funded by an international NGO. The initial design of the programme had to be refined in successive opportunities until it achieved an appropriate format for Venezuelan peculiarities (e.g. electricity shortages and lack of internet access). It mainly comprised the so-called 'chat forums'.

The chat forums were free-of-charge interactive thematic meetings on psychological issues (i.e. stress, anxiety, panic attacks, mourning and sleep problems) over WhatsApp, reuniting several journalists from all over Venezuela. Each time, the chat forum had a specific topic following the same structure: introduction of a promotional flier few days before the activity; 4–5 voice messages sent by psychologists on the morning of the event, describing an emotional disorder, its symptoms and causes with practical recommendations, like exercise or reading, to deal with such disorders and meeting with the psychologist and organisers in the evening for comments and questions made either publicly or privately. Due to the internet and phone access problems faced by some Venezuelan regions, the organisers also encouraged the use of email for delivering their messages. The live sessions were recorded and distributed for on-demand consumption. Moreover, after the first chat forum, the team started to create and distribute podcasts on diverse topics. These activities were complemented with three–five free-of-charge individual consultations with the psychologist upon request.

According to the organisers, in the first meeting in February 2020, 44 journalists participated, all of whom were victims of attacks: 'either detained, harassed, insulted or physically assaulted'. In terms of figures, during 2020, the team produced 10 podcasts and 50 infographics, mostly about anxiety and sleep problems. Their regular live chat forums reunited between 40 and 130 journalists simultaneously. In addition, 396 journalists received individual psychological consultations because, from day one, the journalists requested individual appointments.

Figures from 2021 were similar, according to the organisers, the most solicited topic in 2021 was mourning, 250 journalists received three–five free individual consultations and 80 journalists requested extended psychological treatment. Moreover, the team organised seven talks on diverse topics over Zoom.

At the beginning of 2022, with the remission of the pandemic, the team started to organise face-to-face activities, such as picnics and laugh yoga. The team currently offers activities on other topics related to journalism practice—‘We are now working on the addiction to telephones. This is a serious problem within journalism’, stated one of the organisers.

The journalists appreciated these activities very much, as our source continued,

They opened up, they cried, they expressed themselves, they gave their opinions and they requested individual consultations... It was impressive! The psychologist asked who had had sleep problems and everyone raised their hand. In their emails requesting appointments, they said they could not sleep, they could not focus, they were sad and anxious... They requested a workshop on mourning.

The mental health taboo: A challenge for (male) journalists

Venezuelan journalists face two difficult circumstances, according to a psychologist who has worked extensively with them: ‘They are accustomed to living with discomfort and they are reluctant to ask for psychological help because they fear issues of confidentiality. Indeed, they do not want their colleagues to know they are seeing a therapist. They do not want anyone to know they need psychological aid’. That would be a sign of weakness.

For these reasons, professionals providing mental health services to journalists must use euphemisms to talk with them about their work (i.e. wellbeing and emotional strength) while avoiding referring to the term mental health. In fact, only a few infamous Venezuelan journalists have publicly spoken about suffering any kind of emotional problem during their professional lives. According to the previous therapist, the topic is also ignored as a central theme or reportage or news even though ‘talking about anxiety in a news piece does not imply that the journalist is getting crazy’.

According to the organisers, 95% of the participants of the described chat forums were women: ‘Men, no. They have a big ego. Our activities are mostly addressed to women who have suffered an emotional breakdown and say, I am broken. I can’t stand this situation. I am scared. I am anguished’. Nevertheless, some men have started participating progressively in the activities, which the organisers consider a success because ‘at the beginning of the pandemic, there were none’.

However, there are some work environments in which seeking psychological aid is not a taboo. A female journalist stated that all her colleagues not only see a therapist but they also speak about it openly, due to the openness of their superiors: ‘My bosses are very understanding of mental health. In fact, almost all of us are under therapy. At my job, it is a topic we openly talk about, which is a rarity in Venezuela’.

Conclusion

This study focuses on the psychological help that journalists need for dealing with the emotions driven by working and living at continual risk, through the extreme case of Venezuelan journalists. Research on the mental health of journalists is important as, according to Thomson (2021), workplace emotions have been a historically marginalised topic. The negation of emotions can impact journalists’ mental health, and

conversations on emotions may result in better support systems, solidarity and empathy—all of which impact the quality of journalism.

The studied journalists stated that working in a continual risk is emotionally demanding not only due to inherent risks derived from the context situation but also because the stories they cover may be emotionally draining. Moreover, all of this may affect their personal and family lives. Most of the participating journalists had received psychological aid during their careers or sought emotional help through other means, such as religion. Consequently, emotion management training must be included in journalism education because emotions form an integral part of the profession, and peer support, which has been found to be a crucial factor in previous studies (García Santamaría and Salojärvi 2020; Hughes et al. 2021), is not always enough. Unfortunately, not all journalists have equal access to therapy due to financial constraints, taboos or geographical location, even though recent increases in the use of online technology have democratised access geographically.

Based on the studied case, we recommend that 1) schools, unions, NGOs and media outlets should provide emotional training and aid to journalists; 2) media, including news pieces and reportages, should hold public debates on mental problems; 3) journalists' wellbeing and healthy lifestyle (e.g. fair salaries, workload and labour conditions) should be integrally promoted and 4) psychological aid should be planned in an environment at continual risk, taking into account contextual variables, such as infrastructural constraints. Thus, practical solutions to providing aid need to be tailor-made for the specific setting. However, all journalists, despite their gender, age, experience, working contract, ethnicity or religion, should be emotionally trained.

Moreover, institutionally organised aid, preferably by employers and NGOs—not only after disasters or during a pandemic—should guarantee continuity, planning and resources. The existence of free-of-charge and fairly open networks would also enable the participation of freelancers and fixers, who may be left out in media outlet-based aid. Above all, though, it is essential to guarantee the conditions for the safe and healthy exercise of journalism within any country.

Finally, as the level of emotional reactions is cultural context-dependent (Paez and Vergara 1995), further research needs to be conducted on the emotional experience of journalists in different settings (e.g. safer environments, war, conflicts and natural disasters) to assess the variables impacting the need and access of journalists to mental health services. Additionally, future studies should explore mental health before and after receiving aid and the efficiency of specific therapies.

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