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FOSTERING A CULTURE OF WELL-BEING IN JOURNALISM

Valérie Bélair-Gagnon, Avery E. Holton, Mark Deuze and Claudia Mellado

Globally, journalists face stressors related to their work, including demanding circumstances and a lack of reciprocity on the job. They often give much and receive little in return while public trust, and institutional support, continues to erode. Journalists, especially women, people of color, or practitioners with minority backgrounds experience harassment, bullying, emotional exhaustion, and trauma at work. Outside of the newsroom, journalists are vulnerable to trauma because of the tendency of the news to focus on what goes wrong in society and in people's lives. This has a major impact on the mental health and happiness of reporters and editors, as documented in numerous surveys and research projects. Though not new, problematic aspects of what working in the media is like have been linked to demands for journalists to engage on social media, document and remedy increased political polarization while suffering attempts to vilify the press, the rapid rise of atypical work, and the pressures associated with the pandemic.

The circumstances of work in journalism have implications for individual journalists and for news organizations' bottom lines as they seek to recruit and retain talent and bolster their reporting. Journalists have referred to the impact that all of this has on their professional performance, ranging from self-censorship and burnout from a 24/7 news cycle, addressing toxic workplace cultures, to enduring harassment from news audiences. Researchers, educators, professional associations, and news organizations have come to recognize the occupational hazards involved with journalism and have begun to invest in resources and programs designed to improve journalists' quality of life. Our book documents this global trend while attempting to benchmark an effort for news organizations, researchers, and educators, asking what sustained steps can be taken to help make journalism the profession it is expected to be.

Defining Happiness for Well-Being in Journalism

One of the main findings of researchers outside of the media and journalism studies literature who work on happiness is that we, as individuals, can rewire our brains to experience and understand well-being. Such a rethink is contingent upon who you are, where you are, and what kind of context you work in. Happiness (or subjective well-being) tends to fall into two related categories: enjoying what you do and finding what you do is meaningful. Such an all-too-easy distinction can vary across cultures and contexts. And there is not much evidence to suggest that, once happy, people will be better at their job. What we do know is that the absence or understanding of happiness at work may lead to work-related stress disorders and burnout, among other issues. What is key is that one's experience and state of happiness to a large extent get determined by one's perceptions and belief.

What makes people happy is not always about what they think will happen, especially in capitalistic societies. Rather, individual happiness can be conceived around kindness, mindfulness, belonging, community, savoring, and gratitude, among other things.¹ Such principles tend to manifest in professional and organizational settings primarily as individual-level constructs such as job satisfaction, commitment, and engagement. Issues regarding engaging in work that contributes to the common good, that fosters a sense of belonging, and an overall more holistic appreciation of happiness at work tends to be largely absent from the literature and the management and culture of news organizations.

As in other types of media work and work in creative occupations, journalism is a form of affective labor, blurring the boundaries between personal and professional lines. Practitioners invest in the stories they tell, the people whose lives they cover, the beat they report on, and the communities they engage with. Changes in practices related to digital and social media make the work of journalists almost 24/7, stretching their lives thin across a range of channels and platforms. Journalists report using strategies to disconnect from their work such as blocking comments from social media, which may afford them (the illusion of) greater autonomy and the freedom to just do their work. Reporters covering traumatic events quite often turn to cynicism to handle all the complex negative emotions that they experience. Precariousness and job uncertainty cause significant stress, emotional exhaustion, and turn many promising voices away from the profession. In some parts of the world, journalists have no choice but to be compliant spokespersons or become activists, especially under repressive political regimes or within larger commercial enterprises.

The COVID-19 pandemic of the early 2020s amplified across the news industry and beyond the idea that the mental health, well-being, and happiness of journalists need care and attention if the profession is to continue in a complex world that genuinely needs them. There is now a larger, global platform for journalists, educators, civil society, journalists' allies, and researchers to think

about what they can do better. Building on this wealth of practitioners' experiences and research, this book focuses on happiness as a concept, and what it takes to be a happy journalist as an individual and as part of a collective. In this book, we explore multiple approaches to well-being,² including an approach to happiness at work, consisting of both hedonic experiences (HWB)—of liking what you do, job satisfaction, being passionate about the work, and so on—as well as eudaimonic aspects (EWB), including personal growth, professional autonomy, and doing work that contributes to the common good.³ We also consider that happiness or well-being is not only an individual problem but a collective one that should be tackled by the industry, governments, and research. Like climate change, individual approaches can yield limited results. As such, our call is broader and requires a systemic intervention.⁴

For a while, there have been emergency alert signals pointing to journalistic unhappiness in the profession's history. Historians noted that journalists have been expected to embrace gender normative ideals discouraging women to pursue the profession, at times leaving them to write in the society pages. Being a journalist was conceptualized as having a "thick skin" or being aggressive. As the population of journalists (slowly still) started to become more diverse, these analyses compounded the experiences of people of color in the profession, as well as reporters with disability. Intersectionality has long played an important role in understanding the lived experience of journalists. Gendered, sexualized, ableist, and racialized notions of journalism often determine today's workplace cultures in journalism. From a communal perspective, critical issues in journalism cultures around the world include fierce competition, favoritism (and other behaviors indicating a lack of organizational justice), a style of management that discourages speaking out or asking for help, a disconnect with the communities one is supposed to serve, and a worrying lack of public trust underpinning newswork.

Unhappiness in journalism takes multiple shapes and the way the news industry has addressed it over time has evolved. While news media are slowly beginning to take their professionals more seriously, journalists are suffering. There is an urgency to address the challenges facing the news industry in terms of journalists' happiness. With declines in happiness have come deep impacts on the personal lives of journalists, the quality and sustainability of newsrooms and reporting, and the sense of autonomy and agency journalists have long championed. How exactly journalists can bridge the gaps between their professional ideals, news practices, and personal lives—especially within social media spaces—to at once serve the public good as well as the personal, remains an important question.⁵

Civil society and various professional associations like the International Center for Journalists, the Dart Center, Trollbusters, the Media and Entertainment Alliance, and others have been central in helping journalists and providing resources. These have pointed to a major issue that inspires and informs this book: as an industry, and as professionals, organizations, scholars, educators,

students, and news audiences, we need to think and act with care regarding journalists' well-being if we want the profession and journalism itself to flourish.

Well-Being in Journalism

Addressing the happiness of journalists is a complex situation without a one-size-fits-all solution. However, there is much that can be done. Change is necessary. There are variations at the individual level and across different working arrangements in journalism, within and between countries and cultures, types of news organizations, and ways of being a journalist. Research has shown that the challenges that journalists experience—how they rate and perceive their autonomy, what precarity means to them—vary substantially across the world.⁶ Discussions about better working conditions and happiness may be more prevalent in places where journalists have time to self-reflect on practices and engage in such discussion as opposed to places where journalism needs to be highly focused on keeping populist governments accountable.

The call to take happiness and well-being seriously is urgent. As part of this urgency, the theoretical and methodological approaches used to explore the professional and personal well-being of journalists need to change. These have been mainly focused on how journalists and organizations need to adapt to changing societies, technologies, and the power of platforms, so much so that they have risked the alienation of very real human beings behind the cameras, microphones, keyboards, and touchscreens. This book acknowledges such well-documented challenges to the profession and asks how journalism can be better as both a community of practice, a public service, and a business. How can we be successful and flourish at the same time? What price are we willing to pay for good work and excellent journalism?

That shift in mindset and approach involves exploring what happiness is, how happiness manifests in journalism and the media industry, and what future we imagine that would be better for the profession that we practice, teach, research, and experience. This book is ambitious and hopes to amplify voices that speak to such topics as trauma, harassment, precarity, mental health, and well-being.

Our Approach to Building Resilient Journalism

By understanding the many roadblocks that journalists face, we need to consider carefully what happiness is and how the subjective well-being of professionals may contribute to stronger, more sustainable journalism. We must engage in and amplify conversations about and undertake concrete actions that consider the different challenges of today's journalism across the globe—if only to acknowledge that journalists everywhere are, or can be, struggling.

We thus invited international scholars to discuss happiness in journalism from their unique perspectives and positionalities. The chapters in this book

offer a collection of stories, best practices, and advice for journalists, media professionals and organizations, as much as for journalism students, educators, and scholars alike. We hope that this will contribute to the emerging worldwide dialogue on mental health, and subjective well-being at work, providing agency, and spark new and much needed actions to support journalists. The topics addressed include:

- Norms, values, and ethics
- Organizational best practices
- Social media policy best practices
- Approaches in unionized organizations
- Approaches to recruitment and retention
- Approaches to emotional literacy, intelligence, resilience, and self-efficacy
- Approaches to digital security and safety
- Psychological approaches to well-being
- Practical tips for journalism schools and the news industry
- Different concepts of happiness at work
- Challenges related to diversity, equity, and inclusion
- And much more.

This book is for journalists and their audiences, educators, undergraduate and graduate students, and practitioners interested in learning about practices and strategies related to well-being and mental health in the news industry. Chapters are designed to be short and propose concrete solutions on how to bring happiness to journalism. While we do focus on journalism, this book is meant to spark conversations on happiness and well-being across all media professions and inspire and map out a better future for work and labor.

Organization of the Book

All chapters point to concrete solutions for journalists and media professionals, news, and professional organizations for fostering a culture of well-being in journalism. These chapters are meant to empower news and media professionals and the industry leaders to take steps to change culture globally and in unique contexts. While it addresses questions of intersectionality in gender, race, ethnicity, and sexuality, it doesn't address the role that religion has in some cultures. This book is divided into four main parts addressing these challenges.

Part 1 of the book, "Journalists, Joy & the Pursuit of Happiness," focuses on well-being from psychological and, relatedly, individual perspectives. In Chapter 2, "Journalists Considering an Exit," Jana Rick explores job precarity and journalists who seek to leave the profession. In Chapter 3, "The Joy in Journalism," Richard Stupart connects emotional well-being to journalism's moral dimensions by asking, "what moral communities exist within the profession and who we ought to hold responsible for whether or not journalists

can live up to the obligations that those communities impose on their members.” In Chapter 4, “Finding Joy as Journalists: Motivations for Newswork,” Gregory P. Perrault unpacks why journalists stay in the field despite difficult working conditions.

In Chapter 5, “What Psychology Can Offer in Understanding Journalists’ Well-Being,” Jennifer M. Ragsdale and Elana Newman introduce key ideas and present recommendations for future research to leverage the knowledge of well-being from psychology and occupational health. In Chapter 6’s “Building Resilience Through Trauma Literacy in J-Schools,” Lada Trifonova Price and Ola Ogunyemi analyze the role of journalism schools and journalism educators in addressing the lack of trauma literacy teaching.

Part 2 of the book, “In Support of Well-Being in Journalism,” addresses ways in which organizations can help build more resilience—that is the ability to withstand shocks, survive and adapt when situations arise—in response to contexts and preemptively. Chapter 7, “Recruitment and Retention Practices in a Changing African News Media Ecosystem,” by Hayes Mawindi Mabwezara and Trust Matsilele, explores the transformations in African journalism and how those changes have been reshaping recruitment and retention practices, from informal recruitment procedures to the “juniorization” of news organizations affecting journalism’s well-being. In Chapter 8, “Developing Psychological Capital to Support Journalists’ Well-Being,” Maja Šimunjak outlines industry-specific interventions that could be useful in the development of personal resources for safeguarding well-being amongst its journalists, including hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism. In Chapter 9, “How Newsroom Social Media Policies Can Improve Journalists’ Well-Being,” Logan Molyneux and Jacob L. Nelson provide recommendations on how news organizations can improve their social media policies.

In Chapter 10, “Supporting Digital Job Satisfaction in Online Media Unions’ Contracts,” Errol Salamon argues that improved language and dialogue around workers’ happiness would improve work conditions. Chapter 11, “Establishing Individual, Organizational and Collective Practices for Journalists’ Well-Being through Disconnection” by Diana Bossio, suggests that improving journalists’ happiness means centering methods of care in the profession, editorial strategy, newsroom resources, and the community of practice. In Chapter 12, “Championing a Security-Sensitive Mindset,” Jennifer R. Henrichsen examines journalism safety and security options for journalists and promotes the role of security champions to contribute to a “security culture” in newsrooms. Víctor Hugo Reyna in Chapter 13, “Job Control and Subjective Well-Being in News Work,” unpacks the concept of job control as a precondition of journalists’ subjective well-being and how it may be contributing to job satisfaction and work-life balance.

Part 3 of the book, “Steps & Practices Towards Happiness,” focuses on journalists themselves and what they can do to be resilient in their practices and normative constructs. In Chapter 14, “Cognitive Dissonance in

Journalistic Trauma,” Danielle Deavour proposes alternatives for unhealthy coping techniques, such as ignoring the pain and only positive thoughts. In Chapter 15, “Safer Vox Pops and Door Knocking,” Kelsey Mesmer shows how vox pop interviews and door knocking may be common reporting techniques used by journalists and at the same time harm them. In Chapter 16, “Teaching Student Journalists to Refill their Happiness Tanks,” Alexandra Wake and Erin Smith propose methods for encouraging well-being among journalism students (e.g., the importance of purpose and help seeking).

In Chapter 17, “Self-Employment in the News Industry,” Sarah Van Leuven and Hanne Vandenberghe show how the conditions of freelance journalists can be precarious. In Chapter 18, “Workplace Happiness, Journalism and COVID-19 in South Asia,” Achala Abeykoon et al. highlight the ways in which South Asian news organizations have positively supported their employees during COVID-19. Chapter 19’s “Engaged Journalism and Professional Happiness” by Lambrini Papadopoulou and Eugenia Siapera explores the notion of contentment in journalism engagement. Together, these chapters point to the importance of recognizing one’s own boundaries and journalism ethics as a central part of a culture of well-being in journalism.

In Part 4, John Crowley (Chapter 20), Hermann Wasserman (Chapter 21) and Seth C. Lewis (Chapter 22), present essays that reflect on the book chapters, highlight gaps, and propose ways forward for fostering a culture of well-being in journalism practice and education.

This book contends that acknowledging and supporting journalists’ happiness and well-being are fundamental first steps towards re-imagining journalism in terms of work and labor, if only because a happy worker in the full and richest sense of the concept is a better worker when it comes to resilience, efficacy, and one’s ability to do good work.

Notes

- 1 Laurie Santos, “The Science of Well-Being.” The first editor completed this Coursera course certificate delivered by Dr. Santos in Spring 2022.
- 2 William Tov, “Well-Being Concepts and Components.” In *Handbook of Well-Being* eds. Ed Diener, Shigehiro Oishi and Louis Tay, (Salt Lake City, UT: DEF Publishers, 2008), 30.
- 3 Cynthia Fisher, “Happiness at Work,” *International Journal of Management Reviews* 12, (2010): 384–412.
- 4 Diana Bossio, Valérie Béclair-Gagnon, Avery E. Holton and Logan Molyneux, *The Paradox of Connection: How Digital Media Is Transforming Journalistic Labor*. (Urbana Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2024).
- 5 Claudia Mellado (ed.), *Beyond Journalistic Norms*. (London: Routledge, 2021).
- 6 Kalyani Chadha and Linda Steiner, *Newswork and Precarity*. (London: Routledge, 2021).