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*Considering the Body of the Journalist*

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Article

# What Journalism Feels Like: Considering the Body of the Journalist

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**Abstract:** All journalists have bodies. This commonsensical fact acquires more currency every day as the work of reporters and editors becomes automated, robotized, and taken over by (generative) artificial intelligence. The embodied nature of news work matters, not in the least because of the personal attachment practitioners have to what journalism is, or should be. However, in the rich history of journalism studies, bodily perspectives are remarkably absent—beyond descriptions of journalists as sociodemographic profiles. In this essay, we explore various theoretical frameworks to bring the body back into the study and practice of journalism. In our argument, we apply the insights gained from this exercise to address the well-documented gap between what journalists feel their work should be—and the reality of what their work is actually like.

**Keywords:** journalists; embodiment; materialism; affect theory; role conceptions; journalism



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## 1. Introduction

All journalists have bodies—insofar as we still talk about human beings whose jobs have not been taken over by AI applications. What difference does ‘having a body’ make for a journalist, and more specifically for a scholar studying journalism? What insight do we gain with this perspective; what more does it bring to simply acknowledge the basic corporeality of news work? We explore this question through the use of practical, real-world examples, taken from recent studies that have been carried out specifically to document how journalists think and feel about their work—and the fact that the reality of news work tends not to live up to the ideals of journalism—to advance an embodied understanding of journalism.

Based on comparative research around the world, it is clear that there is a very real gap between what journalists feel their work should be—and the reality of what their work is actually like (Mellado 2021). We use this key insight as a departure point to interrogate what the chasm between ideals and practice can tell us about the reality of news work, with specific reference to a global context of precarious working conditions (Chadha and Steiner 2021) and a mental health crisis among journalists (MacDonald et al. 2023; Bélair-Gagnon et al. 2023). We ask: What can the dissonance between how journalists think and feel about their work and what they end up being able to do tell us about the embodied nature of news work? We deliberately look beyond demographic variables such as age, gender, and ethnicity (as commonly used in surveys among journalists; see Weaver and Willnat 2014), or psychological factors such as the way journalists respond to overwhelming traumatic stress (Feinstein 2006; Greenberg et al. 2009; Smith et al. 2018; Hill 2021; Williams and Cartwright 2021), which tend to dominate scholarly attempts to ‘bring the body back’ into journalism.

In this paper, we take inspiration from the ‘affective turn’ in cultural and media studies, extending it to a bodily perspective on media work in general, and journalism in particular (Siapera 2019). The way reporters and editors individually as well as collectively feel about

and make sense of what they do—and how they end up doing journalism—tends to escape capture when solely looking at what they say (in interviews, focus groups, and surveys), nor can it be explained by who they are in terms of demographics, just as much as the content of their news does not necessarily speak to what being a journalist feels like to the practitioners involved. We postulate that what is needed is an appreciation of journalism as *inter-embodied* practice “whereby the lived experience of embodiment is always already *the social experience of dwelling with other bodies*” (Ahmed 2000, p. 46; italics in original). In other words, a critical awareness of journalism appreciates how it comes into being (and subsequently makes sense to its practitioners) quite literally by bodies bumping into each other, navigating place and space together, and in doing so coming to understand their differences. Following the tenets of such intercorporeal appreciations of how people act and give meaning to their worlds, the body matters—how it moves through the world, how it recoils or leans in, how it sweats and bleeds, how it touches and gets touched (by sources, stories, and the sights, sounds, and smells of different contexts—including that of the newsroom), how it is addressed and called upon, how it is soothed (for example by cigarettes, alcohol, exercise, and diet) or gets fired up (by adrenaline and caffeine). Furthermore, an inter-embodied consideration adds credence to a ‘social epistemology’ of journalism (Godler et al. 2020), appreciating how knowledge and meaning is not just acquired by an individual but rather must be seen as constituted in and out of social activities of people in particular environments—such as the newsroom. All of this speaks to the work that people do—that journalists do.

By applying a body-based conceptual framework to the well-documented gap between the ideals that journalists cherish and the differing ways in which reporters get to do their work around the world, we open up an investigation into embodied and social realities of news work. As the disparity in role performance and perceptions tends to be considered as a cause for genuine concern about the veracity of journalism’s function in (democratic) society, appreciating it in bodily terms helps us to prepare, train, and support journalists in grounded ways, focusing on the efficacy of reporters on the ground to make sense of themselves and take responsibility for who they are—as professionals as much as simply human beings at work.

## 2. On the Body in Journalism Studies

It may very well be that the discrepancy between journalists’ perceptions of their profession and performance on the job is a particular artifact of journalism studies as a field of research, given its strict focus on individual news workers as exemplifying the ideals of objective, truthful, and non-sensationalist reporting, without taking their existence as (interacting) bodies explicitly into account. To wit, three canonical books covering the field—Stuart Allan’s *Companion to News and Journalism* (Allan 2009), Tim Vos’ edited collection *Journalism* (Vos 2018), and Karin Wahl-Jorgensen and Thomas Hanitzsch’ *Handbook of Journalism Studies* (Wahl-Jorgensen and Hanitzsch 2020)—do not consider reporters as having bodies at all. The few oblique references to the embodied nature of journalism in these benchmarking works contain mild critiques of the “unembodied discourse that marks much of traditional journalism” (Atton 2009, p. 177), and “the detached and disembodied stance of conventional journalism” (Wahl-Jorgensen and Hanitzsch 2020, p. 267). Emotions and bodies do not belong to journalists, according to the discourse in these reviews, but are the realm of “the citizenry’s ‘embodied knowledge’” (Allan 2009, p. 68) and the “embodied identities” of “ordinary people” (Wasserman 2020, p. 278)—while these works advocate journalists would do well to make use of this.

While some authors in the various seminal disciplinary texts indeed question the fact that “journalism studies tends to look at news use as a disembodied, cognitive activity and its devices and platforms as neutral mediators of information” (Costera Meijer 2020, p. 399), not a single one of the prominent, field-defining scholars featured in these volumes extends that query to the actual work of reporters. Tamara Witschge and Frank Harbers, in their chapter for the *Journalism* collection, draw attention to practice theory’s relevance for

journalism studies in its insistence on “embodied, materially arrays of human activity” (Witschge and Harbers 2018, p. 110), without discussing what this would mean beyond suggesting that materiality should be researched “as a constitutive element and integral part of practice” (p. 118).

An exception is Linda Steiner’s work, whose 2009 and 2020 chapters on gender and the newsroom deploy feminist theory to ask for recognition of the fact that journalists have bodies and that this bodily aspect matters (Steiner 2009, 2020). With Deborah Chambers, Steiner addresses the “sexualised scrutiny of [female reporters’] bodies, hairstyles, fashion, and voices” (Chambers and Steiner 2009, p. 49) in the context of rampant sexism in newsrooms, while her contribution to the *Handbook* describes journalists as “inevitably embodied people” (Steiner 2020, p. 464). Remarkably, the only explicit discussion of journalists as having bodies in all of these books can be found in chapters on women, gender, racism, and sexism (see also Cristina Mislán’s contribution on gender and race to the Vos volume), which hints at why journalism studies, as a field, is struggling with diversity and inclusion (Zeng and Chan 2023) as much as the news, as an industry, struggles to see the body as more than a distraction from the ‘real’ work of supposedly disembodied reporting.

In terms of making claims about the lived experience of news work, we primarily draw from the Worlds of Journalism study (WoJ; [worldsofjournalism.org](http://worldsofjournalism.org), accessed on 28 November 2024) as well as the Journalism Role Performance project (JRP; [journalisticperformance.org](http://journalisticperformance.org), accessed on 28 November 2024) as influential and ongoing longitudinal cross-national research projects. The WoJ study is, at the time of writing, in its third wave of collecting data through surveys of journalists in more than 110 countries. The JRP combines news content analysis with surveys among working journalists to document and understand the gap between the ideals that inspire the work that journalists do and their performance on the job. In the first wave (2013–2018), the JRP project used a mixed-method design based on content analysis and survey research in 18 countries (Mellado 2021, p. 8). The second wave (2019–2023) covers 37 countries.

The WoJ and JRP projects, while designed differently and addressing distinct concerns regarding the composition, values and practices of the journalism workforce, follow a long-standing tradition of research among nation-based samples of working journalists. Such work is grounded on survey-based research among US journalists in 1971 (Johnstone et al. 1976), yielding several collections featuring international comparisons between populations that benchmarked the development of journalism studies as a field, including the News Around the World series of studies and the Global Journalist edited volumes.

While the many publications flowing from such projects provide fascinating insights about who journalists are and what they value in (and about) their work, it is remarkable to note that none of these works consider the fact that all of these interviewed reporters and editors have bodies. In the 2014 collection of journalist surveys in 31 countries edited by David Weaver and Lars Willnat, it is suggested that the roles journalists see for themselves in society are embodied (Weaver and Willnat 2014, p. 291), without making explicit what that means. Similarly, in the 2019 book-length overview of the WoJ project, reference is made to “journalistic culture, which is meant to embody the differential readings and articulations of forms of journalism in different societal contexts” (Hanitzsch et al. 2019, p. 25), without further elaboration of how exactly journalists, in and through their bodies, come to produce and experience a particular culture. It is almost as if cultures magically come into being, without articulating the materiality of the human beings involved.

Claudia Mellado and Cornelia Mothes briefly explore a promising line of bodily inquiry in their contribution to the 2021 JRP overview, suggesting that through professional socialization and the disciplining nature of organizational control, the journalists’ body may come to conform to the prevailing mores and expectations in the newsroom even while their thoughts and ideas differ. They point to the simultaneous agentic and repressive potential of the journalists’ working environment, as “working at a media outlet entails being in contact with coworkers, sources, and other reference groups, all of which can impact the effectiveness of the normative control that news organizations exert” (p. 152).

Regrettably, they do not push this observation about the inevitable *intercorporeality* of news work any further.

In their work combining content analyses of the news with focus groups among journalists, public relations practitioners, and members of the public in 10 countries, Pamela Shoemaker and Akiba Cohen make an overall issue of noting that “theories of cognition must begin with biology” (Shoemaker and Cohen 2012, p. 9). They use this to argue that biological evolution has resulted in humans being “hard-wired for news,” a point derived from evolutionary psychology. What is mentioned in passing is how journalism’s focus on deviance as the basis for their reporting is ‘embodied’ in key stories identified as being the most important by journalists and audiences alike (p. 330). This metaphoric use of the body is remarkable given the scholars’ earlier insistence on biological explanations for how people think and act. While their work opens up opportunities for nuanced inquiry into the mutually constitutive forces of nature and nurture—including critical perspectives on the relative rigidity or plasticity in such understandings of what people feel and do—none of this is applied to news work.

In recent years, scholars in the field of journalism studies have started to move away from relatively static and indirect approaches to the body to explicitly include emotion in their analyses of who journalists are and why they do what they do (Beckett and Deuze 2016; Kotišová 2019a). This has led some to proclaim an emotional turn in both professional journalism as well as in journalism studies, indicating a conceptual move beyond the false objectivity–subjectivity dichotomy in favor of appreciating the creative and necessary role of emotion—and therefore the body—in good-quality news coverage. A concrete example of such work is an exploration of emotions such as fear, anger, and joy as sources of embodied knowledge that are crucial if one is to understand and appreciate developing stories, especially in the context of reporting on war and conflict (Kotišová and van der Velden 2023; see also Parks 2021).

Such an ‘affective epistemology’ of news work is a stark departure from (Western) journalism’s stubborn insistence on individualized objectivity, rationality, and detachment, instead looking at the emotions, feelings, and intercorporeal sensations of reporters (and their sources) as inevitably entangled with journalists’ knowledge-building and fact-finding practices about as well as part of particular communities. Although theories outlining (the necessity of) ‘affective intelligence’ on account of people as politically engaged citizens in society have been uncontroversial since the late 1990s (Marcus et al. 2000; Papacharissi 2012), when it comes to journalists being considered as actual human beings who have and can tactically deploy their emotions—and thus their bodies—in service of their reporting, only much later did a tenuous scholarship emerge to acknowledge this (Jukes 2020). This is understandable, as by recognizing the centrality of feelings and embodied ways of knowing, journalists may be fearful of losing their privileged position in society. Objectivity, understood as such, is less of a news value than it is valuable as a shield to ward off criticism and attacks from politicians and publics alike (Rosas 2018).

The question that follows from these observations about the field and that informs the project documented in this paper, is: What does it mean, that journalists have bodies? How can an embodied perspective on journalism contribute to helping us understand and explain the contemporary role, function, and position of the profession and the dissonance between reality and expectations? Following seminal work by Chantal Francoeur on ‘bodying’ the journalist (Francoeur 2021), we hope to show how an appreciation of being a journalist as involving a wide range of affective and bodily experiences opens additional ways to think and talk about what journalism is (and can be), to educate future professionals, and to reflect on what is ‘good’ or ‘bad’ about the profession and its industry. In doing so, we recognize a call in the field to focus more on experientialist approaches to journalism, allowing for the full bandwidth of coherent yet not necessarily consistent “emotional states, material contexts, activities, and definitions” of journalism practice (Witschge et al. 2019, p. 656).



### 3. Theorizing the Body at Work

In advancing our argument, we lay down some groundwork to indicate the theoretical canon from which we draw by synthesizing approaches from various theoretical traditions premised on apprehending the body more fully. Up until Francoeur's fairly recent work on bodying the journalist (Francoeur 2021), the affective and emotional 'turn' in journalism studies (Kotišová 2019a, 2019b), and Middleweek's (2024) important discussion of touch in journalism, there has been a notable absence of the body in studies of journalists. With prejudice to the idealism–materialism binary upheld in the problematization of the gap between journalists' role conception and job performance as noted earlier, and inspired by the challenge as put forward by Francoeur and Kotišová in particular, we argue that it is crucial to consider the "bodymind" (Glitsos 2019) when theorizing what a profession such as journalism feels like. In other words, when we consider the role of the body in journalism practice, we cannot separate the mind (or brain) and the body. While still a footnote in journalism studies, this insight is uncontroversial in social psychology (Ekman et al. 1980), psychotherapy (Payne 2009; for a popular take on body-centered therapies for treating trauma see van der Kolk 2014), feminist philosophy (Grosz 1994), Eastern philosophies of Buddhism, Taoism, and traditional Chinese medicine (Chan et al. 2002), as well as cultural studies (Glitsos 2019), and neuroscience (Damasio 1994).

This omission of the body in journalism studies is underscored by the very idea that informs and inspires so many journalists to do their work (and among scholars to analyze and report on the news): providing a crucial public service by covering the news in a neutral, objective, and verifiable way to tell the truth (Deuze 2005). The professional ideal of objectivity relies on a degree of detachment—journalists maintain their physical and emotional distance in reporting, effectively removing their bodies from the work. As such, the body—with its attendant senses, emotions, moods, and impulses—disappears and has come to be overlooked in journalism studies and education.

Benchmarking our perspective here is Chantal Francoeur's (2021) plea for 'bodying' the journalist. As Francoeur argues:

"Conceiving the journalist's body as an instrument that simultaneously senses, transforms, and stores information opens the door to a rich and nuanced understanding of how sensing bodies participate in and contribute to the journalistic endeavor, both practically and epistemologically". (p. 202)

Such a body-centric framing of journalism is a deliberate move away from seeing journalists as more or less rational, reasoned, and cohesive individuals—in other words, as perfect cogs in the machine of industry, without feelings, identities, and operating in a vacuum. In doing so, explanations of the gap between perception and performance on the level of demographics, type of industry, and national media system are perhaps less than useful when it comes to saying something that refers to what journalism 'really' feels like to the reporters and editors involved. Second, the unhelpful binary between reason and emotion—so effectively called into question in Antonio Damasio's "Descartes' Error" (Damasio 1994)—can be replaced by a bodily perspective on the work of journalists that considers embodied, affective and emotional experiences as potential resources for news work.

Documenting the disconnect between perception and performance tends to assume that journalists are rational agents and cohesive individuals making all kinds of deliberate decisions in particular situations—when covering a story, during a discussion in the newsroom, or upon pitching an item. However, Francoeur cautions against such a conceptualization of the journalist as a reasoned and objective professional. This 'twinning' she critically considers as reinforcing "the body's lack of place in the journalistic process, at least in terms of how it is seen: as something that gets in the way of good journalism at best; as something that leads to bad journalism at worst" (Francoeur 2021, p. 203). Her argument forcefully reminds us that when journalists go to work, their bodies go to work too, which means that the body is affected when doing journalism: "a body that cannot help but be affected, marked, changed, by what is deposited in and across it" (p. 218). This

opens up investigations to moments when the body is marked. Examples include when journalists' gender, ability, or any other real or perceived personal characteristics come to play a profound role in the job or when reporters manage and display a range of emotions when reporting on the scene and extracting information from sources.

Another instance of how overlooking or denouncing the role of the body and of the reporters' embodied subjectivity can even cause real harm comes from a range of studies on the mental health of journalists in different parts of the world (MacDonald et al. 2023). Such work suggests how an emphasis on the journalist as a value-neutral observer in professional work cultures, industry training contexts, and journalism education programs can "make journalists believe that they are immune to the impact of violence and tragedy and resilient to whatever they face in their professional life. But the reality is quite different [...] their constant effort to remain distant from the issues and events they cover sometimes prove to be counter-productive leading to develop a sense of guilt which eventually affect their psychological well-being negatively" (Aminul Islam et al. 2021, p. 168).

From a research perspective, the embodiment of being a journalist can perhaps best be captured by a phenomenological approach. At its core, phenomenology aims to understand a particular phenomenon from the perspective of the people who experience it (Tandoc and Takahashi 2018, p. 922). Phenomenological analyses—while relatively rare in journalism studies—describe journalism as "structured, ritualized and progressively embodied: that is, experienced as a personal characteristic rather than something requiring conscious calculation or effortful enactment" (Markham 2011, p. 571). Bengtsson and Johansson (2021) additionally note how phenomenology necessarily involves a sense of wonder about the world we investigate and try to make sense of—something Francoeur similarly notes as a consequence of intentionally bodying the journalist.

From sociological analyses of news and ethnographic observations of news work—providing part of the foundational work in journalism studies as a field—we know how much, if not all, of the creativity in journalism is formally structured along dedicated, consensual, and often implicit rituals, routines, techniques, formulas, conventions, protocols, and formats. A phenomenology of news work would extend these structures to the patterned reactions of journalists' bodies in the practical experience of doing journalism. Observations could, for example, include the 'power stance' for video reporters with legs widespread when doing a standup on camera, the use of nonverbal cues (leaning in, touching someone's arm, nodding in agreement, and so on) to convey trust or push on in interview settings, or standing around the coffee machine in the newsroom in predictable ways.

In doing so, the body is neither singular nor unique—in fact, the research shows that bodies always work together, responding to and riffing off each other through their interactions, generating particular actions, behaviors, and sensemaking practices. It is for this reason that Maurice Merleau-Ponty, in his seminal work on the primacy of perception, introduces the concept of *intercorporeality*, as "[e]ach one of us [is] pregnant with the others and confirmed by them in his body" (Merleau-Ponty 1964, p. 181). Intercorporeality allows for a permanent perception–action loop between the self and the other, preventing a reductionist research focus on the singular (rational, deliberately acting) individual, instead opening analyses up to embodied and shared ways of doing and understanding things.

In studies of journalism practice, intercorporeality can be fruitful for reconsidering some of the most well-documented conceptual paths in the scholarly discipline, for example, regarding patterned and well-worn news values, the link between professional identity and journalistic roles, formulaic storytelling and narrative structures and the occupational ideology of journalism (Deuze 2005). While such values, roles, and structures are dogma in journalism education and handbooks of journalism, it would be interesting to explore how much of this could be different if we take the embodied, emotional, and affective dimensions of news work into account.

Given the fact that "the body cannot be taken outside of its relationships with the techniques and organizing practices of the material world, particularly because the body is

expressed by the language of those organizing practices” (Glitsos 2019, p. 8), purposefully combining an embodied and affective perspective would add a focus on what journalists feel about their work, how they experience the material context of news work—its working environments (including, but not limited to furniture, hardware, software, decorations, and all other details of newsrooms and any other places where they work), the rituals, routines, techniques, formulas, conventions, protocols, and formats that structure news work, the precarious nature of their (often atypical) employment, and so on.

Our reading of the various publications on journalists’ role perceptions, job performance, and organizational cultures assumes that it is the way reporters and editors feel about their work and how they put their bodies into practice that provides the thread that ties all of the other explanatory variables—such as nationality, media type, audience orientation, demographics—together. This would align journalism studies squarely with findings across the academic post-discipline (Waisbord 2019) of media and communication research—most notably in the field of media audiences and effects—suggesting that individual predispositions and emotions are most likely to shape media use (Taneja and Webster 2016; Lecheler et al. 2013), while people’s individual differential susceptibility or ‘person dimensions’ in conjunction with their affective engagement tend to explain the extent of media influence (Valkenburg and Peter 2013; Papacharissi 2012). In all of this work, it is people, their bodies and their feelings, operating in distinct contexts that seem to warrant our undivided attention.

The affective nature of news work, while relatively underexplored in journalism studies, has extensive literature regarding journalism and trauma reporting, such as in cases of war correspondence and coverage of terrorism (Ogunyemi and Price 2023). Of particular note here is an emerging area of investigation into work-related stress, burnout, and other threats to the mental health and well-being of journalists (Bélair-Gagnon et al. 2023). Critically, this literature emphasizes that when we take affect, feelings, and emotions in the workplace seriously, we must refer to mental and psychological processes as well as physical and physiological indicators and behaviors. Mental health and physical health (and spiritual health) have to be seen as interdependent (Cloninger 2006). Few studies look specifically at the bodies of journalists as technologies in their own right, which would involve considering the agentic nature of journalism’s physical embodiment and an appreciation, as Barad (2003) notes, of how matter comes to matter. The work that comes closest to such notions of technology and matter (see for example Moran and Usher 2021) shows that the material context of journalism—the manner of employment and the working conditions, including the location, architecture, and decoration of the newsroom and individual reporters’ workspaces—informs and reflects organizational principles, the division of labor involved, as well as the various feelings journalists have about the job. Yet such material analyses of journalism tend to be ‘modest’ (Moran and Usher 2021, p. 1156) and do not consider the embodied human being of the journalist as a material entity with an active force on its own.

When taken all together, the above provides a compelling groundwork for taking the body seriously when considering the gap between performance or perception and the realities of practice from a hopeful perspective to establish more ways for reporters and editors to enact their agency and claim professional autonomy.

#### 4. Theorizing the Data

As we have outlined above, with the publication of the JRP, WoJ, and other studies, there is now a critical mass of empirical data about the people involved in news work around the world, and the disconnects between personal and professional identities and between occupational ideals and practical realities on the job. Here, we structure an application of our theory, grounded in a conceptual approach as outlined above, to advance an argument about how and why the gap might be apprehended, discussed, and most importantly, remedied with an appreciation of the body.



#### 4.1. Professionalism Versus Precarity

The gap between the ideals embodied in the professional identity of being a journalist versus the reality of precarious working conditions is a most urgent tension, especially since the disaster of COVID-19 further exacerbated the vulnerabilities of people working in the media, cultural, and creative sectors across the board (Duarte and Gauntlett 2022). Given the mythology of the dedicated reporter supported by a caring, responsible, and accountable organization equally invested in the noble profession of journalism (Dadouch and Lilly 2021) and the promise of stable careers that have been built into journalism degree programs that tend to act as informal gateways into the news industry, it is no surprise that reporters (and the general public) think of journalism as they would any other career path that offers (at least some level of) job security. Some kind of security or predictability in the career path can be assumed to be “a crucial factor allowing journalists to do their job and pursue reporting that may not lead to immediate publication or commercial ‘success’ or may be too risky or costly without employer support” (Rafter and Wheatley 2023, p. 18). The reality of news work is starkly different. A consistent trope throughout the literature about the way media organizations are managed is the general lack of institutional and organizational support for reporters—both in material terms (fair pay, transparent tariff structures, accommodations regarding reporters with disabilities or care responsibilities, and so on) and affectively, as in the existence (or appearance) of empathic leadership, workers being treated fairly, and receiving recognition for a job well done (Jung and Kim 2012; MacDonald et al. 2016; Hill 2021).

Study after study signals the sense of abandonment workers feel by their managers, significantly contributing to their distress. Such instances of ‘institutional betrayal’—when institutions that are expected to be safe and to protect their members fail—are paramount in the literature, for example, in surveys documenting the consequences of cost cutting in media firms, whereby the remaining employees often feel pressured to ‘battle on’ even when the increased workload damages their health and well-being (Walters et al. 2006, p. 18). In a series of clinical interviews with 19 journalists sampled from 86 prominent news organizations around the world in 2017, participants shared that their bosses “were not supportive” when it came to emotionally tough or otherwise traumatic assignments and felt that they “lost support from the newsroom,” while several reporters ended up questioning whether they chose “a moral” career with “no soul” (Dadouch and Lilly 2021, p. 963).

This condition produces a tension that pulls the individual in several different directions. First, the individual is asked to take risks with little to no support—which is stressful in and of itself. Second, if those risks lead to damage or harm, the journalist must navigate this on their own. Third, the journalist is expected to take risks because of the mythology of risk taking as part of the profession—even considered a prized and privileged part. Finally, the general public assumes that the journalist is protected by the apparatus of the news as an institution to do their job and take those risks, but this is generally not the case. As such, there is an extraordinary level of assumed reciprocity that is expected from the individual journalist because of the assumptions about journalism—but there is often no actual support in return. We call this the ‘reciprocity problem’ and consider it directly related to the extensive literature on the adverse mental and physical health consequences of structural imbalances between effort and reward at work (Rugulies et al. 2018).

A sense of reciprocity is critical in the reality and perception of news work, playing out directly into and onto the body. In the ground-breaking book *The Body Keeps the Score*, Bessel van de Kolk details deeply interconnected physiological mechanisms that enable the human body to behave and act following mental maps (the things people feel they should be doing based on their perception of the environment) (van der Kolk 2014). Van de Kolk stresses that, “numerous studies of disaster response around the globe have shown that social support is the most powerful protection against becoming overwhelmed by stress and trauma” (p. 79). That is, beyond financial aid, people need to feel that they are supported to carry out stressful tasks and encounter impactful phenomena. In other words, for a journalist to do their job in the ways that are expected, they “need a visceral

feeling of safety” that can only come from trust and reciprocity experienced at work (p. 81). Not only is this lacking for so many journalists despite navigating stressful and even physically dangerous situations, but the mythology of the professional ideal encourages one to overlook or even dismiss the occupational hazards of journalism, so reciprocity is not only missing *but not addressed or acknowledged*. This is not a problem that can be managed by the individual alone, and van de Kolk makes it clear that this is not “something a doctor can write a note for” (p. 135). It is something that needs to be borne out of authentic, pro-social organizational structures that ‘show up’ when a journalist feels threatened or unsupported.

Recent research built on the premise of van de Kolk’s seminal work exposes what happens to the body in work situations when one’s sense of safety is compromised. When an individual lacks that reciprocity, in turn, they “attempt to maximize their sense of safety to improve their ability to complete a task” (Jones Christensen et al. *Forthcoming*, p. 12). This is exhausting for both mind and body:

For example, he or she might ask to sit in a location where they can see the door; they might request to work in a quiet location; they might need to know the names of everyone they are expected to interact with on a project; or some may sit against a wall or with a mirror positioned so that no one surprises them from behind [...] the body of such a person is unable to relax, so a coworker may observe higher levels of illness or absenteeism.

Safety is a matter of requisite reciprocity that is established when a journalist feels that an organization—or an industry—can support them if and when they face challenges. Given the alarming statistics on precarity in the media industry (Chadha and Steiner 2021), news workers get abandoned in this respect. It is one thing to note precarity in news work and second to connect this to the occupational ideology of journalism, but our embodied perspective takes this further to acknowledge the profound toll all of this takes on the bodymind, pushing frustration and exhaustion to its limits, and leading to the mental health ‘epidemic’ documented among reporters and editors around the world (Deuze 2023; Arana 2017).

#### 4.2. Watchdog Versus Parasite

Few aspiring journalists hope to one day be labeled as a ‘social parasite’ or ‘a disconnected elitist’ (Nelson et al. 2024), and yet this is the kind of language that journalists carry with them every day (for the most part), working hard to do their job while living up to the impossible ideal of objectivity. This is not to exonerate unethical journalists or tolerate ‘bad actors’ in journalism. It is to acknowledge that the pejorative language falls on all reporters regardless of their positive social impact or professional integrity, and this widespread aggression tends to be met by disregard within news organizations (Holton et al. 2023). Most journalists idealize and practice being a watchdog of society and see their work as providing a public service, and they are taught this normative ideal as a foundational tenet of journalism from their undergraduate degree (Deuze 2005). The earlier mentioned national surveys of journalists consistently show how the primary dedication of journalists is to informing and educating the public, as such benchmarking their commitment to the profession.

Yet, when entering into the industry, or after dedicating years of their life to it, journalists tend to be met with anything from mild distrust to outright hostility—further fueled by the rhetoric of populist politicians from all sides of the political spectrum—that constructs them as being less than human. Even more so, sometimes such attacks come from their clients, employers, as well as co-workers (Meade 2016). Much of their work (including such sensitive tasks as reporting on anything from traffic accidents to having to do ‘death knocks’) may also be misunderstood by the public, depending on the circumstances (ABC News 2022).

Added to this is the historically recent ability to approach practitioners directly through social media channels that vastly amplify bullying and harassment (Bossio et al. 2024). Journalists are consistently vilified, with women and those with minority backgrounds

as prominent targets (Harris et al. 2016). What Bossio and colleagues call ‘the paradox of connection’ (Bossio et al. 2024), pointing toward the opportunity a digital environment provides to journalists to be closer to the people they intend to serve and the barrage of hostility and distrust subsequently leveled against them online, tends to be met by a ‘craft mentality’ predominant among creative workers more generally, typified by a commitment to quality and skill development—often despite all else (Morgan and Nelligan 2018). Once the conditions of work turn against such an ethic—for example, when people do not receive the time, resources, and support necessary to create, innovate, and master their craft, being treated with hostility and contempt—practitioners can become cynical and depressed as they end up quite literally shouldering the burden of staying productive and engaged while submitting themselves to unforgiving working circumstances.

Admittedly, this discussion is not to suggest that public distrust in the media is misguided or not important (see Flew et al. 2020), only that at an individual level, a journalist striving to do their best work is torn between these poles of connection and craft, between normative ideals and less-than-ideal practice. The question is: How does it feel to be torn between these two poles and what effect does this have on the body of the journalist? How does it feel to think about one’s social role as positive and then have that violently shattered and undermined on a day-to-day basis? What are the embodied effects of having an emotional investment in the human condition—when that is the very investment that is nullified by everyday discourse cursing one’s vocation as parasitic? The answer here emerges *from* these questions: this is a process through which the body of the journalist becomes dehumanized—they are no longer recognized in the scope of personhood when framed as parasites or ‘vultures’—or they internalize themselves as such (Spinner 2022; Milovanović 2011).

We know from the literature that even “subtle forms of dehumanization can occur within everyday social interactions” (Bastian and Haslam 2011). The ongoing chasm between carrying such a high sense of ethical and moral duty—while being denigrated for *not* doing it all—is exemplary of Bastian and Haslam’s characterization of the dehumanization that occurs when humanity is denied to people and “they are explicitly or implicitly likened to objects or machines and seen as cold, rigid, inert, and lacking emotion” (p. 296). Bastian and Haslam specifically point out the process of “animalistic dehumanization” as a typical way that maltreatment festers in organizational settings, aligning with the oft-repeated phrasing that journalists are vultures or parasites, not to mention direct threats to journalists lives as if they were no more than vermin (*Threats That Silence: Trends in the Safety of Journalists* 2022). Unsurprisingly, these maltreatments are associated “with cognitive deconstructive states, characterized by reduced clarity of thought, and numbing [and] uniquely associated with feelings of anger and sadness” (Bastian and Haslam 2011, p. 299). It is not a radical speculation to suggest that being structurally targeted with anger and abuse for some leads to maladaptive coping mechanisms, importantly including substance abuse, self-harm, and even suicide (Wang and Jiang 2016). It is also not unusual to find numbers in recent surveys showing that about 1 in 10 journalists regularly think about suicide, for example, after covering difficult stories—which tends to be the kind of hard-hitting reporting that primarily motivates people to become reporters in the first place (Pearson et al. 2022, p. 5). The body of the journalist is emphatically *speaking back* to the discourse.

#### 4.3. The Objectivity Ideal Versus ‘Human Interest’

The abovementioned dehumanization process feeds into what is perhaps the most profound disconnect in the practice of journalism, which is the ideal of ‘objectivity’ coupled with the requirement to be a barometer for human misery and a conduit for the most urgent crises the world faces every day. This is an untenable position, after all, how could one be expected to retain the status of a neutral observer *and* engage with the entire tapestry of the human condition simultaneously? Further, as outlined by Denis Muller, attempting to be impartial requires intense emotional labor as well as courage in so many ways. He writes,

“Impartiality is not the product of fear: it is the very reverse. It is the product of courageous efforts to be accurate, fair, balanced, open-minded, and unconflicted by personal interest, especially in the face of unrelenting pressure and highly charged emotions. It takes guts” (Muller 2023). Yet, this is the contradiction that many journalists navigate every day in their work.

The impossibility of the journalists’ position during the pandemic comes to mind, as reporters covered the coronavirus crisis while also being caught in the middle of it, at the same time having to work from home under intense pressure to meet global demand for accurate news, on top of dealing with a gradual decline in public trust, as discussed earlier. An online survey organized early in 2020 by the European Journalism Centre among 130 reporters from 12 countries around the world found 77% mentioned some kind of work-related stress during lockdown, with 59% saying they sometimes felt depressed or anxious (Crowley 2021).<sup>1</sup> In open comments, journalists talked about working harder than ever without much managerial support or care. A survey of 73 journalists working at international news organizations in June 2020 by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism found that 70% suffered from psychological distress, with many reporters finding it difficult to cope with the emotional demands of covering the pandemic. Later that year, the International Center for Journalists warned of “the deepening mental health crisis within the profession” in its report (on the impact of the pandemic based on a survey among 1406 journalists from 125 countries (Posetti et al. 2020). About two-thirds (67%) of respondents indicated that they suffered from financial hardship, lack of organizational support, and an intense workload, while a similar number (61%) felt more committed to journalism than before. The most-cited negative reactions to doing their work during the pandemic were increased anxiety (42%), exhaustion (38%), difficulty sleeping (35%), and a sense of helplessness (34%).

In considering the role of journalists during the pandemic, we find how the professional ideal of objectivity forcefully clashes with the reality of news work, specifically insofar as expectations are involved—from audiences, clients and employers, managers and directors, as well as journalists themselves. Maintaining such a position becomes untenable, and it should come as no surprise that this primarily played out in bodily experiences of distress. As Danna and Griffin (1999) noted in an early review of the field, occupational stress can cause all kinds of problems, all of which manifest in and on the body: hastening and worsening of sickness; drug and alcohol abuse, getting into all kinds of physical accidents, violence; sleep disturbance, sexual dysfunction, and depression.

Bastian and Haslam’s work gives us insight into the mechanisms that can destroy a journalist’s sense of personhood when constructed in this way. They explain that the dehumanization process often involves making a person into something that is “cold and emotionally inert” (p. 296). Concomitantly, “being treated in these ways is therefore likely to elicit a sense that one’s existence is unimportant and one’s identity as a person has been denied” (p. 296). An argument is often made that ‘many jobs’ are hard and require contradictions in terms or actions, however, our contention here is that journalism is singular in specific ways. For example, lawyers may often be called ‘parasites’ but they rarely put their lives on the line to cover stories. Doctors may work long hours and deal with trauma and death, but they are rarely called ‘vultures.’ It is the discordance that we suggest produces the effects of harm that manifest in the very real exhaustion and everyday burdens that are so often unacknowledged by the wider media industry and certainly are underappreciated by the public. Perhaps internalizing these contradictions and conflicts manifests in the body by way of over-pronounced risk taking, as we know is common among journalists—and even celebrated as journalists gain distinction through trauma-based work (Keats and Buchanan 2013). One need not look far—James Foley, Marie Colvin, Jamal Khashoggi, the toll in terms of casualties and wounded among journalists in the russo-Ukrainian and Israel-Gaza wars, and so many others—to see how journalists embody the pursuit of truth telling right to the very bone.

#### 4.4. Discussion

The individual human experience constitutes an entirely singular set of political and emotional conditions, yet a journalist is expected—by audiences and reporters alike—to act through a predetermined set of ideological principles within an industry based on the constructs of extractive capitalism that primarily has cost efficiency, shareholder revenue, and profit at heart. Yet all of these conditions are meted out as the responsibility of the individual journalist as a smokescreen for the material conditions that predetermine their role. In other words, ‘the media industry’ does to journalists what it does to all ‘objects of the media gaze’: it objectifies and makes the body complicit in the operations of the news media.

In this paper, we have shown how, despite emergent research, the body (and more comprehensively, the bodymind) remains a blind spot in journalism studies, which in turn leads to profound paradoxes in the everyday practice of being a professional reporter. While precarious working conditions have been signaled before, their consequences as experienced in the body warrant serious attention, especially as the expectation of professional performance stands in stark contrast with the institutional betrayal so many journalists feel at the hands of their clients and employers. Similarly, the preferred role as society’s watchdog doing its job to protect and serve its master—the public, citizenry, and community—but derailed by growing distrust and widespread harassment and attacks against reporters at work, requires a bodily analysis to appreciate everyone’s position in sharing responsibility for what we desire of our journalists. Finally, the much-debated ‘affect-sanitized ideal’ (Rosas 2018, p. 2117) of objectivity may be a cherished value, but when considered from an embodied perspective, it becomes a deeply problematic and potentially sickening way of thinking about and doing news work. The body matters, the body keeps the score, yet the body remains missing. It is our hope that this contribution is one step toward remedying this error, as is the work of the scholars we cited to further our argument that what journalism feels like is anything but trivial.

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