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### Considering mental health and well-being in media work

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## KEYNOTES

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# Considering mental health and well-being in media work

### ABSTRACT

*All is not well in the studios, agencies, newsrooms and on the sets of the media we love so much. Reports on the mental health and well-being of media professionals suggest that they tend to score high on depression, stress and burnout, and considering suicide. Documented causes tend to be particular to the working conditions of the media industry – such as unusually high work intensity and tight deadlines, little or no work-life balance in the context of precarious careers, experiences of toxic working environments and an over-identification of the self with work. The industry furthermore lacks resources and corresponding capabilities to recognize when and how its people are in distress, and offers little in the way of opportunities to discuss or otherwise meaningfully address mental health and well-being at work. This contribution explores ways we can map, explain and tackle the mental health crisis in media work through interventions in research, theory, teaching and practice.*

### KEYWORDS

media work  
production studies  
media industries  
mental health  
well-being  
journalism education

In recent years, across various media professions around the world, a series of reports, industry-wide surveys and studies commissioned by unions and other organized networks documented what some call a mental health crisis among media practitioners. Australian examples include a series of ‘Mentally

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1. See: <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2022/06/14/journalists-sense-turmoil-in-their-industry-amid-continued-passion-for-their-work/> (accessed 12 May 2023).

Healthy' reports by Never Not Creative, UnLtd and Everymind (surveying more than 1300 employees across various media industries), the Australian Actors' Wellbeing Study (AWS) and Australian media professionals participating in cross-national surveys such as by the World Federation of Advertisers (in the context of its Global Diversity Equity and Inclusion Census), the annual Developer Satisfaction Surveys by the International Game Developers Association and the International Center for Journalists (as part of its monitoring the consequences of the pandemic).

The majority of workers in the media – in digital games, advertising, marketing communications and public relations, film and television, music, social media and journalism – report experiencing mental health problems, struggling with feelings of fatigue, isolation and depression related to the job, experiencing irregular and inadequate sleep. Media professionals subsequently tend to engage in a variety of unhealthy lifestyle practices such as lack of regular physical activity, poor nutrition and overeating, and smoking and alcohol abuse. Despite all of this, most of these industry studies note that professionals still claim to be satisfied on the job. As one recent research headline notes: 'Journalists sense turmoil in their industry amid continued passion for their work' (from a 2022 survey among nearly 12,000 US-based working journalists by the US Pew Research Center).<sup>1</sup>

While the numbers differ somewhat in different industries, in different parts of the world and the way all of this impacts the working lives of individuals in specific contexts; a global picture emerges of an industry where its professionals are clearly suffering yet also seemingly happy at work. It is exactly this paradox or *creative tension* between vision and reality (Senge 1990) that goes to the heart of any debate and assessment of mental health and well-being in media work.

Working in the media is notably distinct across the various disciplines and professions, and is more likely to be experienced differently for professionals working at specific companies or in particular labour arrangements rather than any differences of the work experience can be explained by between-country or industry differences (Deuze 2007; for journalism, see Mellado 2021). When considered in terms of work-related psycho-social risk factors (van der Molen et al. 2020), working in the media has remarkably consistent key elements that can be considered to be potentially hazardous to people's physical and mental health across the broad-spectrum of professional media production practices:

- professionals generally work in informal circumstances, generally unregulated and without clear policies, protocols and standards (e.g. regarding bodily and social safety);
- an ever-transforming technological context of the work expects workers to constantly learn and adapt to new requirements, skills and procedures;
- the work tends to be (physically, cognitively, emotionally) involving and demanding, for example, leading to long working hours, having to manage often intense emotions (of colleagues, clients, as well as consumers), and having to be 'always on' to keep going and make it work;
- jobs are few and far between, often without formal benefits such as sick pay, medical or legal protections, and scheduled time off, and are increasingly governed by conditions of 'atypical' or non-standard employment (including fixed-term, project- or task-based contracts, casual, part-time and on-call work, temporary agency and subcontracted labour, and myriad

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forms of disguised employment or dependent self-employment; see Deuze et al. 2020);

- the job market tends to be quite competitive, high strung and conflictful, involving a lot of unpaid and speculative labour (Fast et al. 2016); and
- the culture at work can be characterized by constant looming deadlines, unusually intense schedules and pressured productivity, all of which are further illustrated by numerous industry-wide reports of ‘toxic’ work cultures (often on the level of specific teams or certain departments) where favouritism, bullying and work overload are prevalent (some recent high-profile examples include Weta Digital in New Zealand, the Ellen DeGeneres TV show in the US, Canadian newspaper *The Toronto Star*, and game company Activision Blizzard facing numerous lawsuits, formal workplace reviews and dealing with worker suicides).

All more or less hazardous issues related to the physical and mental health of media professionals tend to be disproportionately experienced by women, people of colour, workers with disabilities and those working in non-standard employment settings. Any particular appreciation of media health and well-being must therefore be mindful of intersectionality and individual situation. In other words, I advocate a *generalized* appreciation of mental health and well-being across all media work, as well as a *particular* awareness of people’s circumstances – all in the context of work that is as meaningful, fun and fulfilling as it can be frustrating, debilitating and sickening.

## SO WHAT?

One crucial reason we should all care very much about the reported issues affecting people’s mental health and well-being at work in the media is, that the people we rely on for our news, information and entertainment are suffering. As much of this distress is clearly work-related, this should prompt us to consider carefully the nature of media production and work.

From a personal perspective, I must state that I feel passionately about this issue, having studied and interviewed media workers for 25 years, being a musician, and having been a working journalist for six years (between 1989 and 1995). One of the reasons I love researching media work is the energy, enthusiasm and idealism of the practitioners involved, and I find myself struggling to corroborate that passion with the realities on the ground. Working in the media is for many a luxury only few can afford – in terms of finances, living labour precarity (Elefante and Deuze 2012) and mental health. At the same time, young people in particular are eager to step up to prospective careers in the various media industries and many (if not most) professionals I have met acknowledge how thrilled they are to be working in the media. The precarity of media work can be seen as a specific consequence of the rise of non-standard employment, and as an ontological condition of insecurity and interdependency that affects not only the world of work but pervades all other aspects of life (Gill and Pratt 2008). This dual meaning of precarity draws people into the industry, who are attracted to the promise of exciting, dynamic and unpredictable careers, as it to some extent explains how these industries structurally exclude and lose a variety of voices.

Given the fact that the classrooms, departments and schools offering coursework on various aspects of media production tend to be overflowing worldwide, another reason we should be concerned about the mental health

and well-being of media professionals is our ethical duty of care – not just for what we study and teach, but also for the newcomers we are sending into the industry. We are, as scholars and educators, preparing ‘fresh meat for the grinder’ (quoting from a scene from the 1997 satirical film *Starship Troopers*), as much as we tend to be dedicated to support autonomous practitioners that are equipped, both professionally and emotionally, to sustain a career, hold their ground, and possibly be able to resist and oppose problematic practices throughout the media industry.

Furthermore, when journalists, actors, game developers, programmers, vloggers, musicians, production crews, creatives, etcetera are unhappy and suffer from work-related mental disorders, it follows that this would impact the quality and health of our democracies and societies. An important nuance to all of this: mental health and well-being are not the same. Whereas a mental health problem is quite specific and involves affect, frustration and anxiety as much as physiological indicators such as blood pressure, heart condition and general physical health, well-being is an all-encompassing concept including non-work elements, life satisfaction, the feeling that what you do is worthwhile, happiness and (social) safety. Furthermore, the absence of mental illness symptoms is not enough to achieve good mental health and well-being; positive mental health is not the opposite of mental illness (these are independent but related constructs; see Agterén and Iasiello 2020). For example, someone can have a diagnosed mental health problem, yet still enjoy a healthy sense of well-being. However, a low sense of well-being tends to be a precursor to the development of stress and ill-effects. Importantly, health and well-being can refer both to physical health and to mental health, and psychological and emotional aspects of workers (Danna and Griffin 1999), which nuance calls for an embodied perspective on well-being.

In short, in this argument I operate from the assumption that a focus on happiness and well-being in media work adds a critical subtlety to both theories of media industries and production, and to the way we educate future media professionals. Secondly, taking mental health and well-being seriously offers an action-oriented or actionable component to research and teaching: beyond describing and explaining issues such as labour precarity, problematic work cultures, and operating in unusually high-pressured working environments, a perspective on mental health and well-being offers ways of both critiquing and possibly dealing with these structural features of what it is like and what it feels like to work in the media.

## **MAPPING THE MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS IN MEDIA WORK**

Before moving on to suggesting some potential ways to tackle the current mental health crisis, it is fruitful to take a moment and try to understand why mental health and well-being in general, and work-related problems or disorders specifically, have become such current issues in the various media industries.

Following Stephen Reese and Pamela Shoemaker’s (2016) multi-level modelling of influences on the factors that shape how media get made, it is possible to parse out different yet interlocking explanations for the mental health crisis in media work. The arguments presented here are somewhat speculative, and on the whole based on research on and among media professionals since the 2000s, as documented in reviews of media production scholarship (Deuze 2007, 2011; Perren and Holt 2009; Banks et al. 2013; Curtin and

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Sanson 2016; Maxwell 2017; Hesmondhalgh 2018; Deuze and Prenger 2019). This in turn suggests that one of the explanations for the kind of attention currently paid to the health and well-being of media makers is the emergence and rapid growth of production studies as an academic discipline (for reviews, see Caldwell et al. 2009; Paterson et al. 2016).

A first assessment on the causes of mental health issues resides on a systemic level, which in media work relates to the occupational ideology and professional ethos that media practitioners tend to ascribe to. A striking feature in interviews and conversations with these workers is how they internalize the implicit norms and expectations of their work while often being quite critical or even outright cynical about the industry. Journalists, for example, consistently proclaim their passion for journalism and consider it a noble profession, yet do not hesitate to blast the news industry as chaotic, dysfunctional, exploitative and mismanaged. Similarly, professionals in other fields – such as advertising, music, digital games, film and television, including in social media (Duffy 2017) – tend to embody this tension between loving being part of these industries at the same time as considering the companies and corporations involved as less-than-stellar. This implicates a fundamental tension and incongruence in one's sense of professional identity.

On the social institutional level of influences on media work, it is important to acknowledge the interaction between increasing deregulation of policies regarding media industries since the 1990s (with the exception of autocratic regimes such as in China, Brazil, Russia and elsewhere), and the decline of the traditional media business models of subscriptions, sales and advertising coinciding the rise of a digital economy determined by platformization (Poell et al. 2021). The overall industry response to these institutional developments has been one of accelerating casualization and flexibilization of working arrangements, and repeated rounds of managerial restructuring. A global rise of non-standard employment is observable across all economic sectors, yet is paramount across the media industries (Charhon and Murphy 2016). The gradual replacement of full-time employment by contingent and flexible work plays a part in people having to piece together their biographies as individuals in constant states of transition and self-reinvention, often without any kind of social safety net to support them. Unsurprisingly, research suggests that freelancers, gig workers, and other independently operating professionals within the media have an elevated risk of poor subjective health and experiencing psychologically harmful effects directly related to the non-standard nature of their work (Ertel et al. 2005; Ekdale et al. 2015; Gross et al. 2018).

On the organizational level, work in the media is circumscribed by a highly dynamic and disruptive context of rapid digitalization (and, to some extent, automation) of all aspects of the production process with correspondent pressures to reskill, deskill and upskill, reshuffling of responsibilities at work, and the rise of new roles and occupations (often related to data analysis, content and community management). Some of this can be seen as caused by the burst of the dot-com bubble between 2000 and 2002 as well as the global financial crisis of 2007–08, which led to massive job losses and budget cuts. At the same time, media companies are generally not known for effectively managing innovation or maintaining a healthy, somewhat predictable revenue stream (Caves 2000; Knee et al. 2009), the consequences of which tend to be shouldered by the workers within these industries (Deuze and Fortunati 2010). Given the fact that autonomy is the primary value media professionals ascribe to their identity – in journalism as much as other media disciplines

(Holt and Lapenta 2010) – such decline of labour power inevitably contributes to feelings of powerlessness and loss of control.

On the next level, Reese and Shoemaker (2016) consider everyday routines, formulas and procedures that structure much of the work in the media. Such patterned practices organize how practitioners function and make sense of the professional community they are part of. A profound paradox particular to work in the media industries is the coexistence of artisanal and small-scale production methods next to producing content on an industrial scale (Miège 2019). Much of the work in the media depends on craft, talent and creativity – often using complex technologies such as digital cameras, content management systems, recording equipment and editing software. Projects tend to be run by teams consisting of people with a variety of skills, backgrounds and professional roles, requiring careful calibration to make things run smoothly. These are all the benchmarks of artisan-like processes, relying on skilled workers dedicated to quality of both the work and the working experience. At the same time, the media industries rely on mass reproducibility of its goods and services, churning out content to accommodate an ever-growing array of channels and platforms. Such an industrial configuration of media work is paramount in generally patterned and routinized production processes and practices, in the development of and strict adherence to genres, formats and conventions, a bureaucratic rationalization of management (e.g. by outsourcing and subcontracting significant parts of the process to external professionals or firms), and of sticking to well-worn patterns of mass distribution and promotion.

The tension between craft and creativity on the one hand, and factory-like formalization of production on the other makes it possible for media professionals to deny (or remain wilfully naïve to) the fact that their work is part of a vast, globally networked industry, as much as it enables the media as an industry to privilege intuition, craftsmanship and artfulness as a primary frame of reference, despite the often highly formulaic and repetitive nature of the industrial production process. This tenuous relationship between creativity and routine challenges and complicates notions of doing meaningful work that would contribute to self-realization (Lampel et al. 2000: 265–66; Martela and Pessi 2018).

Finally, it is also possible to find explanations for the increased significance of mental health and well-being in contemporary discussions within and about media industries on an individual level of analysis. What is crucial about media work is that the professionals in these fields (are expected to) bring their ‘whole selves’ to the job. This means that all aspects of who they are – their socio-economic background, gender, ethnicity and ability, personality and character, tastes and preferences, skills, feelings and emotions – are considered commodifiable assets of their professional identity. Furthermore, the promise of creativity and self-realization that leads people to consider a media career in the first-place leads many in these industries to overinvest, losing sight of personal boundaries and other priorities. In media work, just like all other creative professions, this results in people going all-in when it comes to their projects, assignments and jobs. Such intense personal and emotional commitment amounts to a profound paradox related to workers’ rights: that what makes the work most alluring – its intensity, the empowering experience of being self-expressive and creative, of building meaningful relationships with colleagues, peers, fans and audiences – also sets many of its workers up to fail. The permanent pressure to make it work (both



commercially and financially, as well as in terms of managing one's reputation and professional identity), to meet recurring deadlines, to deal with one's emotions and those of all stakeholders in the media production cycle, and always having to perform can be genuine liabilities to anyone's mental and physical health and well-being.

2. See <https://europeanjournalists.org/blog/2022/07/08/how-to-support-journalists-well-being-five-recommendations/> (accessed 5 May 2023). Disclaimer: I was part of this working group and meeting.

## NOW WHAT?

Considering the available reports on the mental health and well-being of media professionals and the broader institutional context within which media work takes place it seems we are faced with a paradox: what makes media work special is also what can make people sick. It is clear that simple, straightforward policies and procedures would not be very successful in addressing the mental health crisis throughout the media industries. This is poignantly put forward in David Hesmondhalgh and Sarah Baker's 2011 review of work in the magazine sector, music recording and broadcasting, especially in their extensive discussion of what entails 'good work' in media industries. Hesmondhalgh and Baker point towards a consistent tension between what counts as 'good' or 'bad' work, showing that what makes people happy at work is neither unambiguous nor particular to a specific set of circumstances. For some, *hedonic* elements such as involvement, sociality and fun are most important to be happy at work, whereas others consider *eudaemonic* aspects of the work key – such as doing meaningful work that is adequately compensated, ensures creative autonomy and provides some measure of job security.

What remains is the question of what we (as scholars, educators, current or future media professionals) can do? There is something to be said for adopting a holistic concept and approach that would include idiographic subjective well-being (i.e. each individual's happiness) next to generalizable indicators of 'good' work such as theorized by Hesmondhalgh and Baker. Many of the earlier mentioned industry reports make excellent recommendations for companies to introduce formal protocols for addressing problematic work cultures and handling health issues, raising awareness of health and well-being at work and calling for further professionalization when it comes to these issues. Specifically in journalism, there is a rich field of scholarship and practice around mental health, trauma and well-being that offers resources in engaging these issues in the newsroom. Of particular relevance here I would like to mention the 'Recommendations for supporting journalists' well-being' drawn up by a UK-based working group on journalists' well-being in the spring of 2022, featuring representatives of the BBC, British National Union of Journalists, Centre for Media Monitoring, European Federation of Journalists, Headlines Network, Reach, Rory Peck Trust, Society of Freelance Journalists and UNESCO, as well as scholarly researchers.<sup>2</sup> These recommendations, applicable to any kind of media organization, as documented by Maja Šimunjak of Middlesex University London (see also Šimunjak and Menke 2022) are:

- acknowledge the well-being issue and contribute to the culture change;
- educate and train in emotional and mental health literacy;
- create and deliver fair and transparent support systems within news organizations;
- ensure well-being practices and systems are accessible and sustainable;
- build and join coalitions to support evidence-informed solutions.



Another important initiative I would like to mention is the Journalism Education and Trauma Research Group (JETREG), originally formed by about sixty journalism educators around the world, meeting regularly online and organizing symposia, workshops and seminars, and contributing to publications. One such publication is a forthcoming book on ‘Happiness in Journalism’, which I have the privilege of co-editing with Valérie Bélaïr-Gagnon, Avery Holton and Claudia Mellado (to be published with Routledge in late 2023), where we focus on how journalism can respond to institutional issues like work-related trauma, gaps between ideals and professional practices, and precarity. Specifically, we consider how journalists can be successful and happy on the job. We have asked colleagues from around the world to contribute their reflections on (and experiences with) the concept of happiness in journalism, inviting them to specifically share methods and best practices for classrooms as well as newsrooms.

Beyond these examples, I would like to conclude this article with three scholarly interventions in the field that sustain my engagement and enthusiasm regarding tackling the issue of mental health and well-being in media work: the promotion and development of *mental health literacy* (Jorm 2015) specific to media work; to highlight and pursue research and teaching in media (and related fields) that is grounded in the principles of *creative justice* (Banks 2017), and to educate or otherwise encourage (prospective) media workers to develop different *mental models* (Behrens et al. 2018; Koban et al. 2021) of what it means – or could mean – to work in the media.

First, one could argue that what media work seems to be missing is a certain degree of *mental health literacy*, broadly defined as knowledge and beliefs about mental disorders which aid their recognition, management or prevention. Considered in more detail by Anthony Jorm (2012: 231) (who originally coined the concept), mental health literacy consists of (1) knowledge of how to prevent mental disorders, (2) recognition of when a disorder is developing, (3) knowledge of help-seeking options and treatments (insofar such options are available), (4) knowledge of effective self-help strategies, (5) first-aid skills to support others affected by mental health problems. Throughout the literature and industry reports it seems that media organizations tend to take little or no responsibility for the mental health of their employees – let alone for the growing army of freelancers and otherwise atypically employed professionals that make up the bulk of the workforce. Furthermore, the culture of the business – with its roots in a ‘tough-nosed’ style of management, relentless focus on deadlines, an overall lack of diversity, equity and inclusivity, coupled with a normalization of stressful working conditions – is not particularly conducive to the development (and implementation) of mental health literacy (Buchanan and Keats 2011; Hopper and Huxford 2015). One could add to this kind of literacy particular to media work the development of a nuanced notion of mental health and well-being as outlined earlier, including the critical awareness that the very elements that can contribute to mental illness – a pressured, dynamic, informally organized and overall intense working environment – also explain the attractiveness of the work.

Second, Mark Banks (2017) advocates how we should pursue *creative justice* in all our work – and promotes corresponding practices throughout the media industries. This would mean respecting all the internal benefits, capacities and pleasures media work provides, without discounting the external structures and pressures (such as exploitation, alienation, low pay, stress) that can make media work deeply unfair and unjust. This additionally includes advancing social arrangements that allow for the maximum range of people to enter and participate in the work, in which they will be fairly treated and

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justly paid and rewarded for their efforts. As scholars and educators, we have a role to play in highlighting and reducing the physical and psychological harms and injuries inflicted by media work, making sure that practitioners are treated fairly and justly as dignified and deserving human beings. These principles do not just relate to the practices of media firms and professionals, but also to how we organize coursework, conduct ourselves in the classroom and how we do the research with (and about) those who make media professionally.

A third and final recommendation I would like to make is to specifically consider the complex ways in which media workers think about, conceptualize and act upon the precarious context of their work. Terry Flew (2020) draws significant attention to the *mental models* that individuals create of their institutional contexts. Flew emphasizes how professionals imagine and understand the various institutions (and their processes and procedures), and how this shapes how they act and how they perceive their own actions, which in turn produces particular institutional environments. Mental models are personal heuristic tools based on assumptions about the field of media work, which influence a wide range of workplace and career navigation tactics and strategies, providing flexibility to both analyse and participate in the inherently unstable nature of media work. In this context Behrens et al. (2018) documents the significant role people's cognitive maps play in organizing the relationships and entities in their world, while Koban et al. (2021) highlights how people's models or cognitive maps of their 'self-in-context' have real implications for their current and future well-being. Finding out what mental model someone has of their work – for example, what 'being a journalist' means – provides important clues to how such a person would choose to conduct themselves as a reporter, which in turn opens possibilities to introduce and work with other mental models. In earlier research, we for example distinguished between a 'traditional' mental model of media work, that would see professionals competing with each other for a chance to pitch and sell their work to the most prestigious or reputable media companies and platforms, instead of a 'contemporary' mental model which sees the media professional as a more or less autonomous producer of content that can be marketed, published, promoted and sold across a variety of outlets – including, but most definitely not limited to traditional or legacy media (Van't Hof and Deuze 2022).

Of course, simply introducing mental health literacy, creative justice and different mental models does not solve the problem – some would argue the problem is capitalism, or to be more specific: the culture of contemporary capitalism as articulated by Sennett (2006), where success seems to be premised on one's ability to accept fragmentation and permanent change, which in turn prohibits the kind of anticipation and hope that one needs in order to rebel against intolerable working conditions (Bourdieu 1998). However, I would argue that armed with adequate literacy about mental health, pursuing work benchmarked with the principles of creative justice, and cultivating emancipatory mental models about one's professional identity tactically empowers media workers to both envision and enact different futures.

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