

The Impact of Online Trauma Threats Faced by Journalists: The Case of COVID-19-Imposed Remote- Working Regimes

by

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Thesis

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Abstract

The global reach of the COVID-19 pandemic, with its sustained infection and fatality rates from the first quarter of 2020, has deeply affected the majority of journalists across the world, who now find themselves working on stories of trauma linked to the pandemic from remote locations and under restrictive working conditions. These COVID-19-enforced working conditions have exponentially increased the exposure levels of online trauma threats faced by journalists. This research examines the confluence of online trauma threats and their manifestations and impacts, along with mitigative measures some journalists took to ease the impact of this confluence. The research is guided by the central question: 'How are journalists experiencing and responding to online trauma threats they face in the line of work during and 'post' COVID-19 lockdowns?' The research utilises three distinct yet interrelated methods: an online survey; in-depth, semi-structured interviews; and narrative case studies in the form of feature-length journalism. Thematic analysis of the survey and interviews provides a framework for the works of journalism, which are situated in broader contexts of the journalism profession and online trauma reporting. Responding to the increase in online trauma threat activity exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, the research points towards potential transformations within the profession that might assist journalists to continue undertaking their important role in and for society.

Keywords:

Journalism, Trauma, Online safety, Work-life balance, COVID-19, Lockdowns, Resilience, Well-being, Digital threats, Remote working

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Finally, to my parents, who loved me enough to let me go and chase my dreams.

In Memoriam

Lasantha Manilal Wickrematunge

Editor, Mentor, Friend

(1958-2009)

Assassinated

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Due to their online work activity, journalists are confronted with or exposed to content that constitutes a threat of injury, sexual harm or death.¹

Preface

January 8, 2009, was turning out to be just another day covering the end of a three-decade old civil war. It was anything but normal, but back then the war and mayhem around me was normal. I was accustomed to conflict. The Sri Lankan military had regained sway over the northern Sri Lankan town of Kilinochchi, the once impenetrable stronghold of the rebel Tamil Tigers. Like many others, I was forcibly kept miles away from the battles by a government-imposed travel ban. I was trying hard for months to get to the front but failed at every attempt. The Sri Lankan military had wrested control of the northern town from the separatists after 11 years. A decades-old civil war was reaching its bloody crescendo and I was reporting on it 200km away, from the capital Colombo. The daily body count was mounting steadily, and this Thursday held the grim promise to deliver the same. As I settled into my home-office, the phone rang. It was by all appearances a routine call by a colleague, stuck in Colombo like me, trying to verify information seeping down the grapevine. “Check on Lasantha,” the caller said, referring to my former boss. As I hung up the phone and dialed Lasantha’s number, my life changed irrevocably. The phone rang, but there was no answer. And there never would be.

My mentor and ex-editor, Lasantha Wickrematunge, was shot a few minutes prior, while driving through a residential suburb in Colombo. It was a brutal, cold-blooded murder using a cattle gun that silenced the most vocal and prominent critic of the government. Suddenly I was confronted with one of the biggest stories of my career. In typical journalism fashion, I approached this sudden loss as a ‘story’ without considering the personal impact of the murder. For years, I had programmed my professional self to aim for absolute objectivity in my reporting. No story, however personal, would impact me. This was a big story that I wanted to cover. The final phase of the civil war had already generated international attention

¹ Jukes et al., 2021, p. 3

towards Sri Lanka as never before and freelancers like me were in high demand. I wanted to report the story as professionally and impartially as I could. For at least five years from that day, I did just that. I reported on Lasantha's murder for international outlets like *TIME* magazine, the *Guardian*, and national newspapers as a 'story', approaching it from all possible angles while trying to maintain professional impartiality.

But the longer I reported on the murder, the deeper the impact the contents had on my personal life. Even though I could not clearly identify what was wrong with me, I could feel it. My behaviour was changing. Clearly, the story I was covering was the prime factor. I was simply angry. As I gathered more details of the crime, the angrier I became. I became angry at myself, at my slain colleague, at his family and friends, for not being able to stop the crime.

I began to try to reason with this anger and understand why I was feeling like this. I tried to divert my energies back to reporting the story. I spoke with a few trusted colleagues and loved ones. Nothing worked. Then a contact pointed me in the direction of the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma,² an organisation that specialises in ethics, well-being and providing support for journalists who have encountered trauma, based at Columbia University in New York. In April 2011, I was awarded a fellowship to attend a week-long introductory workshop on journalism and trauma as a Dart Asia-Pacific Fellow. This was my first introduction to the possible trauma induced from my work. I realised that the deep personal connection of Lasantha's murder made it difficult for me to approach it just as a 'story' without emotional consequences for me.

By then I had worked in a chronically violent news reporting environment for more than a decade. As a journalist based in Colombo, Sri Lanka, since 1998 I had reported on a bloody civil war, the devastating aftermath of the 2004 Asian Tsunami, and the plight of ordinary people caught up in the fighting or left bereft of hope due to disasters. I had grown accustomed to reporting the violence and assuming that journalistic objectivity ring-fenced me from emotional impact. However, at the workshop I made the first realisation that, like all storytellers, I lived in a storied narrative. Each story I reported was part of me, some more so than others. One of the first things I did at the conclusion of the fellowship was to examine some of the more important stories I had written. I tried to at least understand how the reporting had impacted me personally. The realisation that what I reported had an impact on me, made me take a step back from reporting the story of Lasantha's assassination – this was

² Original US spellings used

in January 2014, after I once again attended the Dart Center for a week-long seminar, this time as an Ochberg Fellow – but not before working on at least a dozen stories linked to the crime. The stepping-back was a culmination of a re-examination of my works of journalism that began my initial introduction to understanding trauma and journalism. I began to reevaluate how I approached my reportage, varying from the post-conflict wounds in my native Sri Lanka, to rights' violations, to the impact of climate change on vulnerable populations. I realised that the nature of the stories and their content had a huge emotional and cognitive impact on me. I had tried to keep that impact unacknowledged, reasoning that it would lead to emotional bias in my reporting. What I understood quickly was that, if I was to make my work professionally sound, I *had to deal* with the emotional impact of it.

The more I reported on Lasantha's murder, the more I knew that the crime would never be fully investigated. The absence of justice made me feel helpless. The helplessness was fuelling the anger I felt. It was this growing awareness that influenced me to take up the Ochberg Fellowship. I was in the company of journalists from across the US and a few from the rest of the world. We were all grappling with the same thorny issue: trauma impact on us due to our work. During the fellowship I felt that we were all in the same tempest but in different boats. Some were better equipped to deal with the situation, others not so much. Soon afterwards, I also began working as a trainer with the Dart Centre for Journalism and Trauma, Asia-Pacific³ on journalism and trauma. It was during these numerous training sessions across much of Asia and other parts of the world that I realised there is a gap between applicable knowledge among practicing journalists on mitigating trauma threats, and the growing pool of academic expertise on the subject. A refrain I kept hearing from colleagues was that most of the trauma literate practices, for example, allowing interviewees the freedom to talk on what they chose rather than on the questions important to the story, is quite impossible to honour during the daily work cycle of a journalist.

This research project clearly springs from an autoethnographic impulse – the trauma I realised I was subsuming made me look outward, to others' experiences. This research project is also about what I found. The large body of academic knowledge was not being transferred as applicable skills to the profession. Journalism trainers struggled to unpack the conceptual understanding of journalism and trauma into easily applicable tools and techniques. These, I felt, could be used by journalists on the frontlines of reporting. I felt that this disconnect was

³ Original spellings used

harming the quality of journalism as well as putting journalists in danger. It was this impulse that influenced me to seek the transition from journalist to researcher, focusing on trauma and journalism. And this is where this Master of Research degree began.

Introduction

When I began this Master of Research project in mid-2019, my focus was on the online trauma threats faced by journalists, and their impact on journalists' personal and professional lives, broadly. My plan was to focus on the Philippines, a nation with the highest daily recorded per capita online usage (Kemp, 2019). The Philippines is also a society with a vibrant online news media culture. Thus, this context offered the ideal location to situate my research, focused on a growing yet as-then broad (non-pandemic-related) phenomenon.

Even then, research and literature highlighted that journalists are increasingly exposed to potential trauma threats. A simple framing of a potentially traumatic reporting situation is where the journalists find themselves either directly or indirectly in a situation where they feel their mental health and safety are endangered. This can happen by witnessing traumatic incidents during their professional duties. It could also be trauma exposure due to the content of the information they consume for their work. This information can be visual and non-visual (McMahon, 2016). Online trauma threats are when journalists feel their mental well-being is compromised due to their online activity. This is due to information they access and consume online (Slaughter & Newman, 2020). However, despite growing expertise on trauma-sensitive journalism, Slaughter and Newman (2020) rightly point out that the concept of online trauma faced by journalists requires better defining and benchmarking. It is evident that incidents of online harassment, threats and abuse are one of the most significant work-related trauma threats faced by journalists during the last two decades. The same period also witnessed the journalism profession pivot to online resources as professional tools of significant importance. In September 2019, 71% of 115 female and gender non-confirming US and Canadian journalists taking part in a survey by the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) identified online harassment as the biggest threat they faced (Westcott, 2019). From early 2020 and into 2021, the enforced work-from-home regime brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic heightened the potency and reach of online trauma threats to levels not seen any time before (Siamanovich, 2020).

Within this context, the Philippines has been referred to as the 'Petri dish' of online harassment, threats and abuse of journalists (Occenola, 2019). Recording the highest per capita online usage worldwide at 10 hours per day (Kemp, 2019), there is a vibrant social media culture and sophisticated online media consumption trends in the Philippines.

Researchers refer to it as ‘the social media capital’ of the world (Estella & Löffelholz, 2019). Historically, journalists in the Philippines have faced threats, intimidations and mass attacks. The worst is the November 2009 Maguindanao massacre, when 34 journalists were killed. The CPJ (2019) considers the Maguindanao massacre as the deadliest attack on journalists ever reported. The National Union of Journalists in the Philippines (NUJP) in 2018 documented that in the decade since the Maguindanao massacre, attacks on the media have become more prominent online (Asian Institute of Journalism and Communication, 2019). As such, the Philippines provided the ideal context to carry out research into online trauma threats faced by journalists manifesting on online. But COVID-19 changed the way journalists did their job across the world. And so, my research project also changed.

War reporting and trauma

Industry attention to trauma-sensitive journalism began with the coverage of the Vietnam War and has steadily built since the 1970s. The initial focus of this was placed on reporting under hazardous environments like conflict (Feinstein, 2006). However, during the last decade, experts have established that not only physically dangerous reporting situations, but any given reporting situation that a journalist reports from or on, could be potentially traumatic (Dworznik, 2007). The important role played by social media in the violent social unrest and conflicts in the Middle East linked to the Arab Spring (2011-2012) was the initial catalyst for attention on online trauma threats faced by journalists (Carvin, 2012). Since the Arab Spring and more so during the pandemic the industry-wide shift to online resources has also influenced a growing attention to the mental well-being of journalists. However, an equally corresponding channeling of attention to analyse online trauma threats faced by journalists has remained slow (Wescott, 2018). Instead of assessing online trauma as a generic threat, researchers have focused on specific threat manifestations often arising from viral coverage, abuse and trolling. The reportage of the Arab Spring led to focus on the impact of vicarious trauma threats due to the consumption of content often consisting of graphic violence (Carvin, 2012). Some of this content is user generated (UGC), and as Carvin (2012) details, journalists can be drawn into a perpetually revolving loop of such content. The growing focus on gender in the media has resulted in research on trends dealing with online harassment and abuse directed at female journalists and those from minority communities (Chen et al., 2018). These dangers are heightened due to the operational nature of social

media platforms like Facebook and Twitter, which facilitates anonymous attacks, has a lack of gatekeeper oversight, and propagates a virality of extreme content.

The need for research into online work-related trauma impact on journalists is made urgent by the exponential rise of social media's influence on journalism throughout the last decade (Englund, 2019). Feinstein and Storm (2017), in their study of journalists who covered the European migrant crisis, detail that in addition to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), 'moral injury' is one of the other potent trauma threats faced by the journalists. They define moral injury as: "the injury done to a person's conscience or moral compass by perpetrating, witnessing, or failing to prevent acts that transgress personal moral and ethical values or codes of conduct" (Feinstein & Storm, 2017, pp. 4-5). Moral injury is not a medical condition but by its very nature is deeply intimate and personal. The research also catalogues that the dangers of moral injury are accentuated by journalists working in isolated environments, similar to how they conduct their work online, often interacting with others only through an electronic interface. Media convergence on digital platforms increases the need for development of aptitudes and skills, which meet the demands of this shift (Ureta & Fernández, 2018). Wescott (2018) proposes more focused research and attention on cyber threats faced by journalists. He notes that current mitigative measures recommended for journalists are limited to blocking, muting or non-engaging sources of potential trauma risk content. These recommendations do not address the potential trauma impact on professional and personal lives. The recommendation to disengage also limits the scope for interactions with the audience, which is crucial for online journalism (Rees, 2020).

Online trauma threats have increased in form, content and potency. Yates (2020) – who retired in 2020 after a 26-year career at Reuters serving in bureaus as diverse as Jakarta and Baghdad as a reporter, and finally as the head of mental health and well-being – notes that by the last years of his career, online trauma threats were considered as equally dangerous as threats faced in offline conditions like warzones or disaster zones. He reasons that the high level of distressing content journalists access online make the threats harder to avoid in the line of duty (Yates, 2020).

The global outbreak of COVID-19 during the first quarter of 2020 and the ensuing imposition of remote working regimes changed the dynamics of my original research proposal. On one level they made travel and in-person interactions impossible. On another, with journalism suddenly more reliant on online resources than ever before, they made the research more urgent and relatable to the media community.

Online, all the time

Journalists all over the world faced tightening restrictions imposed on their mobility during 2020. They were subjected to restricted mobility in their confined workspaces. Their access to sources was heavily reliant on online interactions. They could not report from the source of the story without putting their physical safety and that of those living closest with them in serious danger from the circulating virus. Most were also sharing their workspace with family and intimate partners, either working or studying within that same space. COVID-19 enforced remote working regimes changed the way journalists worked like never before. Suddenly with the imposition of the restrictions the core of my research, online trauma threats faced by journalists, became a key journalism self-care issue, an issue on the periphery for most of my colleagues, peers and even some detractors not so long ago. The International Center for Journalists (ICFJ) survey found that 67% of respondents were using digital tools and online communities to report during the pandemic (ICFJ, 2020). As work shifted predominantly to online, these new work regimes also re-emphasised the impact of online trauma threats faced by journalists. The screen became the only contact point to the outside world. They were confronting online trauma threats more than ever before and the impact was hard to ignore. As United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) reports:

There is nothing virtual about online violence. It has become the new frontline in journalism safety – and women journalists sit at the epicenter of risk. The psychological, physical, professional, and digital safety and security impacts associated with this escalating freedom of expression and gender equality crisis are overlapping, converging and frequently inseparable. They are also increasingly spilling offline, sometimes with devastating consequences (UNESCO, 2021, p. 5).

Before the pandemic, the impact of online trauma threats on the journalism profession was slowly gaining recognition. It was the latest signpost in an industry dialogue on journalism and trauma that began more than three decades ago. COVID-19-imposed lockdowns meant that all over the world, journalists were confined to their homes, faced with a situation of reporting on a story of unprecedented interest, of unprecedented influence and of unprecedented dangers in terms of both physical and online dangers. The lockdowns were also not going to go away quickly. Journalists were making preparations to work from remote locations for months on end. They were also adapting to more permanent changes where, in

the post-COVID-19 work environment, they are expected to work more from remote locations. With the pandemic, online trauma threats became a primary danger faced by almost all journalists. The majority of journalists who were working during the height of the pandemic were working on health-related stories and working remotely – using online resources as the main tools for news gathering, dissemination and audience engagement.

Even as the lockdowns eased towards the end of 2020 and normal life began cautiously, it was clear that it was almost impossible for me to carry out the research I had planned on the ground in the Philippines safely, within the timeframe. With various second, third and fourth waves appearing throughout Australia's summer in 2020, it became totally impossible.

At the same time, it also became clear that online safety and well-being had gained resonance within the journalism community during the strict lockdowns. Fast-evolving work conditions influenced me to re-think the situational framework for my research. Attention to my research from international media colleagues was widespread at: the Centre for Excellence in Journalism, Karachi; the East West Centre, Hawaii; Nepal Investigative Multimedia Journalism Network; the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung; Internews International; Transparency International; the International Committee of the Red Cross; National Union of Journalists of the Philippines; World Associations of News Publishers; and the Dart Centre for Journalism and Trauma Asia Pacific. As the impact of COVID-19-imposed work conditions began to manifest, my nascent research was becoming timely and important to the journalism community and academia.

I found myself often interacting and dealing with journalism organisations and communities across the world. Using online platforms like Zoom, Meets and WhatsApp, I regularly spoke with journalists, media academics and trainers on how journalism was adjusting to the new working environments, the dangers posed by the same new working conditions, and how journalists could effectively mitigate these dangers and continue with their work safely. I also found that journalists were becoming more aware of online trauma threats than before. This was because they were spending more time using online resources. In many instances at the height of the global lockdown, journalists had no choice but to seek online resources as the sole gateway to gather information, to disseminate their work and to engage with their audiences. Some of the most demanding discussions I had during this period were with individual journalists. My colleagues told me how they suddenly found themselves in an environment where they were not in control: the demands were overwhelming and the story unrelenting.

During my engagements with more than 150 journalists through the multiple lockdowns, I found that they were more descriptive than before about online trauma threats and the impact they were having on their working lives, their personal lives and the lives of those around them. The threats had become a mainstay in these journalists' working lives. Unfortunately, most also realised that they did not possess the required skillsets to identify and mitigate these dangers effectively. My refocused research, *The Impact of Online Trauma Threats Faced by Journalists: The Case of COVID-19-Imposed Remote-Working Regimes*, sets out to examine the manifestation of online trauma threats faced by journalists during the COVID-19 lockdowns, their impact on the journalists' professional and personal lives, and possible mitigative measures. The changes do not change the core focus of my original research plan, which was the impact of online trauma threats. The project design and methodological framework remains intact. As I progressed my research project, my engagement with the industry both within Australia and internationally increased (see Appendix B). I also realised that the industry's renewed attention to online trauma threats and developing skillsets which are easily applicable at newsroom or individual journalist level is not waning.

In December 2020, I presented at the Journalism and Policy conference (RMIT University, Melbourne) organised by the Journalism Education and Research Association of Australia (JERAA). My presentation was titled: *How COVID-19-Remote Working Regimes Increased the Potency and Content of Online Trauma Threats*. Another important industry acknowledgment of the research was when I presented at an academic conference that was part of the UNESCO World Press Freedom Day Conference, in Namibia, April 2021. In keeping with the times, both presentations were online. I also work closely with the Dart Centre for Journalism and Trauma, Asia-Pacific in enhancing skills among journalists in the Asia Pacific. My inputs into the Dart projects are focused on online trauma. I am particularly invested in developing the tip sheets on physical safety and mental well-being, including online safety, which were especially developed by the Dart Centre for Journalism and Trauma, Asia Pacific to benefit journalists in Myanmar. The resources were developed a month after the February 2021 coup. They are translated into Burmese and widely distributed within the country. They are also repurposed for UNSECO as infographics. I was also a trainer and presenter at workshops jointly organised by the Dart Centre for Journalism and Trauma, Asia Pacific and the East West Center, Hawaii for journalists based in India on mental-well-being and online safety. These

workshops were organised as the need for such skills increased from April 2021 as India faced the worst COVID-19 surge recorded since the outbreak of the pandemic.

As I embarked on the newly modified research project, I engaged actively in the growing community dialogue on mental health and safety. The research data gave me the much-needed building blocks to situate my engagements solidly on sound research. This in turn made my inputs stronger as they went beyond the anecdotal and incidental. These regular industry engagements like webinars, discussions and presentations are the clearest exemplars of a growing industry recognition and awareness on online trauma and journalism. Those occasions where I got the chance to interact with individual journalists give insights into the deep and intimate impact of such threats. During the darkest hours of the pandemic, digital technology was the only window to the world to almost all of us, not only journalists. But the flickering light of hope on the screen comes with its own dangers. As Houston writes: “Digital technology may well be applauded as the hero of the pandemic, but without exceptionally generous measures of empathy, kindness, and a deep awareness of our own humanity, the technology won’t get us very far” (Houston, 2020).

In the past the journalism community has been slow to recognise these threats. The industry has come to regret those missteps. This project helps in its small way to build awareness to not repeat those mistakes.

Research questions

The research is guided by the central question: ‘How are journalists experiencing and responding to online trauma threats they face in the line of work during and ‘post’ COVID-19 lockdowns?’ While answering this question, the research also answers the following sub-questions.

How did online trauma threats faced by journalists during COVID-19-imposed remote working regimes manifest themselves?

How did these threats impact on the professional and personal lives of the targeted journalists?

How did these journalists attempt to minimise the impact of online trauma threats?

Chapter One: Literature Review

In order to provide analysis of the important and critical literature currently available on journalism and trauma, with particular attention on work-related online trauma threats, the following literature review catalogues academic research and professional expertise on the role of trauma within the career experiences of journalists. The review structured into three sections outlines extant knowledge: on the impact of work-related trauma on the professional and personal lives of journalists; on the impact of online work-related trauma threats on the professional lives of journalists and their personal lives; and on the impact of online trauma threats on the professional and personal lives of journalists during and post COVID-19 lockdowns. Finally, the review identifies outstanding gaps in research into the impact of work-related online trauma threats on the professional and personal lives of journalists.

From the reviewed literature, it is evident that while research on journalism and trauma is at an advanced stage, literature on online work-related trauma impact on the professional and personal lives of journalists is still emerging. A significant gap exists in academic and professional attention paid to the impact of online trauma on the professional and personal lives of journalists during and post COVID-19 lockdowns. As such, this review identifies the need for and importance of focused research on work-related online trauma threats impacting the professional and personal lives of journalists, and the drastically changed work-environment during and post COVID-19 lockdowns offers the specific opportunity to carry out such research

References are chosen from peer-reviewed journals, recognised industry institutes and works by journalists documenting trauma impact on professional and personal lives, including online trauma threats. The review includes books by authors with high industry recognition, and training resources developed by media development organisations and media rights advocacy groups. As this topic is shifting rapidly with journalistic practice, the review also includes academic and industry expertise, training sessions (Rees, 2020), conference papers and publications (Healey, 2020) which explore the trauma impact on the professional lives of journalists during the lockdowns. The research scope of this project exhibits significant growth in understanding the characteristics and impact of online work-related trauma threats on the professional and personal lives of journalists. As such, it is important that the research weaves together academic understanding of trauma impact on the professional and personal

lives of journalists, and industry specific expertise, to ensure that it delivers on appropriate current knowledge for both theory and practice.

What is journalism and trauma?

This section examines current industry and academic concepts on journalism and trauma. It explores the development of trauma impact as a vital influencer on how journalists carry out their professional work, and the concept of moral injury. It concludes by analysing literature that evaluates post-trauma growth as a precursor to resilience.

Expertise on the impact of trauma on journalists and journalism has expanded in the past 20 years. In 1999, the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma, a dedicated industry resource organisation, was established at the University of Michigan. The initial focus of such resources was the trauma impact of conflict reportage on the professional and personal lives of journalists. As expertise widened, trauma impact due to reporting on or from hazardous environments such as conflict or disaster zones, or within areas of civil disturbances, received focused attention. During the past 10 years, research into other factors influencing journalists' professional and personal lives, like the challenges of reporting sexual abuse, managing online trauma threats, accurate and careful health reporting and environmental reporting gained attention but are still in their emergent stages. *Journalists under fire: The Psychological Hazards of Covering War*, (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006) by Anthony Feinstein is considered a significant milestone in journalism and trauma studies. The work is one of the first to comprehensively examine the experience of war journalists and the impact of traumatic events they encountered due to their professional duties. Feinstein's book is the result of initial research that began with the exploration of trauma impact on the professional and personal lives of journalists who covered the Vietnam War. More current research, including recent work by Feinstein and Storm (2017), establishes that trauma impact on the professional and personal lives of journalists is not limited to reporting from hazardous environments. Rather, potentially traumatic threats arise from any reporting situation (Dworznik, 2007, p. 534). The potency of these threats depends on the subject matter in focus and the journalist's own work and personal situation (Yates, 2020).

The majority of journalists now identify trauma threats that emanate from their professional duties and the ensuing danger of 'moral injury', as a serious work-related risk. McMahon's research (2016, p. 43) establishes more than 80% of all journalists are exposed to traumatic events during their reporting careers. As described in the introduction, another

study of journalists covering the European immigration crisis identifies a constant work-related trauma threat faced by participants as a condition the authors termed “moral injury”. Moral injury is the transgression of an individual’s “personal moral and ethical values or codes of conduct” while performing their professional duties (Feinstein & Strom 2017, pp. 4-5). The study, a qualitative survey of 64 questions answered by 80 journalists, finds that an individual’s moral boundary is often personal, and that any breach of those boundaries can impact their professional work. Moral injury is not considered a medical condition; however, it does create unique psychological challenges for journalists if they are to continue to work professionally (Feinstein & Storm, 2017, p. 4). The risk of trauma injury is increased by the demands of the job (Dworznik, 2006, p. 536); the focus of reportage on challenging scenarios such as war or cybercrime; a journalist’s work situation, like their job security or moderating user-generated content; or their work environment, such as a highly competitive office or abusive public reactions; and personal circumstances (McMahon & McLellan, 2008, pp. 1-2). As such, journalists persistently face trauma threats impacting their professional and personal lives. The threats require further study and research to understand their potency.

If unaddressed, trauma impact and moral injury can inhibit the capacity of an individual – and by extension, an organisation – to carry out professional work. Trauma threats create physically and emotionally vulnerable situations and can lead to self-censorship, difficulties in reintegrating into normal life and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Feinstein & Storm, 2017, p. 4.; p. 23). These dangers are heightened by the relentless news cycle, the shortening audience attention span, the erosion of the role of the news media as the main custodian of public information and public interactions with that information. Public engagements with journalists are becoming faster and more abusive than in the past (Abramson, 2019, pp. 5-6). Despite observing trauma as an integral part of its core production process, journalism was slow to recognise the emotional labour demanding news coverage imposes on its practitioners. Its traditional standards of detachment and objectivity also prevent the acknowledgement of trauma impact on the professional and personal lives of journalists (Rentschler, 2010, p. 24). Recent developments, however, show that the journalism industry now recognises work-related trauma threats as a specific health and safety risk. In January 2020, a veteran reporter for the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) stepped down from his role as Africa editor due to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (BBC, 2020). International news organisations like *Reuters*, the *BBC* and *Deutsche Welle* have established in-house guidelines to manage and mitigate work-related trauma risks faced by journalists (personal

communication, ACOS Alliance, December, 2019⁴). And international journalism training and advocacy organisations like International Media Support and Global Trauma Support have set up dedicated resources to assist journalists to better understand and mitigate work-related trauma risks (personal communication, ACOS Alliance, December 2019). ACOS has also set up resources on trauma dangers dedicated to freelance journalists who work outside the safety provided for permanent employees of news organisations. Industry experts are also proposing that trauma awareness skills training become an entry level requirement for journalists. Awareness of work-related trauma risks can equip entry level journalists to conduct their professional duties in a safer environment (Rentschler, 2010, pp. 25-26).

Feinstein and Storm write: “It is best that education with respect to moral injury and other potential emotional challenges that come with this work, should begin before deployment and be part of individual debriefings on return” (2017, p. 5). In the most recent developments, as I witnessed during the ACOS Alliance meeting in New York 2019, industry focus has shifted to building trauma resilience and awareness among freelance contributors. *BBC* journalist Jo Healey published *A Journalist Guide to Covering Sensitive Stories*, (Routledge, 2020) as a best practice guide including testimony from working journalists and trauma experts. Healey documents that there is a growing demand for trauma awareness at a training skill entry level. Awareness of work-related trauma risks equips journalists to be more resilient in their professional and personal lives. Post-traumatic development is seen as a stage of resilience building and recovery (Pearson et al., 2019, p. 197). In her doctoral research into post-traumatic growth among Australian television journalists, McMahon (2016) describes post-trauma recovery as a stage that helps journalists to understand the threats clearly and be better prepared to encounter them in their line of work in the future. Awareness of work-related trauma threats can also make journalists better understand and relate to similar threats encountered by the subjects and the audiences of their work (Rentschler, 2010, pp. 25-26). As such, post-trauma impact recovery is not a negative outcome, but a recovery stage with potential to make way for better, more professionally equipped and emotionally resilient media personnel (McMahon, 2016). More expertise on newer trauma threats, like the study of impact of online trauma threats, adds to the growing body of trauma research treating recovery as a positive stage.

⁴ The researcher was a participant in ACOS Alliance meetings on developing peer support networks for freelance journalists. The ground rules for the meeting preclude stating sources of information.

What are online trauma threats?

This section documents literature analysing online trauma threats as a key danger impacting the professional and personal lives of journalists. The literature reviewed details the prominent manifestations of such dangers, their impact and possible mitigative measure against such dangers. In the past 20 years, digital platforms have become essential for journalists as work tools. *Buzzfeed* and *Rappler* are digital-only media outlets that are industry pioneers (Abramson 2019; Anderson, 2017). During the past decade *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and *The Guardian* transitioned to outlets that pay equal attention to both online and offline market prospects (Abramson, 2019, p. 6). Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube are now considered essential reporting tools (Carvin, 2012; Yates 2020). The transition to online platforms increases the dangers faced by journalists due to work-related trauma threats. Some of these dangers are online versions of what is also present offline, such as physical threats and abuse (Chen et al., 2018, pp. 2-3). Others, like user-generated content, trolling, doxing and cyber stalking, are hybrid versions, which exhibit unique online characteristics (Carvin, 2012). Online trauma threats are as dangerous and equally unrelenting as those manifesting offline, for example, those witnessed in hazardous reporting environments (Yates, 2020). As I discuss further in Chapter Four, the experience of Suren when lockdowns forced him into working in isolation, the online trauma threats he faced were as dangerous as those faced when reporting from the field. These online threats require further intense study and unpacking. The COVID-19 pandemic elevated electronic interfaces as the main reporting tool used by journalists (Perera, 2020). It also heightened the dangers posed by online trauma threats as journalists adjust to remote working within an environment of global fear and restrictions on mobility (Siamanovych, 2020). They are also frontline recipients of what experts have termed an ‘infodemic’ – unprecedented global online information environment where verified information, misinformation and disinformation are exchanged in a relentless, high-speed cycle (World Health Organisation 2020).

Abuse and threats are a common online threat manifestation (Chen et al., 2018, p. 8). The increased reliance on online resources for reportage and dissemination brought on by COVID-19 lockdowns heightened the potency of these threats and made it extremely difficult for journalists to disengage from online platforms (Yates, 2020). Research into online abuse and threats directed at female journalists document that these attacks often are misogynistic and in the worst cases, include threats of sexual and other violence of the worst form (Chen et al.,

2018, p. 13). Similarly, user-generated content is an essential resource for online journalism. Anything taking place anywhere at any time can be disseminated using digital technology. However, the process also leads to a situation where moderators are faced with a cyclic delivery of graphic content and unverified and potentially inauthentic information. The impact of consuming such a high volume of graphic content is visible in the professional and personal lives of journalists (Rees, 2020). In one such instance, a moderator curating images from the Middle East began to associate body parts with food items (Carvin, 2012). Trolling – the relentless pursuit of others with vitriol and digressive comments – is another potentially traumatic impact of online journalism. The inbuilt functionalities of the web in general and social media platforms specifically affords trolls easy mechanisms for anonymity, to be relentless and more abusive than if they were administering threats offline. Victims of trolling feel isolated, scared, and threatened, especially when working for outlets with limited trauma sensitive reporting skills (Gorman, 2018). The latest inclusion into the list of threats is fake news and disinformation. They are potential trauma triggers due to their relentless nature and their potency to potentially undermine journalistic integrity. Fake news and disinformation weaken the trust journalists build with their audiences. In 2019, 70 countries witnessed organised social media manipulation campaigns, up from 46 the year before (Barndshaw & Howard, 2019, p. i). In 26 countries, computational propaganda is used as a tool to control public information while several countries have sophisticated operations to influence global or specific international audiences (Barndshaw & Howard, 2019, p. i).

Anecdotal evidence from around the world shows that online work-related trauma threats impact the professional and personal lives of targeted journalists. One such instance is the appearance of the hashtag #ArrestAntiPakJournalists, during the first week of July 2019. The first tweet with the hashtag carried pictures of 30 Pakistani journalists and read “grab the keyboard and start trending”. Subsequent analysis by specialists established that the viral tweet and the hashtag were artificially boosted using bot⁵ accounts (Digital Rights Monitor, 2019). However, there is no analysis on how the victimised journalists were impacted in their work life and personal life. At least one of the victims, Umar Cheema, the victim of an abduction in the past, went quiet on social media for some time (Journalism Pakistan, 2019). He has more than a million followers on Twitter. In April 2018, Rana Ayyub, an Indian female journalist, appeared on international media channels talking about an instance of a rape of a

⁵ Automated computer software

minor and the culture of political protection. In the few days following, a fake pornographic video with her face super-imposed was released to the web. It went viral and was shared more than 40,000 times. Her contact details were released without her approval. She was diagnosed with heart palpitations and high blood pressure after the incident and hospitalised (Ayyub, 2018). Similar cases are reported from the Philippines. In October 2016, online news platform *Rappler* published a three-part series on the patriotic trolling effect, similar to what took place in Pakistan three years later. *Rappler* CEO, Maria Ressa, the 2021 Noble Peace Prize Laureate, received on average ninety hate messages per hour on social media for the next few months (Ressa, 2019, p. 38). Soon after the cyber abuse and trolling began, Ressa initiated digital safety training and provided psychological support to members at *Rappler* (Posetti, 2017, p. 39).

Detailed research into online trauma impact on journalists still remains relatively emergent compared to expertise on offline trauma impact on their professional and personal lives. This gap amplifies the dangers of online work-related trauma threats: the lack of expertise creates a situation where journalists are not adequately equipped to understand the dangers and advantages of online resources, now essential for their work (Ureta & Fernández, 2018, p. 877). Journalists frequently underestimate the potency of online trauma risks, are underprepared to meet the risks and resist reporting such threats to supervisors (Index on Censorship, 2019). They are also not equipped to judge the physical dangers posed by online trauma threats. *Rappler* head Ressa says: “You don’t know when it will jump out from the virtual world and sneak into the physical world” (Posetti, 2017, p. 38).

Online trauma threats and lockdowns

Even before the mass, global lockdowns of 2020, the pivot to digital resources was gaining momentum. By April 2020, there were 4.5b global online users and 3.5b social media users (Plan International, 2020). The demand on journalism and journalists as the world came face to face with a deadly pandemic was unprecedented. Journalists were required to work long hours, produce timely and often lifesaving information, while in lockdown and working in remote workspaces and dealing with a deadly health risk and renewed mental health dangers (ICFJ, 2020). The ICFJ survey reports that 67% of respondents say they are making more use of digital tools for reporting and 38% say the same for audience engagement. The survey identifies the heightened dangers corresponding with such online exposure trends. The ICFJ survey reports: “More time inside social media communities means more exposure to online

toxicity – in the form of ‘platform capture’, which involves social media channels weaponized by disinformation purveyors, and increasing online violence targeting journalists” (ICJF 2020, p. 20).

We still do not know in sufficient detail enough to understand how journalists react to this toxic exposure. But we do know enough to be aware that the confluence of the demands of remote working, fear of contracting a fatal disease and financial uncertainty has a deep impact on emotional well-being (Feinstein & Hughes, 2020). Feinstein and Hughes document that the predominant emotion during the lockdowns expressed by journalists taking part in a survey conducted by the Reuters Institute and the University of Toronto is anxiety. A similar trait is witnessed in front-line health workers as well.

Research conducted jointly by Bournemouth University and the Dart Centre for Journalism and Trauma, Europe, detail how the working conditions imposed during and after the lockdowns heighten the new threats posed by the ‘digital frontline’. The same work conditions in turn limit the ability to create breaks and distance between the reporting and activities outside of professional duties of the journalists (Jukes et al 2021, pp. 1-2). As Jukes et al. elaborate: “... they [interview participants] all expressed the relentlessness of ‘living the story’ and felt that the volume of material on social media was challenging, particularly in a context of risk (assessment and focus) and precarity (health and socio-economic),” (Jukes et al. 2021, p. 15).

Lack of skills to mitigate the impact while continuing to work undermines the safety of journalists faced with this threat (Feinstein & Hughes, 2020). The pandemic and global attention on mental safety refocused attention on the same within the journalism community and among journalism educators and trainers. Elana Newman, Professor of Psychology at the University of Tulsa says she has never received as many invitations to train and talk to journalists on mental safety as she has during and post lockdowns. She has worked with the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma, US, for more than two decades and is currently its research director (personal correspondence, March 17, 2021). This is a trend that is visible on a community-wide scale. As Murphy et al. write: “A new culture of well-being and safety training may be one of the few benefits the COVID-19 pandemic brings to news organizations internationally” (Murphy et al 2020, p.11). Academic research has also shown renewed interest on the impact of digital media platforms on the well-being of journalists. Gavin Rees the director of the Dart Centre for Journalism and Trauma, Europe, says that the journalism

industry needs to invest more resources to understand these threats much better and in detail (personal correspondence, April 21, 2021).

Conclusion

This literature review details how expertise into trauma threats faced by journalists impacting their professional and personal lives has developed extensively in the past twenty years. However, a clear need emerges for more research regarding the impact of online trauma threats on the professional and personal lives of journalists. A need that is now more urgent due to the changes brought on by the pandemic and lockdowns. There are major achievements in the field so far. For example, work by Feinstein (2006) establishes the importance of better awareness on work-related trauma threats faced by journalists in their professional lives. Others, like Rentschler (2010), widen the scope of such awareness to detail that work-related trauma threats faced by journalists are a frequent danger faced under any circumstance. Moral injury is now recognised as a major work-related trauma threat faced by journalists (Feinstein & Storm, 2017). The journalism industry also acknowledges that post-trauma recovery constitutes a potential step towards resilience building (Pearson et al., 2019).

Despite the transition to online platforms by the media industry (Abramson, 2019) and the growing awareness on online trauma threats (Carvin, 2012; Chen et al., 2018), industry and specialised expertise about online trauma threats faced by journalists remains still in its emergent phase. The most frequent advice given to journalists to counter online trauma threats is not to engage the source of the threat (Wescott 2019). However, such a strategy curtails the targeted journalist's ability to continue to carry out professional duties online (Rees, 2020). A study on online abuse and trolling finds that the advice not to engage creates a situation where such passive reactions result in the trolling continuing and emboldens the attackers (Lumsden & Morgan, 2019).

Tip-sheets (CPJ, 2019) and best-practices guides (Healey, 2020; Rees, 2020) are the most easily available resources for journalists to counter online trauma threats. These resources often build on on-the-job evidence and do not have access to in-depth research or academic analysis. Academic research, on the other hand, provides more resources to improve such recommendations and make them more applicable (Backholm et al., 2019, p. 7). Backholm et al. (2019, p.7) document that online trauma threats require specialised awareness to counter their impact.

The pandemic is another major signpost in modern journalism. The journalism industry and academics have reacted with urgency to the newer demands on journalists and connected dangers due to post-COVID-19 changes to work culture. However, the dangers are such that more research is needed to understand them better and effect mitigation. This research project affords the opportunity to analyse the characteristics of work-related online trauma threats faced by journalists during and post-lockdowns, and the impact on their professional and personal lives. The research also gives the opportunity to develop specialised skills to counter the impact of online trauma threats. Such knowledge is beneficial to enhancing a safe online working environment for journalists across the world. It also gives the opportunity to build on available research and bridge a gap that is clear from the literature review.

Chapter Two: Methodology

This research uses survey and interview methods and is constructed within an overarching methodology of journalism practice. Like research degrees that are conducted using a creative practice research methodology (e.g., creative writing, fine art, screen production), where the ‘insider’ practitioner draws on their practice and conducts research to create new understandings for that field of practice (Leavy, 2020, p. 3), this research investigates the field of journalism practice – including the lived experience of the researcher – to acquire new understandings of how journalists are impacted by the sudden transfer to a predominantly online-reliant remote working regime. The research was undertaken with the aim of “systematically studying” and understanding the changing role of the journalist undertaking their profession during and post COVID-19 lockdowns (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017, p. 3351). Through the lens of trauma, it aims to understand the impact of these changes on journalists as practitioners and, by association, on journalism as a profession.

As is custom with creative practice research, the main findings from this research are presented in long-form journalistic essays that not only talk about the field, but by their form and style, also speak to those working in the field. As Vine et al. (2016) discuss, by adopting journalism practice research, “not only can journalist-researchers build distinctive research identities, but also institutions can take advantage of the core fabric of journalism to generate research with cultural, social and political impact” (Vine et al. 2016, p. 282). The two research methods, namely the survey and the interviews conducted online and remotely, allowed for the collection of data and intimate details. They also provided means for the research to progress despite the restrictions imposed by COVID-19 related lockdowns.

This journalism practice methodology thus allows the journalist-researcher to use his extant skills and experiences as an international journalist, producing a body of work that focuses on the personal, affective aspects of journalism practice through and beyond COVID-19. The research attempts to understand how narratives emerge from the lived histories of the journalists. These lived experiences, drawn directly (and ethically) from participants, explore “how narratives are silenced, contested or accepted” (Andrews et al., 2013, p. 2). As described in Chapter Four (4.2), Kavitha felt guilty of sending colleagues for interviews in remote regions while she remained in the relative safety of her office. She said the difficult decisions she was making impacted her work.

Taking into account the growing reliance on online resources for journalism since the first COVID-19 lockdowns during the first quarter of 2020, this research adds to the growing body of work on the importance placed on digital safety and journalism. As is evident in the findings, the research has an overriding theme of transformation in relation to how journalists seek to mitigate digital dangers while adapting to a digital-reliant workflow. Awareness of the implications of online trauma threats exacerbated by the disruptions and changes that took place due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and its subsequent lockdowns, are crucial to this transformation.

The 'insider' researcher

I am a practicing journalist and journalism trainer, specialising in trauma-sensitive reporting. During my reporting and training career, I have experienced the impact of online and offline trauma threats on my personal and professional lives as a result of my work. I have also seen similar impact on other journalists across the world. The subjectivist epistemology of the research is my role in it. In this case, the research takes into account how my personal and professional experiences influence the project (Leavy, 2020, p. 6), including why I was drawn to it in the first place. Witnessing the impact of traumatic reporting such as the reporting of the end of Sri Lanka's two decade-old civil conflict, (including the murder of a colleague and friend) or online hate speech and abuse in the Philippines, influenced me to pay more attention to the impact caused by potentially traumatic content on my work and that of others (Healey, 2020, p. 1). I was drawn into studying the impact of online trauma on journalists when I witnessed growing evidence showing how online trauma impacts the personal and professional lives of journalists during my engagements as a trainer between 2015 and 2018. Bearing witness to such experiences, coupled with my own experiences, influenced me to undertake this research project. These experiences and the subsequent COVID-19 lockdowns also influenced my selection of the research location – to conduct the research from my home-office using online resources, participants and content for interview and surveys.

The intention behind this research, including its findings embedded in long-form works of journalism, is to disseminate the research to a wider audience of practicing journalists and journalism educators. This is integral for any research, arguably, but especially that which adopts a practice-based approach where the subject matter is of importance to the very field

researched. Qualitative research is described as an attempt at engaged building of knowledge of the world we live in and human experiences therein (Leavy, 2020, p. 3). This research develops a new repository of knowledge on online trauma dangers and journalism by engaging the journalism community closely (Murray, 2009, pp. 46-47).

The research examines the lived experience of the journalists rather than treating their experiences as distant objects of study (Witschge et al., 2019, p. 976). As Murray outlines: “It is through telling ourselves stories about ourselves and others that we come to understand who we are, who they are and what the relationship is between us. Our life story is constantly changing as new events unfold” (Murray, 2009, p. 46). As such, the research is designed on the ontological basis that reality is diverse, contingent, contextual, and multiple (Saldana, 2011, pp. 177-178). The phenomenon of online trauma is not a naturally occurring reality – though arguably for the journalism profession, it is becoming one. Additionally, social phenomena created by the lived experience are influenced by gender, cultural and political influences, and can manifest in multiple formats (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, pp. 110-111), and this research considers these aspects in its design (e.g., survey and interview questions, contextual framing in the long-form works of journalism).

Journalism practice research

Extant journalism-based research emphasises the practice of journalism, but it does not always explore the impact of the lived experiences of journalists on their practice (Lewis, 2020, p. 685). This research contributes to understanding the lived experiences of journalists as they undertake their practice, including how the professional responsibilities of journalists are threatened when subjected to online threats. As highlighted by Carey (1996), journalism is influenced by distinct social practices and conditions. In that vein, journalism which was produced during and after the lockdowns manifests a clear imprint of the experience of the journalist living through those periods. Nash (2013, p. 132) positions journalism practice research as scholarly research that establishes the basis and criteria of inquiry into the discipline with academic rigour. This research affords that opportunity: to investigate the complexities of reporting a deadly pandemic while under strict restrictions on mobility and heightened personal and professional stressors. The research answers questions of how this complicated lived experience impacted the work of those who took part in the research. Further, it offers, through quantitative (survey), qualitative (interviews) and practice-based (works of journalism) research, a variety of insights and embodied understandings of how

journalism as a practice and a profession is becoming transformed. The journalistic outputs allow for the embodiment of the findings of the project as products of journalism practice.

Methodologically, then, the resulting works of journalism found in Chapter Four embody both the subject matter and method. These artefacts – works of journalism practice research – bring together the lived histories of the journalists surveyed and interviewed, during and after COVID-19 lockdowns. As Witschge et al. elaborate in their paper on broadening perspectives of digital journalism, the creativity embedded in the works of journalism “allows us to gain insight into experiences, motivations and emotions in journalism, allowing us to tell the diverse stories of journalism in a more inclusive way” (Witschge et al., 2019 p. 974). The essays are artefacts incorporating the confluence of influences faced by the journalists and how they impacted the journalism produced during a cataclysmic reporting period. As Osmann et al. (2021, p. 6) contend in their research into the psychological impact of COVID-19 coverage, journalists should be considered as frontline workers. They formulate this assertion on the basis that journalists are on the front lines of, and first respondents to, information and events. This research is thus the life story of the journalists who reported the pandemic and beyond.

Methods

While the aims, objectives, research question and anticipated outcomes of the research were the prime influencers in finalising the research methods (Leavy, 2020, p. 2), the time frame and constraints imposed by COVID-19 were also taken into account. Research methods were selected to gain details and data on the main objectives: to identify the characteristics of work-related online trauma threats faced by journalists during and post COVID-19 lockdowns; and the impact of these threats on the professional and personal lives of journalists. An online survey allowed for the gathering of broad data on the characteristics of work-related online trauma threats faced by journalists and the awareness levels of those threats among the participants. Follow-up in-depth interviews provided descriptive and intimate details on how individual journalists were impacted by these threats. In-depth interviews with journalism and trauma experts provided broader analysis of the emergent trends from the survey and the interviews with the journalists. The interviews with these participants, coupled with the survey data, was then analysed to discern trends and themes that were then used as the basis for the long-form journalism works. By combining these methods, the research aims to achieve not only new knowledge, but also new implications

for practice. Here I outline and detail the three data inputs, the selection process of participants for the survey and interviews, and the interpretative framework used to analyse the data.

Data Collection

Three critical data inputs are used for the project: an online survey initiated to gain data, easily categorised to show the characteristics and impacts of on-line trauma impact; four in-depth interviews conducted with journalists, aimed at gaining further details of the impact of trauma on individual journalists, personally and professionally; and three in-depth interviews conducted with trauma experts, to gain insights into established trends and applicable mitigative measures (for the journalism profession).

McMahon's (2016) research is considered pioneering in research investigating trauma impact on journalism. A mixed-methods design – quantitative and qualitative methods – is applied by McMahon in her research into occupational trauma impact and post-trauma growth on selected Australian television journalists. The mixed-method design allows for the gathering of quantitative data which is supplemented by the qualitative inputs from the interviews. This research benefits from the application of a similar mixed method design. McMahon applied a questionnaire-based survey and in-depth interviews for the research to gain details on post-trauma growth. McMahon immersed herself within the news organisation to observe the working conditions of the journalists. Similarly, I used my extensive experience as a journalist and my wide network of journalistic colleagues to closely observe how a more online-reliant, remote work pattern impacted the lives of the journalists who took part in the research, and by implication, those in the profession more broadly. Taken together, the results from the three data inputs of the research provide empirical evidence of the characteristics of online trauma threats faced by journalists during and post COVID-19 lockdowns, the impact of such threats on their personal and professional lives, and mitigative measures that might be used in professional training and education settings. These results were then used as the empirical foundation for the four works of journalism found in the thesis, reflecting the overall journalism practice methodology.

Online survey

Despite the qualitative nature of the research, the lack of data on online trauma impacts during and post COVID-19 lockdowns created the need for quantitative data. As such the

research includes a limited online questionnaire-based survey. The survey was aimed at cataloguing the characteristics of trauma threats and impacts. The research questions sought details on the manifestations and characteristics of online trauma threats faced by journalists during and post COVID-19 lockdowns; their impact on the participant journalists' professional and personal lives; and any mitigative measures used by the journalists. The survey contents are also informed by the Journalism Occupational Behavioural Checklist and the Journalist Traumatic Exposure Scale, developed by the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma, US (Dart Center 2020). Online survey platform Qualtrics hosted the survey, which included 25 questions (see Appendix A, survey questions). For 15 questions the participants chose from a predetermined set of answers. Six questions required detailed answers from participants, focused on the areas of awareness of online trauma threats, their impact on the participants' lives and work and any changes they made to their lives or work routines. The remaining four questions were on consent, gender, location and reporting on COVID-19. The survey was conducted in English. It commenced before the in-depth interviews. It was kept open between October 19, 2020, and August 31, 2021. The trends visible through the data influenced the interviews. It was open to journalists across the world, invited through a link sent via email. No mass mailing lists were used in an effort to maintain authenticity. Resulting data is analysed using tabulation techniques, and simple data visualisation methods are used to present some of the manifestations, characteristics and frequency of online trauma threats (see Chapter Three).

Online surveys are limited by sample selection and can be subjective, with poor response rates (Nayak & Narayan, 2019, p. 35). The selection of the participants also reflects the researcher's own network (Tajjudin et al., 2018, p.6). I was able to use my wide networks of journalists and media organisations to invite participants from across the world. For this project, as the participants were individually selected without relying on mass mailing lists, I was able to limit participation to journalists who reported through the pandemic. Using English as the language of the survey added to the project limitations, given that the intention was to survey journalists from around the world. However, the survey was limited to easily understood questions to minimise the impact of lack of language skills. Additionally, as the survey findings are used to underpin and supplement the findings of the interviews, the survey drawbacks do not have a wide impact on the overall research methodology.

Interviews

A combination of in-depth and semi-structured interviews with journalists and trauma experts were begun half way through the 10 months the online survey was open, conducted between January and April of 2021. Semi-structured interviews use predetermined questions and were aimed at gaining predictable answers (Travers, 2010). By using the same set of questions with all participants, findings were easily compared (Travers, 2010, p. 290). The questions used in this research were planned around the main research question: 'How are journalists experiencing and responding to online trauma threats they face in the line of work during and 'post' COVID-19 lockdowns?' The three sub-questions – how did online trauma threats faced by journalists during COVID-19-imposed remote working regimes manifest themselves? How did these threats impact on the professional and personal lives of the targeted journalists? And how did these journalists attempt to minimise the impact of online trauma threats? – were also taken into account when planning the interviews. The focal themes of the interviews are on details of the manifestations of online trauma threats, their characteristics, their impacts on professional and personal lives, and any mitigative measures participants were using or that experts recommended.

The opening questions, especially with the journalists, were used as an icebreaker and to determine whether the participants showed any signs of discomfort. None of the participant journalists showed any discomfort or indicated a desire to stop the interviews. The rapport built and detailed information provided before the interviews prepared the participants for the contents of the interviews. They were aware and prepared to talk of deeply intimate experiences. The 60-minute length of each interview helped to conduct interactions at a measured tempo. I sensed that the participants felt they were in control of their interactions because of the option to terminate, postpone or request a break from the interview.

The combination of semi-structured, in-depth interviews gave the opportunity to gain information that is impersonal at the start of the interview and thereafter build trust with the participants, acquiring information that is intimate in nature (Grix, 2010, p. 25). Semi-structured interview methods created the opportunity to start the interviews with journalists and trauma experts with questions that required simple, impersonal answers. Grix (2010, p. 120) establishes that this in-depth interview method allows the researcher the ability to move the dialogue beyond the impersonal and into details that are personal. Interviews for this research were conducted one-on-one via Zoom. Only the researcher and the interviewees participated in these interactions. The time and venue for the interview was decided by the

interviewee. The language of communication was English. They were recorded live and stored digitally. Participants remain deidentified in all outputs. The interviews provided intimate insights into the impact of trauma threats in the personal and professional lives of the participants. Three of the participants disseminate their works of journalism in English. Two of them work in two other languages but use English as a second language and as one of the main languages of their work. One is based in a region where English is the first language. The participants gave detailed answers. As highlighted above, participants were given the opportunity to stop the interview altogether at any given stage if they became uncomfortable. They were also given the option to take breaks if required. However, none of the interviewees requested a break or a complete stop to the interviews. The interviews formed a large part of the content and structure of the essays. They were informed that the interviews and any input derived from them are anonymised in any output. None of the interview participants requested for any other conditions for usage of inputs outside those recommended. In-depth interviews are constrained by the limitations of time and the size of the sample (Praveen & Shokwat, 2017). However, in this case the diversity of the participants, their experiences and skills, were helpful to keep the content on topic. Interviewing journalists who lack some understanding of trauma impact would not have suited the focused nature of the research.

Interviews with the experts were used to confirm and build on the themes emerging from the survey and the interviews with the journalists. I chose the experts based on their academic expertise (two hold doctorates), their journalism training and skills development experience (all three experts are recognised as experts in the field of journalism and trauma and work closely with the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma, US). Their inputs play a prominent role in determining effective mitigative measures and recommendations. I already had some level of familiarity with their expertise before they took part in the interviews, as academics and researchers developing expertise on trauma and journalism. The interviews with trauma experts are guided by the interviews with journalists, the online survey results and research objective in seeking details on mitigative measures against online trauma threats. These interviews were used to catalogue the participant journalists' experiences and reactions into established trauma threats and reaction categories. The expert inputs are the primary inputs for recommendations and suggestions on mitigative measures that can be used by journalists to ease the impact of online trauma threats while continuing work as journalists.

Survey and Interview Participants

Participants for the online survey were selected on their reporting portfolio during and post COVID-19 lockdowns. I individually selected them or sought recommendations from industry experts on journalists who had reported during and post lockdowns. As the research focus is on the impact of online reliant reporting on the lives of the journalists and their work, it was essential that the journalists taking part in the survey reported on the pandemic. Once the selection was made, I contacted the journalists via email. I apprised each in writing about the purpose of the research project and what determined the selection, seeking approval from the journalist to send the invite to the survey. The invitation was sent only after the journalist agreed. While most of the recipients did take part in the survey, few did not after receiving the invitation. None of them explained why they did not take part after agreeing to do so, except one who sought financial remuneration. Due to time constraints and the need to keep the research lens in focus, I did not seek further explanations. Sixty journalists from across the world took part in the survey. The majority of the participants were based in Asia (60%), followed by those based in the Middle East (11%) and Americas (nine percent). Fifty three percent identified as male while 46% as female. One percent did not specify their gender. Ninety five percent said they reported on 'the COVID-19 pandemic'.

Participants for the in-depth interviews were selected on their reporting portfolio during and post lockdowns, their location and experience. I took into consideration their online presence and their reporting and media engagements during the pandemic, and their experience as a journalist. Due to the intimate nature of the interviews, I paid attention to building a rapport with the selected participants in the in-depth interviews before embarking on them. Before the interview which took place over Zoom, the interviewee also signed and returned a consent form. The interviews were conducted at a time selected by the interviewees. I contacted seven journalists to invite them to take part. One selected journalist declined to take part in the interview due to a high work volume. One agreed but then could not find the time to take part. One journalist never declined the invitation but postponed the interview on three occasions throughout a three-month period. He finally stopped responding to queries. Four journalists took part in the in-depth interviews. This number was determined because of the length of the thesis (maximum 50,000 words) and the time available to conduct the interviews.

Data Analysis

The data analysis adapted the same sequence as in the data gathering process. The survey data was first analysed to identify reoccurring themes and patterns. These results are presented in detail in Chapter Three. The predominant themes from the survey, namely the disruption to work and personal life, expressed resilience to continue to work, self-doubt and self-censorship and the need for more skills, were then applied to the analysis of the interviews. The survey data supports and supplements the themes emerging from the interviews. Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 7) describe thematic analysis as a process that equips the researcher to identify concepts and interpret the research data. The emergence of the themes from the interviews are the key to developing clear narratives on online trauma impact on the professional and personal lives of participating journalists. The analysis of the interview contents is guided by Braun and Clarke's research (2006).

At the conclusion of each interview with a journalist, the audio recording was transcribed verbatim using transcription software. It was necessary to familiarise myself with the interviews and explore them for themes. At the preliminary level, the themes are guided by the four research objectives – to gain details on online trauma threats, their impact, possible mitigation mechanisms, and to develop a research model. After the initial familiarisation and reading of the transcripts, each transcript was re-read and coded using a colour system. The process was recursive. At the conclusion of coding the interviews, the most prominent themes were clear. The interviews with trauma experts were guided primarily by the third sub-research question, seeking details of possible mitigative measures and to determine emergent trends. The interviews with the experts were critical to establish the emergent patterns, recommendations and future action.

The predominant themes from the survey data were also frequently present in the life stories of the journalists participating in the interviews. I paid attention to how they manifested in the lived experiences of the journalists. The long-form journalistic essays in their form and style embody the lived histories of the journalists. Each essay is scaffolded by journalists' experiences and with one of the four main themes at its centre. The lived experiences of the journalists embedded in these works show how online trauma threats manifested, their impact and the changes they made to the lives of the journalists. They detail not only how the reporting during the lockdowns and thereafter came into being, but also how those narratives were contested and possibly withheld (Andrews et al., 2013, p.2). The

journalistic artefacts allow us to understand the safety and wellbeing skills required to promote professional journalism within a digital-reliant work-life environment.

Interpretive framework

Thematic analysis supported the identification of themes that form the core of the journalism essays, and by extension this is where the key findings of the research are detailed. This research is an attempt by an 'insider' practitioner to investigate lived experience of the journalism community during and after COVID-19 lockdowns. The long-form journalism works embody the results of the investigation in an inclusive and intimate form. I applied thematic analysis to identify and analyse the data from the survey and the interviews. The themes first emerged in the data extracted from the survey when a majority of the participants identified them. I approached the interviews using a hybrid coding method. I used closed-coding methods where I was guided by emergent themes from the survey when analysing the interviews. I also used open-coding methods to identify and categorise the main themes and sub themes irrespective of those emergent themes from the survey. Colour-codes were used to identify reoccurring themes and sub-themes. The themes that emerged from the analysis of the interviews are consistent with those that emerged from the survey. They were also identified and established when analysing the interviews with experts.

The four main themes emergent from the analysis, and which form the basis for the works of journalism, are:

- Disruption to normal life and work patterns due to the pandemic and lockdowns – Chapter Four: 4.1 The everyday dread of the wired mind and body
- Resilience and self-belief – Chapter Four: 4.2 Physical distancing is not social distancing
- Self-doubt and self-censorship – Chapter Four: 4.3 The corrosive bubble
- The need for more skills – Chapter Four: 4.4 Occupational Paranoia

The next chapter details the findings of the survey. It also sets out emergent trends. Critical survey findings like the time spent online, use of online resources, categorisations of online trauma threats and the need for more skills enhancements are highlighted using data visualisation and quantifications. Detailed answers by respondents provide the first specific descriptions of the impact of online trauma threats during the lockdowns and after they eased. The long-form essays that follow the survey findings build on the emergent trends and provide a more detailed and intimate insight into these impacts

Chapter Three: Survey Results

In this chapter I present findings from the online survey concluded with 60 survey respondents throughout a period of 10 months. The survey was aimed at cataloguing the characteristics of online trauma threats faced by journalists during and post COVID-19 lockdowns, and their impacts. The survey data were analysed to identify emergent trends, and this chapter details the main ones. These trends informed the interviews with journalists and experts that followed the survey, which are then used to form the thematic basis of the journalism essays in Chapter Four detailing the lived experience of these journalists.

Survey results

A total of 60 journalists took part in the survey. Of the respondents, 53% identified as male while 46% identified as female. The remainder did not specify gender. Thirty journalists were located in the Asia Pacific, five in Europe, four in the Americas and three in the Middle East. Seventeen respondents did not specify their location. The respondents have been anonymised because of ethics approval (Application reference: 0000022459) and consent granted by the respondents, with each respondent assigned a number starting from Respondent 1 to Respondent 60 based on the order in which they took the survey.

Amount of time spent online

An effective starting point to the survey was to determine whether the online usage habits of journalists had changed during their reporting of the pandemic. Q4 of the survey asked whether the respondents had reported on the COVID-19 pandemic. Forty-three respondents answered the question. Ninety-five percent (or 41 respondents) answered yes. Only two respondents said they had not reported on COVID-19. Not only did a majority of the respondents report on the pandemic, they were also engaged in the reporting for an extended amount of time. More than 80% of the respondents who answered the question on the length of their COVID-19 reporting (Q5) said they reported on the pandemic for two months or more. Five percent reported for a month. Only three journalists reported for a fortnight or less. Overall, of the 42 journalists who answered the question, 39 had reported for more than one month. Eight out of 10 journalists, or 80% who answered the question: *what was your main platform for journalism – gathering information, dissemination, and*

audience engagement during the lockdown? (Q6), said they used online resources as the main platform.

What changed dramatically almost overnight as these journalists reported on COVID-19 was the time they were spending online for their work. Sixty percent of the journalists who took part in the survey reported that they were spending more than five hours a day online for their work during their reporting of COVID-19. Sixty-six percent who answered the question (Q9) on current daily online usage said they were spending more than five hours a day online for their work when they participated in the survey. Every journalist who answered the question said that during their reporting of COVID-19, they spent between one and two hours a day online for their work. Figure 1 (below) shows the amount of time journalists spent online during their COVID-19 reporting. No timeframe was specified on the reporting period. The question referred to the time period the respondents considered they engaged in reporting COVID-19.

Q7. How much time did you generally spend online during your COVID-19 reporting?

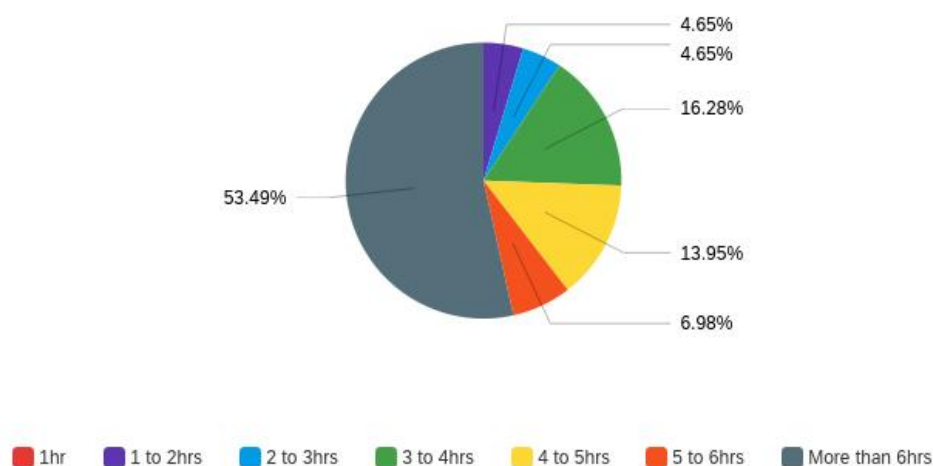


Figure 1. Time spent online for work during COVID-19 reporting

The amount of time journalists spent online during COVID-19 reporting displayed an increase compared to the time they said they spent online before they began reporting on COVID-19. Before the pandemic, 39% of those who answered this question (Q8) said they spent more than six hours a day online for their work. This figure rose by 30% during the pandemic to 53%, as shown in Figure 1 and to 55% at the time of the survey. Before they started reporting COVID-19 related stories, 9% of the surveyed journalists spent between one

and two hours per day online for their work. During their reporting of COVID-19 that figure dropped to 4.65%. At the time they took the survey, all of those who answered the question: *how much time are you spending online per day right now?* (Q9), said they spent at least between two and three hours a day online. Of that, 98% said they spent more than three hours per day online. As highlighted above, this change of time spent online is representative of the reliance on online and digital resources such as social media, messaging, video calling apps, web-based data sources and email communication for journalism.

Experts confirmed this increasing reliance shown by the responses to Q7 above and predicted that the trend was likely to persist. Dr Cait McMahon, director of the Dart Centre for Journalism and Trauma Asia Pacific, calls this pronounced, acute pivot online *the overlay of digital intensity* (C.McMahon 2021, personal communication, 2 February). Online resources were helping people to connect but were also creating their own boundaries, she points out. Remote working regimes created “a sense of entrapment [with] the lack of physical contact. It is a new dynamic,” McMahon says. The lockdowns became a facilitator and an accelerator of the increased reliance on online and digital resources for journalism.

Professor Elana Newman of the University of Tulsa, and research director at the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma, US, identifies the reliance on online resources as a trend which was already gaining traction during the last two decades (E.Newman 2021, personal communication, 17 March). As mentioned before, after the relative easing of the lockdowns, the time journalists spent online did not revert to post-pandemic levels. More than 67% of the journalists who answered the question (Q9) on how much time they spent online at the time they took the survey, between October 2020 and August 2021, reported they were spending more than five hours a day online. The number of journalists who were spending six hours or more daily online rose from 39% before the pandemic to 55%, or an increase of 40%, by the time they took part in the survey.

This data paints a picture that the majority of journalists who worked during the pandemic were reporting on COVID-19. The time they spent online for their work also increased during the lockdowns and did not show corresponding decreases as the lockdowns eased. The working conditions of the journalists underwent changes during the same time period. The majority of journalists were using online tools as the main reporting, dissemination, and audience engagement platforms, thus increasing their exposure to online trauma threats.

The impact of online trauma threats

Despite the relatively low focus before the outbreak of the pandemic among journalists on mental well-being, especially mental well-being and online usage habits, survey respondents recognised that their behaviour changed during, and as a result of, the pandemic and its resulting lockdowns. Their answers attested to their awareness of the link between mental well-being and their online usage habits. The predominant impact of their online usage during their reporting of COVID-19 on the surveyed journalists' work and personal lives was negative. To the question: *how did online trauma threats impact your professional work as a journalist?* (Q15), 56% said these threats made them anxious; 19% said they made their work more numbers based; 17% said they made them nervous; and 4% felt they made their work less in-depth.

To the question: *how did online trauma threats impact your personal lives?* (Q16), 53% said they were concerned about the safety (including mental well-being) of their loved ones; 29% said they made them anxious; and 17% said they made them nervous. Journalists were working in a pervasive environment of feeling anxious and nervous for long durations. They also lacked effective resources and skills to create short-term or long-term relief from that environment. Answers by the respondents pointed to the inability on the part of their managers and employers to intervene effectively to ease the negative reactions expressed by the journalists. Journalists who took part in the survey expressed the opinion that the industry was not prepared to deal with an emergency of the breadth and reach of COVID-19.

The overwhelming feeling among journalists of being trapped that McMahon describes in her interview (C.McMahon 2021, personal communication 2 February) and detailed in the essays that follow this chapter, was also frequently expressed by survey respondents. For Respondent 6, the biggest change was "not being able to switch off because of the constant need to be on top of case numbers [and] deaths". Respondent 5 said that he had to commence his COVID-19 reporting while in quarantine for two weeks with no access to another person other than through a phone or an online connection. Gavin Rees, managing director of the Dart Centre for Journalism and Trauma, Europe,⁶ says that traditional journalism practices like tight deadlines, attention to details and the competition to report stories before others made it difficult for journalists to switch off from a fast-breaking important story like the COVID-19 pandemic (G.Rees 2021, personal communication 24 May).

⁶ Original European spelling format on name of the institute used

The restrictions on mobility did not shield them against the anxiety sweeping through the world due to the spread of the pandemic. Online connectivity assured a steady, constant flow of information. Some of that information was inauthentic.

As Respondent 11 described, working from home sometimes made the impact more powerful:

I was alone a lot in front of the computer. I could not move around in my city. I felt trapped and unable to see friends and loved ones. I was alone in my flat doing reporting, often interviewing people in very difficult situations because of COVID. That made things more pronounced for me, and I couldn't escape it by doing things I usually enjoyed as I was stuck at home.

Respondent 3 revealed that reporting during the pandemic forced him to question his commitment as a journalist:

There was verbal pressure from the security forces. There was also no safety measure in the media. There were no security measures in the media institute[s] regarding such matters. I felt that we are unsafe in every way as journalists. After that I thought hard about whether I should [report] or not to report for our newspaper some of the news that I received. In an environment where we have to protect ourselves individually, I tried to keep the reports within a certain limit.

Respondents described COVID-19 as an intense, fast-moving and dynamic story. But there was no escaping that it was potentially fatal and global. This was the first pandemic of the digital age. It was everywhere. As Respondent 20 described:

[COVID-19] made me much more anxious. There was a lot of panic, a lot to cover and only a few reporters on the health beat who understood the science and the journalistic aspects. My anxiety spiked as deaths increased and fake news seemed insurmountable, all the while healthcare workers were dying.

These emerging trends from the survey, such as increased time spent online, the inability to regulate work and personal life effectively, and a sense of anxiety, were frequent signposts in the lived histories of the journalists who reported on the pandemic. Their impacts on the professional and personal lives of the journalists are explored in detail in the works of journalism that follow in Chapter Four.

Awareness of online trauma threats

The majority of the journalists or more than 81% of those who answered the question: *were you aware of online trauma threats faced by journalists before you reported on COVID-19?* (Q10) said they were aware of online trauma threats faced by journalists. Only 18% said they were not aware. Abuse, threats, attacks and threats to online security featured frequently in how surveyed journalists described online trauma threats. Sexual abuse and threats directed at female journalists were also identified as potential online trauma threats. “Online trolling, abuse, rape threats, especially to female journalists, death threats, plus the trauma of searching for recording, viewing [and] editing hours of graphic footage of COVID deaths”, was how Respondent 18 detailed online trauma threats. The following are a selection of the answers given to the question: *what do you understand as online trauma threats?* (Q11):

- Hate speech or negative comments to journalists saying their reporting is biased or personal attacks like threats or pointing fingers at one’s ethnicity and background [and] being exposed to graphic images or videos – Respondent 4.
- Distressing information and pictures as well as online trolling and direct threats to safety – Respondent 7.
- Written attacks or threats against journalists based on their factual reporting as well as the potential trauma of reporting or editing stories about COVID related deaths and reporting on potential for COVID exposure – Respondent 19.
- Online abuse threats, name calling by vested interest groups, right wing fanatics, religious extremists and others – Respondent 40.

Survey respondents also showed an awareness of the potential of content, visual and non-visual, to harm mental well-being. This awareness is linked to what McMahon describes as the growing awareness of the potential dangers of digital content (C.McMahon 2021, personal communication 2 February). Respondent 21 identified the trauma dangers posed by digital content as:

Journalists covering stories critical of the government face a barrage of online abuse with women journalists facing rape threats as well. There is a distinct psychological impact of

such targeted harassment, and at times it would fall under the category of trauma. Journalists who work on fact checking teams and on countering misinformation also have to regularly view disturbing and graphic content being spread online. These are the kinds of online trauma threats that I know of.

A distinct change took place during COVID-19 reporting on how journalists assessed the trauma dangers inherent in the information they consume or were exposed to in their line of work. Their recognition of the trauma dangers of information rose steeply as the pandemic endured. Four in every 10 journalists surveyed understood that the information they receive or seek out for their work could have a potentially negative impact on their mental well-being. More than 42% of the journalists who answered the question: *what were the most potent trauma threats you faced online during COVID-19 reporting?* (Q12) said they found disturbing information (including details of the spread of COVID-19 locally) as the most potent online trauma threat. Others identified fake news (23%), trolling (19%), and abuse (4%) as the most potent threats. This identification of dangerous information and fake news as the most potent online trauma threat during the reporting of the pandemic is a significant development. Only 9% of the journalists who answered the question: *what were the most potent trauma threats you faced online before the COVID-19 pandemic?* (Q13) said that they considered disturbing information as the most potent online trauma threat before the lockdowns. That figure grew more than fourfold during the lockdown to 42% during their reporting of COVID-19. While 36% of the journalists who answered Q13 identified abuse as the most potent online trauma threat before their reporting of COVID-19, that figure decreased to 4% during their reporting. Before their reporting of COVID-19 19% of the journalists who answered the question identified fake news as the most potent online trauma threat

As Figure 2 (below) shows, even after the lockdowns eased, 31% of the journalists who answered the question: *what are the most potent trauma threats you face online after the height of COVID-19 pandemic?* (Q14) identified disturbing information as the most potent of the online trauma threat they faced, while only 7% said it was abuse. Fake news was identified as the most potent online trauma threat after the height of the lockdowns by 34%.

What are the most potent trauma threats you face online after the height of COVID-19 pandemic? (Q14)

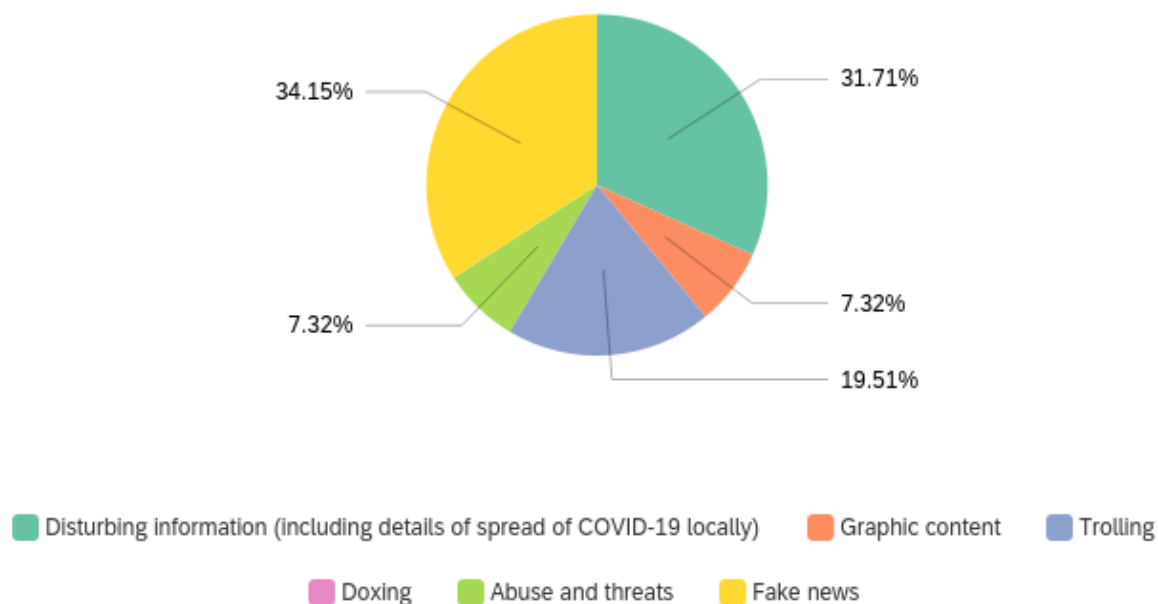


Figure 2. Online trauma threats faced by journalists after the height of the pandemic

Experts pointed to the rising awareness within the general population, and especially within journalism communities, of dangerous content and the emphasis on mental well-being during and after the lockdowns for increasing the attention journalists paid to the potential dangers of the information they gather or come to contact with. McMahon describes the situation as everyone’s antenna tuned into identifying such content. She says: “The antennas are up; awareness has become more [on] dangerous content [since the lockdowns]” (C.McMahon 2021, personal communication 2 February).

How journalists responded to online trauma threats

The growing awareness that the work they do, and how and where they do that work, was having an adverse impact on their lives prompted journalists to make changes. While they attempted to initiate changes that could lead to positive developments in their lives, survey respondents expressed their belief that such change may not be easily initiated within the community. They were aware that historically, journalism communities were slow to recognise newer and opaque occupational hazards. Such tardiness also makes effective interventions difficult. Journalists were mindful of the tendency within the industry to

normalise dangers which are difficult to identify and even more so to mitigate. In their responses to the question: *why do you think that online trauma threats are a danger to journalists?* (Q23), respondents identified that the slow on-setting nature of online trauma threats influenced a lack of attention they received in newsroom environments. As Respondent 16 described:

They [trauma threats] can be a source of emotional stress over a long period of time; they also tend to get normalised in the community of journalists and make healing and seeking help a lot difficult.

Despite the lack of newsroom initiative, survey respondents said they tried to affect safety measures when these digital dangers did become more conspicuous. The recognition of the need to create an effective work-life balance emerged strongly when journalists discuss changes to their work-life since the pandemic broke. Their awareness that being on the job 24/7 was not a viable and safe option stood out in their answers to the question: *what changes have you made to your work life since reporting on the pandemic?* (Q20) as some of the answers given below elaborate.

- Almost everyone in my news organization works from home. We have tried to support each other by acknowledging the stressful situation offering time off when needed, checking in with each other and so forth. I have attempted to establish boundaries between work and non-work time, when possible, for example shutting down the laptop at 6 pm. It has not always worked but the effort to keep working toward those boundaries is important – Respondent 21.
- Keeping work and home separate – Respondent 7.
- Since the peak has passed and we have gotten used to the situation, we allow for more breaks. We took a week off work each, although my time was spent in [taking part in] reporting courses. We tried to do some positive stories to balance out the dreary stories and while the pressure eased up for some time it remains. Health journalists still have a huge burden to provide accurate verified and interesting stories – Respondent 20.
- I have tried to maintain a slightly more definite work leisure balance since working from home tends to make that tougher – Respondent 23.

- I tried to limit my screen time since pandemic but still trying to limit. Also [I] started meditation and regular exercise to keep me occupied with something different to work – Respondent 38.

Newman says that industry attention to training opportunities on trauma-sensitive journalism increased during the lockdowns (E.Newman 2021, personal communication 17 March).⁷ As Rees points out: “Both COVID and traumatic user generated content have put the idea of vicarious trauma being a factor on the agenda in a way that it hasn't been before” (G.Rees 2021, personal communication 24 May).

This research demonstrates evidence that despite the comparative increase in skills training about journalism and trauma, especially in regions like the US and Europe where expertise is high, on a global scale, surveyed respondents expressed the opinion that they found a mismatch between their need for skills and available resources to acquire those skills. An overwhelming majority of journalists i.e., 97% of those who answered question 25, said that they needed more skills development on gaining trauma sensitive journalism skills (see Figure 3). This is one of the striking results from the survey. It establishes the research premise that reporting the pandemic created a surge in the need within journalism communities for skills on digital safety, including those on online trauma.

Do you think more resources should be diverted to developing skills for journalists to mitigate online trauma threats? (Q25)

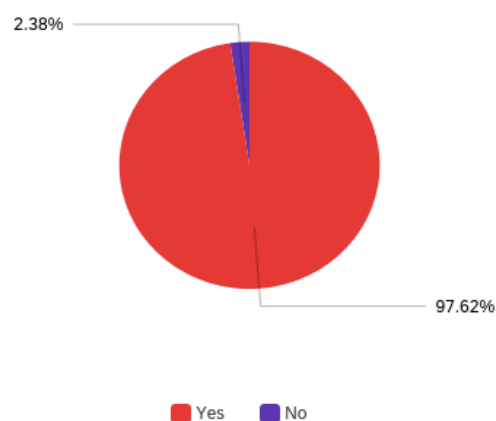


Figure 3. The demand among journalists for new skills to mitigate online trauma threats

⁷ I have also taken part as a trainer in mental well-being trainings conducted by the Dart Centre for Journalism and Trauma, Asia Pacific, including sessions with journalists from East Asia and South Asia. Refer Appendix B for details.

Despite 74% of the respondents answering that they felt they have the necessary skills to understand, identify and mitigate online trauma threats (Q24), the community wide expression of the need for more training and skills development reinforces a main finding of this research; that more resources should be invested in building safety skills against online trauma threats. The essays that follow this chapter also reinforce the need for professionally informed skills to mitigate online trauma threats. McMahon proposes that the expressed desire within the journalism community for more trauma sensitive training skills should be the catalyst for a research-based approach to build awareness and skills (C. McMahon 2021, personal communication 2 February).

How to build skills

McMahon contends that journalism trainings, especially those targeting working journalists, are reliant on anecdotal and ephemeral evidence. She identifies emerging academic knowledge, like this research project, as repositories that can help journalism educators and trainers to develop interventions based on data acquired under academic rigour and discipline. “This research will show the dangers,” she says of online trauma threats. She warns, however, that there is “no policy, no organisational systems and process in place to deal with online threats” within the journalism industry on dealing with online trauma threats (C.McMahon 2021, personal communication 2 February).

Newman says that more research is required to understand and clearly conceptualise online trauma threats and impacts. She notes the interventions also need multiple strategies ranging from pragmatic journalism skills to new work-life rituals. Newman says that journalism educators have the task of defining the characteristics of the newsroom of tomorrow and the journalists who work for it. “I think that there is going to be a dialogue in general about boundaries and health,” she says (E.Newman 2021, personal communication 17 March). To do that effectively, she proposes that journalism educators weigh in all these multiple factors that influence journalism today. The rise in online trauma exposure is but one of the renewed dangers that journalists faced and continue to face during and after the lockdowns. While journalists do acknowledge the rise in online trauma exposure during the lockdowns and thereafter, they also frequently highlight the financial pressures, job losses, the rise in fake content and the lack of employer responsibility about their occupational safety.

In a similar vein to McMahon and Newman, survey respondents expressed the need to create a healthy balance between work and personal life. As highlighted before, respondents assessed the lack of mitigative skills that stand in contrast to their awareness of dangers of an online reliant work regime. The answers to the question: *what changes have you made to your personal life since reporting on the pandemic?* (Q21), established an emergent trend for the desire to create a professionally informed balance between work and activities outside of work. Respondents claimed:

- It has been more difficult to balance family time and work time – Respondent 1.
- I have gotten better at scheduling my work. Initially, I would only focus on meeting deadlines. Now I try to find a balance between meeting the deadlines but also getting enough sleep and trying not to spend all day immersed only in work – Respondent 2.
- I have reserved a space for working where I can be at peace with not much things around me that may distract me. I also work mostly in the night after my kids are asleep so [that] I don't take time away from them, I do this whenever possible – Respondent 32.
- Working from home means you never stop working but I'm trying to balance it with getting more exercises and doing hobbies such as gardening and cycling – Respondent 39.

Conclusion

The survey results establish the following key themes: increased dependency on digital resources; disruption to work and personal rituals; self-doubt; a lack of skills to mitigate the impact of increased exposure to digital and online threats; and a growing need within the journalism community to address digital and online threats with emphasis on online trauma threats. In the chapter that follows, I take these themes derived from this data and use them to underpin lived histories of four journalists from different parts of the world. These four works of journalism, as described in the Methodology (Chapter Two), build on and explore deeply the emergent trends and their impact on the professional and personal lives of the journalists. These trends manifest frequently in the personal stories. The personal histories explore the strong impact of these trends on the lives of the journalists. The personal stories

contained in the artifacts attest to the intimate interlock between the endeavour of performing the professional duties of journalism and the personal life of that journalist. Relatedly, they build on the need for more skills and awareness on journalism and online trauma threats expressed by experts in the field, McMahon, Newman and Rees, in their interviews. In line with the survey results and expert opinions, the lived histories also substantiate and enforce the urgency and immediacy of these dangers, strongly establishing the conclusion of this research that more resources and research energies must be invested to explore journalism and online trauma threats and develop effective mitigative resources.

Chapter Four: Essays

Introduction

The following journalism essays are derived from the interviews and survey data and as a form of creative/professional practice research artefacts, they also constitute my findings. They are framed by the themes of disruption to work and life routines, resilience and self-belief, self-censorship and self-doubt and a need for more skills, which emerged from the interviews and the survey. Though framed by different themes, the essays are interlinked and stand together as a four-part series of long form journalism. They also form an integral part of the thesis.

As described in the Methodology section (Chapter Two) of this thesis, the essays purposely adopt a journalism writing style as they draw together subject matter, professional practice and research data. References and explanatory notes are included as footnotes.

The names of the journalists who took part in the interviews are changed and pseudonyms used, with their consent. The experts are identified by their name and affiliations for which they gave consent. Personal details of the journalists, country of residence, nationality, city of work, work affiliation and age are withheld to de-identify them for ethical practice. Outside the restricted use of these details, descriptions of their personal experiences, thoughts, impressions, and comments are used without censorship.

When COVID-19 related restrictions were imposed nation by nation, journalists found work and life routines they were used to and felt safe within, disrupted. This essay examines the initial reactions to the lockdowns. Working from remote locations using online tools created a bubble with limited human interaction. These reporting circumstances highlight and reinforce the isolation of this new work and life environment. Isolation foreshadowed the loneliness and the erosion of personal safety.⁸

The most immediate impact of the COVID-19 lockdowns and restrictions to mobility that journalists experienced was the disruption to work and life rituals. Kavitha, a female journalist in her mid-20s, working in a South Asian country, felt that she was not prepared for the sudden imposition of the lockdowns.

Mid-April 2020, as COVID-19 infections rose steeply across the world, Kavitha was on a flight. She was on assignment with a photographer to a remote part of the nation where she worked. By then the region had endured the first wave of COVID-19 infections with less than five cases. Kavitha had not made any prior preparations in case of lockdowns. When her flight landed, her phone pinged with messages informing her that sudden lockdowns were imposed. There was apprehension.

“We were going with that uncertainty that things might change in a few days,” she recalled on the decision to continue with their assignment.

The first discussion she ever had with a colleague on the impact of lockdowns on her work, took place with her shouting to make herself heard above the noise of an aircraft, standing on the tarmac of a remote airstrip with heavy winds slapping her face. They could have boarded a return flight, but instead decided to trek for one day to get to the location of their story.

“The first decision we took after [the] lockdown came into effect was to keep going and put our story out,” she said.

Kavitha said they did not consider abandoning their assignment and heading back because they did not have the awareness to assess the full impact of lockdowns. It was after they

⁸ All names of interviewed journalists have been changed

reached their destination that they realised their story had changed from its original form. Their contact, who they had known for years, insisted they stay outside the gate and interview him. As she stood outside and did the interview, other villagers showed that they were not keen about the presence of outsiders.

“We were forced to report from outside [and] the villagers were saying [they] should keep outsiders away,” she said. The journalists then scrambled back to a life, according to Kavitha, they never imagined in their wildest dreams.

“I think this whole year has been so different. It has completely changed the way we work.” Before they could secure two seats on a flight back home, they had to wait a day at the small regional airport.

Since that trip, Kavitha’s reporting has been predominated by the pandemic and its impact. She was confined to her office immediately following the lockdowns. The office building had residential space for one person. She worked remotely from the premises for more than six months. During those months she spoke to her mother only on the phone. Her two main human contacts during that time were her husband, who visited when permitted, and the photographer she worked with. Even after the lockdowns eased, she continued to work with the expectation and preparation to go into sudden remote working conditions.

She was not alone, nor was she in the minority. COVID-19 has dominated the global news arc unlike any another story in the last 50 years. Ninety five percent (43 participants) of the journalists who took part in the online survey for this research said they had reported on the COVID-19 pandemic.

“Health reporting became much more hectic, much more intense and heavy,” survey Respondent 20 said, thinking about how COVID-19 changed the work tempo. Not only those who used to report on health or related fields – everyone who was reporting or available to report had no option but to engage in reporting the pandemic, the respondent elaborated. Kavitha was the sole reporter for her organisation in her country. Before the pandemic, she reported on a variety of stories including Chinese influence in the region, cricket, Himalayan climbers and novel tourist attractions. One story would dominate a week, occasionally a few weeks. Rarely, like in the instance of the border closures between India and Nepal in 2015, a story took all reporting resources for a few months. The pandemic however moved journalists like Kavitha to report on one story for more than a year. When we spoke, nine months after she had first moved into her office to live and work, Kavitha was still reporting on the pandemic or related stories.

As survey Respondent 30 said: “My work in general intensified and there was the added burden of managing reporters who had never done any health, medical or science reporting, and who were suddenly out of their depth and experiencing their own fears about COVID and trying to report at the same time.”

The pervasive physical dangers and the restrictions on mobility influenced a unique set of reporting circumstances. Demands of the job increased for journalists who continued to report during the pandemic. To meet the increased requests for stories, they relied more and more on online and digital resources. This dependence on online tools disrupted rituals and routines that journalists were used to and felt safe within.

In an adjoining South Asian country, Suren, a millennial digital native journalist, was stuck inside an apartment with a flat mate when the first lockdowns were imposed during the first quarter of 2020. He found it hard to adjust to gathering news and information online, despite considering himself tech-savvy. He said that he was used to gathering inputs for his reporting in the field and then disseminating them online. Not much later, his office asked him to work from home, reduced his work a few weeks later and finally put him on compulsory leave without pay. As in the case of Kavitha, Suren recounted that he felt he had not prepared adequately for the lockdowns. However, in both instances there were signs indicating their respective governments were considering imposing lockdowns weeks before they were imposed. When the first lockdowns were announced in March of 2020, Suren decided not to move to his home state from the apartment he shared. Soon he was working from the apartment.

“Then what happened was we got a notification that all flights, all domestic flights were going to be stopped from the next day. It was actually my birthday. And it was a birthday cooped up at home with just my flat mate and the two of us were still sort of doing what we could,” he said.

“Everyone and everything [were] on Zoom and every meeting was three hours, it was overwhelming,” Juana, a Latin American journalist said. Juana’s hope was that her work would not suffer when lockdowns were announced in the Latin American country she lived and worked in towards the end of March 2020. She expected to spend a few weeks stuck indoors. Her plan was to emerge from the hiatus recharged. She was fully prepared to get back to her freelance career as a journalist and a trainer seamlessly once the lockdowns ended. But nothing could be further from reality, a year after the lockdowns were imposed.

Older than Kavitha and Suren, Juana also had more experience in working and reporting from hostile environments, like when she reported on narcotic smuggling networks. However, similar to her two colleagues, she admitted she had not prepared herself for the lockdowns.

“We didn't understand what was happening. We didn't have sources,” she said.

Still under varying degrees of restrictions and the ever-present possibility of sudden lockdowns in April 2021, Juana said she had to make an effort to keep her focus during half an hour conference calls. She never anticipated the lockdowns to endure as long as they did. Similarly, she did not prepare to be staring into a screen, talking with others for hours and hours while in lockdown. When she spoke to me, early evening her time, she seemed tired, frequently closing her eyes, and talking slowly during the interview. She told me she was not keen on Zoom meetings that took more than thirty minutes.

The strangest adaptation during lockdowns for her was virtual meetings. She found that work related meetings were now going on for hours. The lack of physical mobility meant that she was spending little time outside the house she shared with three colleagues. She found it hard to get away from the screen. The lack of person-to-person contact became harder to handle as the number of virtual meetings and their durations grew.

“There were many, many meetings and all these things you cannot turn off. You cannot turn off your cell phone because you are connected to the news,” she said of days when one Zoom meeting was followed by another and another. She felt sapped of her energy by the daily roster of virtual meetings, constantly brushing her untied hair off her forehead. Instead of the enthusiasm to follow through on story tips, she felt drained most times she logged into a meeting.

“[They] need a lot of concentration; at the beginning it was really difficult because it was like many hours and you feel like [they] suck all your energy [out],” she explained.

Like most of her colleagues, Juana had not acquired the skills to effectively manage the sudden pivot to online resources the pandemic enforced on global journalism. Like other journalists, she also was not forewarned by her managers or her journalism community on what to expect when the lockdowns came into effect. To compensate for her lack of skills and awareness on mitigating these impacts, she came up with a simple plan. She made excuses like she was on another call or that the connection was unstable. But a year into the lockdowns, she was still unable to fully deal with the impacts of digitally reliant remote working. In April 2021 during a Zoom meeting, she said she was in need of a ‘digital detox’

after spending more time than ever before online during the last twelve months. She also apologised if she sounded rude when she said she may have to limit our call to thirty minutes.

“I don't want you [to] feel that my comment about one hour Zoom is because [of] you,” she said at the end of the interview. The interview took longer than half an hour.

In South Asia, Suren, much younger than his counterpart in Latin America and much more familiar with the digital space, suddenly found his workspace and personal life shrinking around his electronic devices. As he began working from his apartment, Suren's work life, personal communications and recreational activities were all now reliant on his computer screen or his mobile phone.

Speaking of his online usage, he said it increased exponentially because other forms of entertainment and personal communication vanished. He was using his phone and computer to watch movies, work on his stories and talk to family and friends; sometimes engaged in all of these activities while in bed, under the sheets.

He said: “I think one thing that's happened is that work from home has also changed the settings in which we work [in]. Like for example, I would be working out of my bed with a blanket on in the winter. Sometimes, I saw that that affected my productivity as well.”

He said that his work activities and those outside of his work, like watching movies or talking to his friends, now took place from the same location, his bed or his living room. He shifted from one to the other with no visible breaks in between. On the morning of his interview in February 2021, he had slept a few hours the night before while working on a story on online hate and misinformation from his apartment. He spoke from what appeared to be the living area of his apartment. A string of lights, similar to those used in online videos, was hung in the background using an empty lightbulb socket as a peg. He was late to get on to our meeting and then asked me to wait online until he finished a quick shower.

“I was sleeping two to three hours for the last three days. There is a very, very big project that we are trying to put out by Friday, and there [are] loads of work left. [I have been] literally on two hours sleep on Sunday or Monday. And today is the final day. I need to get the work done for the project,” he said.

With the pandemic, Suren had adopted a high intensity work cycle without frequent in-person contacts with others, a pattern identified by the other journalists interviewed as well. He spoke fast, frequently gesturing with his arms when he related frustrating situations.

The shrinking human to human interaction was something that other journalists also tried to deal with. Sebastian, a European journalist based in North America as a correspondent for

a European TV network, said that the feeling of being cut-off was reinforced every time he stepped outside. He had been working from a remote location for a few months when he walked through Times Square in New York one day to buy a phone. It was during that walk that he suddenly felt the full impact of the isolation. Times Square before the pandemic was always full of people at any time of the day and night, he said.

“I walked across Times Square. At that time there were only two people [in] Times Square, it was me and one more person which is totally surrealistic, because normally you know, there's thousands of people there,” he said.

That one person he saw was symbolic of how his work routine had changed. He was used to going on location full of people to record his stories. Now he was confined to his office and his reporting was reliant heavily on online accessibility of others, he said.

“We went to Las Vegas and did a story on the lockdown on the strip there and everything was closed down, every hotel and casino was closed down and there were no people at all,” he recalled.

He said while he was contacting sources online, his offline activity mainly consisted of travelling long distances, driving rental vehicles. He described the journeys as an extended effort to keep in front of increasing restrictions.

“The problem was that they were coming [up with] new restrictions every day. For example, in xxx⁹ I wasn't aware of it that we had to quarantine for two weeks when arriving, so we just stayed there one night and then we drove, and we entered xxx¹⁰ half an hour before new restrictions coming in that stated you had to sit in quarantine for two weeks. We just got in there before that.”

Back in South Asia, as he was trying to cope with the disruption to his lifestyle, Suren did not possess the skills to make safe choices. During his interview on Zoom he said that he felt that not only did professional journalists like him find themselves unprepared to meet the challenges of remote working, media companies also lacked the same expertise. The company he worked for did not admit to the lack of skills but plunged its journalists into work from remote locations on a fast moving, dynamic and dangerous story, he said.

“The company had to decide that we are not going to be sending out reporters anywhere. Reporters were encouraged to report from home. They should have dealt with it in a more humane manner because that was completely lacking,” he said.

⁹ Location deidentified

¹⁰ Location deidentified

Managers and the companies were not professional in their communication with the journalists working without the usual human to human contact and the safety net of colleagues. His view was that lack of support compounded the disruption and isolation he felt all around. The isolation intensified, according to Suren, as infections and subsequently fatalities due to COVID-19 increased. The four journalists interviewed said that they had little recourse to opportunities to discuss their own fears and work-related anxieties; their interactions were limited to a few colleagues who understood the dangers.

As the pandemic worsened, many journalists realised that they were facing renewed physical dangers and threats to their mental well-being. As the survey established, journalists were aware of online trauma threats. They were also keenly conscious that they lacked the skills to identify these threats and mitigate against them. One of the first recourses for help that journalists turn to when they feel they need help is the organisations they work for. However, in this case, most organisations lacked the capacity to provide help. Sebastian identified this lack of capacity and lack of effort to rectify them as a callous disregard for journalism safety and a case of employer negligence.

“When we spoke to [headquarters], they seldom asked questions about our own safety and the risks that we were taking. It was more about the reports that we were delivering from different situations or places. [It was] not so much about our own safety and security,” he said.

Spread of the pandemic, the restrictions to normal life and the demands of the job were coalescing to undermine the sense of security and safety that journalists gain by working within a community and living in a community. Journalists acknowledged that the story was in control of their lives, rather than them having at least some control. Kavitha, young and newly married, said she was comfortable living and working in her office alone. What made her uneasy was communicating remotely with loved ones.

“It’s a different way to show that you love someone by staying away from them, that’s a very difficult way to show someone that you love them,” she said of the numerous phone calls she had with her octogenarian mother during the lockdowns.

Researchers Anthony Feinstein and Hannah Storm have recorded similar patterns of erosion of personal safety foundations among journalists thrust into reporting dynamic but potentially traumatic stories. In their research into the well-being of journalists who reported the European migrant crisis, Feinstein and Storm described the transgression of personal

moral values and ethical codes as a risk to safety highlighting this phenomenon as ‘moral injury’.¹¹

However, unlike assignments similar to the European migrant story, the pandemic did not offer practical getaway points. There were no effective means to create a safe mode or distance between the story and the journalist covering it, said Gavin Rees, director at the Dart Centre for Journalism and Trauma, Europe. Journalists who covered the pandemic had no experience reporting a story of such magnitude, width, and dangers, Rees explained. He said that the story was potentially dangerous to the closest communities the journalists were linked to and could potentially persist for years. Rees and two colleagues termed reporting the pandemic, “trauma on our own doorstep”.¹²

“[It] is really tricky because you might be reporting all day and then feeling the need in the evening to check the news. This is heavy loading of negative, vicarious, potentially traumatic material that people are absorbing in the course of their working days. We describe this kind of phenomenon of always being on and being unable to switch off,” he said.

Elana Newman, Professor of Psychology at the University Tulsa and the research director at the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma, US focused on the disruptions caused by the pandemic to behavioural patterns defining work activities and those outside of work. Journalists were used to these daily patterns and felt safe within them.

“I think the pandemic has challenged people in multiple ways. Their boundaries between work and home are much more complicated,” she said. The sense of turmoil around them and the absence of any kind of break from it led to journalists feeling entrapped within this unique work and life environment.

Kavitha referred to this situation as ‘*homing from work*’. She described it as a situation where she was living in her office full time. She spoke with me from her office. Unlike in the case of Suren, the room was neatly arranged and gave the impression of a professional workspace.

Because their primary means of communication and connection to the outside world was mainly the lit-up screen of a phone or a computer, journalists were exposed more to online trauma threats than before the lockdowns. They range from content, at times fake on the spread of COVID-19, user generated content and reactions and graphic content and

¹¹ Feinstein & Storm 2017, pp. 4-5

¹² Jukes, Folwer-Watt & Ress 2021, p. 2

information, as the survey results established. These threats potentially include details of the spread of the disease in areas where the journalists or their loved ones lived.

“I think it does increase the intensity because in a lockdown people are feeling a sort of a sense of entrapment already just because of the nature of COVID and having to stay indoors. People are not accessing their normal social supports in the same way,” Cait McMahon, the managing director of the Dart Centre for Journalism and Trauma, Asia Pacific said, describing the impact of online trauma threats during lockdown.

The pandemic created a reporting environment with sustained dangers and work demands. Those however, McMahon contended, came on top of existing work and life related challenges. Journalists who were working in environments where there were sustained, populist anti-media narratives, felt they were under renewed threats once the lockdowns came into place, a phenomenon researchers describe as morally motivated networked harassment.¹³

Suren described this when he talked of working in an environment where journalists frequently came under attack: “It does get very difficult to cope with mentally, psychologically at times. It's often very overwhelming.”

This is the everyday dread that the pandemic created for journalists, according to Newman.¹⁴ It was a relentless working and living situation that showed no signs of easing or resolving. The investment on emotional labour was persistent as the story kept growing. There was no escaping the demands of the job, Rees said, relying on his research on the impact of the lockdown on journalists based in the UK. He said that the rituals which created breaks from the work cycle were replaced by the everyday dread of continuous, potentially traumatic work.

Rees explained: “I think it is the disruption of rituals. You have all these rituals that separate you from the work. You may go to your work in the office, if you're a regional or local reporter; you may be driving quite a lot, so you may actually be driving like an hour or so to get back home from after having done an interview. There were all these kinds of acts of separation built into a day.”

¹³ Marwick, 2021

¹⁴ Poynter, 2020

As the lockdowns endured and extended into months, journalists experienced how the boundaries separating work from their personal lives were gradually becoming indistinguishable. This essay examines the impacts of that blurring, the sense of guilt journalists felt when professional demands rose exponentially, and how personal circumstances intensified the impacts. It outlines the workings of digital connectivity and the importance of safety-nets and of skills on trauma sensitive journalism to mitigate their potential harmful impacts.¹⁵

Journalism entails long hours under difficult conditions and strict deadlines.¹⁶ Gavin Rees, the director of the Dart Centre for Journalism and Trauma, Europe, reasoned that under pre-COVID-19 reporting conditions there were frequent opportunities for these demanding work situations to be interspersed by routine actions, allowing for time off work and personal exigencies. As he explained in the previous essay, a routine drive, or a mundane task like shopping for groceries can create this break. Not only were these acts of separation becoming less frequent during the lockdowns, journalists also found that the demands of the job and pressures from personal circumstances increased.

In March 2020, Suren found himself confined to a small apartment he shared with a colleague. As the boundaries between his work and personal life blurred, he felt uneasy about the lack of person-to-person interactions much more than of the increasing reliance on online resources.

In a similar scenario, Sebastian found his personal life and activities outside of work taking place in the same room he worked from. He had an exercise bike perched right behind his workstation and exercise bars hung from the frame of the door.

In Kavitha's case her job as a writer and a videographer for an international outlet entailed daily deadlines. Her work schedule was anchored to a news cycle dominated by the pandemic. She worked from the capital. But as the lockdowns intensified, she followed the story of thousands of migrant workers crossing a land border several hundred miles away in an effort

¹⁵ All names of interviewed journalists have been changed

¹⁶ Chen et al., 2018, p. 3

to reach their homes. She enlisted journalists who lived closer to the border to work with her on the story. They had to talk to sources and gain first-hand interviews and footage of the migrants. It was an uncomplicated assignment which later led to a personal dilemma for Kavitha due to situational changes brought on by COVID-19 lockdowns.

At the border crossings, the migrants were spending days stuck inside the buses they travelled hundreds of miles in while authorities cleared them to travel onwards. They were prevented from disembarking from the buses as authorities feared some of them were infectious.

“[When the] first buses that came in, they were forced to stay in the bus. People were scared [that] they will spread to the villages,” Kavitha said.

Journalists had to talk to the anxious and tired travellers from outside. Soon after she reviewed this footage, from the relative safety of her office, on her own, Kavitha said she started to think more of the danger of contracting the virus and of the fear of death due to COVID-19.

“Relying on a local reporter, it also means you are putting that person at risk when you know that person goes out to take a photo, send you a video,” she said.

It was this complicated sense of guilt that made her first doubt her commitment to her job. She felt guilty of undermining the safety of colleagues and their loved ones at a time of grave physical danger. She could do very little to ensure they were safe. She worked on achieving reporting targets with them on a dangerous story. But she did so from the relative safety of her office. She was inflicted with guilt and a foreboding fear of the pandemic. Because she was linked to the outside world through digital tools, she was abreast of the information, both authentic and fake. She said the digital information channels made it hard for her to ease personal anxieties. More so, given her personal support structure was also disrupted by the pandemic.

She said the sense of guilt she felt was complicated. Kavitha said she felt a *dual guilt* that made it hard for her to concentrate on her work. It was when she recounted this experience that she became pensive for the first time during the interview. She slowed down and paused before gathering her thoughts, and detailing her work situation.

She explained: “It is dual guilt. I think you're guilty of not being able to do the story on your own, but you know you have to do the story. There is an important story to tell, but at the same time when you depend on someone else, you know that that person is taking some risk to get that story to you.”

On one level she was dealing with her role of sending colleagues into harm's way; on another, she also was dealing with what was expected of her as a newly married wife, a daughter-in-law and a daughter. She lived and worked in a South Asian country where traditional gender roles are still conspicuous. Her role, she said was that of the daughter-in-law. One that she found conflicted with her professional role as a journalist reporting a pandemic. Her personal circumstances made the situation difficult. As the lockdowns took affect her sister-in-law was living with her in-laws and was more engaged in household work than her job. Kavitha said she felt a deep sense of remorse for putting the demands of her job above those of her close family. Confined to an office fulltime with limited contact to the outside world, she said that it was hard for her to create a safe mental space to work.

"With my husband's family because I have only been married for two years, you know there are certain expectations from a daughter-in-law; because I was working, I think I am also the absent daughter-in-law. When I am more absent, then I feel guilty that I'm absent more than necessary."

Rees said if not for the pandemic related restrictions on movement, journalists would have frequent opportunities to discuss their reactions to their job with colleagues, loved ones and within trusted circles. Living with her family, Kavitha would have had the opportunity to feel safe within familiar personal relationships. The pandemic however, created a situation where journalists like her were working mostly alone while facing challenging personal and professional circumstances. The heavy reliance on pervasive digital technology was a contributing factor to the intensity.

"I think a lot of it is to do with the nature of devices and people checking devices, therefore bringing the content into the home as well and then effectively kind of changing the nature of the home," Rees said.

If not for the virtual connectivity, ironically journalists would have found themselves cut-off completely from the outside world during the pandemic. Digital connectivity allowed for the gathering of information using online communication means.

Despite being cut-off physically from others, journalists who continued work through the pandemic did not witness their information consumption load decreasing. Sebastian, who was working in North America, said that he never worked as much as he did during the lockdowns and US Presidential Elections in 2020, compared to any other time during a two-decade career. He has worked as a correspondent in North America and has travelled to more than a dozen reporting locations across the world to report armed conflict, natural disasters

and humanitarian emergencies. As easily as it enhanced connectivity, digital resources also increased the exposure to potential online threats to mental well-being. The connectivity structured a daily work environment where while he reported on a deadly pandemic spreading through the world, Sebastian often interacted with others who questioned the science of the disease and preventive measures.

“It's hard to describe. We were living under that kind of threat of being infected ourselves all the time. [But], you met with people [who] didn't even believe there was a pandemic. They were acting as if nothing was happening at all,” he said.

He identified his decades of reporting experience as a journalist, awareness on trauma impact due to his work (he has been on a fellowship at the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma, US) and working with a colleague as crucial for maintaining professional standards of his work during the lockdowns. He used his experience and skills to carry out risk assessments on his reporting circumstances. The risk evaluations were programmed into his reporting routine due to his experience of reporting from hazardous locations in the past. During one such assignment, he narrowly escaped being hit by gunshots. He assessed the reporting situation he faced as he would have evaluated any other reporting assignment entailing above average risks.

“I think the experience from [reporting] other kinds of complicated situations like conflicts or natural disasters or unrest, when you do a lot of that, that also educates you on how to evaluate risk,” he said.

COVID-19 presented a completely new set of reporting circumstances, but Sebastian adapted a strategy that has worked for him in the past.

He said: “This was a totally different risk, but, the procedure, the thinking is in many ways similar. You have to identify what is the danger. And how do you protect yourself and your crew? So, I think having that experience from other kinds of complicated or dangerous working environments did help.”

He wanted to continue to report, despite the limited help offered by his company and the mounting dangers of the pandemic and a reporting assignment that demanded he travel across wide stretches of territory. One of the main sources of strength for him was the professional relationship he had with the cameraman he was working with. His colleague was also an experienced journalist who was aware of the mental dangers of their work. The two frequently discussed in detail physical and mental risks and implemented safe working routines.

“I did ask him many times. How do you feel? Just don't hesitate to tell me if there is something that is causing stress or fear or whatever,” Sebastian said of the long discussions he had with his colleague.

It was clear during the interview that he placed a high level of trust on his colleague. He was working in the room next door accessible by an open door during the interview. Sebastian used the speakers of his laptop, and the interview was audible. Both Kavitha and Suren spoke to me alone. Juana became quiet when one of her house mates walked past during the interview.

Sebastian called his two-man reporting team “the optimal team”. However, achieving such a combination requires certain conditions. The two had reported together frequently including on assignments in Iraq, Liberia, Russia and Ukraine before they were paired just before COVID-19 spread rapidly.

“We know each other so well that I almost know what he thinks or how we react in different situations,” Sebastian said, pointing out, “it would be much more difficult if he was a cameraman that I didn't know that well from the beginning.”

However, this relationship stands in contrast with the interactions he had with his headquarters, described in detail in the preceding essay. He felt frustrated and let down by the inability of those at the European headquarters to understand the mental toll the reporting could trigger.

Juana also possessed introductory skills on trauma sensitive journalism. She had taken part in training workshops conducted by the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma, US and held a fellowship. She understood the importance a community-based safety-net creates for journalists, especially for those working in chronically hazardous environments. As the lockdowns became effective in the Latin American nation where she lived, Juana organised virtual meetings among colleagues. She used a network that had set up similar meetings in the past when journalists had come under attack. The organisers of the meetings made sure they enlisted mental health professionals to attend whenever possible. As some of the restrictions eased, few meetings took place in person. They held twelve meetings in 2020 and fifteen journalists attended. She said the meetings were first and foremost a forum for journalists to talk about their lives.

She explained: “Because they felt really bad in the lockdown. They didn't know how to cover, or they didn't know what to do, what to cover.”

The participants at the meetings said they felt relieved at the opportunity to talk about the stressful reporting environment, Juana said. Those who participated in the meetings said their workloads had increased but there was uncertainty about their jobs and their pay. The group also frequently discussed the strains of working from home and the inability to create clear work-life boundaries. Another frequent subject was the reluctance to discuss work related concerns with close loved ones for fear of worsening personal relationships already strained due to the lockdowns. A frequent discussion topic was the feeling of being trapped within the work and home environment and the inability to escape it at least for short time periods.

“They felt [like they were] without space, many people felt, they were in slow motion. Myself, I felt like in slow motion many times,” Juana said. She continued: “You just go to the kitchen and sit and then you are in your office, the job is inside [the house].”

In fact, during the interview she spoke seated at the dining table of the house she shared with three colleagues. Household items like kitchen utensils and a broom were visible in the background next to the pantry. Pictures lined the walls. Behind her was a TV stationed on a desk with books and pens lying in front. At least on one occasion, one of her house mates walked past the screen.

She said it was a new adjustment for her to see her house mates as often as she did during the lockdowns, and to share living and workspace with them. During the interview, Juana emphasised that she felt trapped within her living and workspace. She described online connectivity tools as intensifying her sense of inability to ease the strain on herself.

Unlike Sebastian who said he felt safe due to his relationship with his colleague, Juana at no time expressed any indication that she had established a similar relationship with any of her house mates or participants in the peer support meetings she organised. The contents of the meetings were similar in detail and intimacy to what Sebastian discussed with his colleague. Juana said she felt she was alone in facing up to the work and life pressures exacerbated by the COVID-19 outbreak.

Professor Elana Newman of the University of Tulsa identified an increase in the willingness within journalism communities to engage in dialogues on mental health and related safety issues since the pandemic started.

“I think people are willing to talk about the stressors involved in journalism because some of them are safety oriented and I think they're more willing to talk about work life balance,” she said.

While Sebastian and Juana benefited from prior awareness on trauma sensitive journalism and peer support, Kavitha and Suren did not have the skills or a support network of peers to rely on. Both of them said that they worked through the lockdowns on their own and did not have the support of a close professional community. For Juana, the peer support networks failed to create the safe workspace Sebastian was able to achieve with his colleague. Sebastian emphasised that it was the personal relationship and years of experience working together that achieved the trust between him and his colleague rather than any professionally informed skills that prompted the building of such trust.

Because of the growing awareness on mental safety and the willingness to engage in dialogue, some journalists now are more aware of the dangers when such opportunities are not available.

Suren said that even before the lockdowns, he was working in an environment of toxic online threats, trolling and abuse. Before the lockdowns, he said he at least had the opportunity to discuss these dangers. Despite the lack of skilled interventions, these informal dialogues, he said, helped to alleviate personal anxieties. He also said that when he worked with regular access to an office environment, he felt the safety of a community. The lockdowns removed access to both opportunities.

His situation was aggravated by working in an environment where online abuse and threats were a major safety concern even before the pandemic. In the country he worked in, at least one journalist was murdered following a sustained online hate campaign in 2017.

“Our colleagues get trolled, but not just the volume ... that type of trolling is just absolutely vicious; trolling starts with death threats and rape threats and threats of sexual violence and stuff like that,” he said of the attacks, some of which were recorded, clearly organised and politically motivated.

The impact of such online threats, grave at any given circumstance, was felt acutely by the recipients in lockdowns. Suren said his anxieties increased because he did not have the person-to-person network he was used to working in: “You don't have the network of your friends and your colleagues with whom you feel safe.”

Kavitha explained that a constant concern for her was the low priority her reporting was met with within a large global news operation. While pandemic dangers and infections were rising in the country she lived in, she often found her reporting relegated to a secondary position because larger economies were given more prominence. She said it was disconcerting to feel underappreciated, more so when she felt how nervous the community

she reported from felt. She also felt that the lack of options to talk about her feelings was also making her feel overwhelmed. Her sense of vulnerability was worsened by exposure to online trauma threats. Kavitha made a decision early on in the lockdowns not to engage social media beyond what was necessary for her work.

“I think dealing with it was just being careful, like taking extra precautions,” she said of her decision to suspend her Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn profiles. Her decision was influenced because she felt she spent too much time on platforms like Instagram and Facebook and had no training or professional advice on social media usage. When she suspended her accounts, she was concerned that the boundaries between her personal life and her work were blurring. She felt this not because of any trauma related awareness she had gained but she said she is by nature an introvert.

“I was spending too much time, I was wasting too much time online, that is why I limited myself from all these platforms,” she said.

She frequently came across unverified information online because she was spending extended hours there for her work, due to the lockdowns. She found the firehose effect of the digitally acquired information was unrelenting and she could not disengage easily unless access to the platforms was controlled.

“On platforms like Facebook, people can share so much and there is also a lot of unverified information or stressful videos that people keep sharing, that was also one of the reasons I held out from at least Facebook because [there is] very little filter in that,” she said.

She found it was difficult for her to concentrate on her work, keep tabs on the pandemic while also dealing with public fears and her own personal anxieties. She kept her Twitter feed on to keep up with the news. But most days she said, it was a struggle to keep up with the flow of information and verify what is authentic and what is not.

“I have to check right? So, a lot of time was also wasting time just checking, checking and verifying something we see online. We were given less time to [do] work that we actually value, right?” The sustained effort required was, in her opinion, overwhelming, when there was no clear break in the cycle.

“It also adds to the mental pressure and stress. Facebook keeps popping up while you are trying to actually do your work,” she said.

Researchers identify the physiological impact on a journalist due to chronic exposure to stress as the allostatic load.¹⁷ This impact was amplified, according to Newman, because journalists did not fully anticipate the impact on their personal lives when work shifted from office to home. It was a dynamic story that required constant attention. But unlike other such stories in the past, there was no clear break from the news cycle. There was also little opportunity to create physical distance from the dangers of the story and the journalists and their closest circles of human contacts. As participants in this research revealed, they understood the dangers, but continued to work through them without safety precaution due to lack of skills.

Newman emphasised that based on emergent research trends on the impact of the lockdowns, journalism educators urgently should focus on creating work patterns that integrate peer support as a formal occupational safety network. She said there was already a need for a rethink of journalism practices before the lockdowns, but the pandemic had made the change much more urgent.

“We really have to think through how we are going to have a peer network; physical distancing is not social distancing.”

¹⁷ Thompson, 2021

The lockdowns and the pandemic are likely to influence journalism educators to pay more attention to the lived experience of journalists. This essay explores in detail the impact of the personal and social circumstances on journalists during and after the lockdowns. The absence of personal and professional safety-nets heightened the anxiety felt by journalists leading them to adopt self-censorship practices. It also influenced them to question the value they placed on their profession and themselves.¹⁸

The lived experience of the practitioner plays an influential role in journalism. Despite the benchmark standard of objectivity and unbiased reporting, Gavin Rees the head of the Dart Centre for Journalism and Trauma, Europe, observed that journalism educators acknowledged the influence of the personal and social circumstances of the individual journalists on the reporting as significant. This is especially true of demanding reporting circumstances like reporting the pandemic while in lockdown. Lived experiences of the individual play an influential part in the reasoning behind a journalist choosing a story, a beat or how a story is crafted. In any given scenario, journalists are not immune to life stressors from their personal and professional lives. In some instances, the impact of these lived experiences could be more pronounced than in others. Especially, when the stressors are unrelenting and there are no easily accessible breaks, as journalists witnessed and experienced in reporting the pandemic. In such situations this impact on journalism is more pronounced.

Suren studied journalism during a time when digital abuse and threats directed at the media were rising. In a South Asian country where journalists routinely come under attacks and experience threatening behaviour, the new digital trend was amplified due to the rapid telecommunication developments taking place in the nation. He said that even as a student he was used to being the target of trolling and online abuse. He spoke about one of the first stories he was commissioned to write which explored religious extremism. He was trolled and targeted by online abusers soon after the story was posted online.

¹⁸ All names of interviewed journalists have been changed

“At that time actually, it didn't sort of affect me much because I just enjoyed it. They were literally hundreds and hundreds of tweets, some of them praising but a lot of them just coordinated abuse.”

Back then his awareness about digital dangers faced by journalists was at a novice stage. He and his fellow journalism students sometimes reacted to some of these abuses as a sign of recognition. However, as he began working as a journalist and the intensity of the attacks rose and their content became much more disturbing, Suren started to treat them as a viable threat to his safety

It was after he began working inside a newsroom with regular interactions with other journalists that he became aware of the impact these dangers were having on the lives of colleagues who had faced them longer than he had. Political organisations harnessed the efficacy of digital connectivity into coordinated campaigns on the web. This was a transfer of the traditional mass mobilisation campaigns onto online platforms. If journalists felt that virtual threats remained limited to online platforms, they were misdiagnosing the risk. As Philippines journalist and Nobel Peace Laureate Maria Ressa warned, there are very few signs visible to the untrained user to preempt when these online attacks can move offline.¹⁹

Suren also witnessed this, when communal tensions rose, and protests broke out in the city he lived in late 2019. As the civil protests grew, journalists began to report the riots. However, there was no professional assessment of the offline and online risks similar to what Sebastian conducted on his own before venturing to report on the pandemic. Suren's colleagues from minority communities who were facing online abuse were physically attacked as they conducted their work duties. Mobs stopped journalists and questioned them on their ethnicity or asked questions about their physical attributes like beards or dress code. Journalists from minority communities were physical attacked and verbally abused during these encounters. Faced with an unpredictable threat, some of the journalists took to the practice of hiding their ethnicity when in public. Before they ventured out to report, they had decided on a false identity. They also made sure their colleagues knew details of the assumed identity.

¹⁹ Posetti 2017, p. 38

“When they were caught by mobs who then asked them their names and I get goosebumps even while telling [how] a fellow journalist of mine had to lie about his name. He and his camera person went with predetermined names,” Suren said, clearly disturbed.

Suren acknowledged that there were signs that online toxicity was manifesting offline as well. One such instance was when a recording of a telephone conversation between a reporter and a source was leaked. Suren said there was no official investigation into the leak. Then the trend took a deadly turn. One senior journalist who was a target of online trolling was shot and killed in front of her home in 2017. There was no closure in the murder investigation when lockdowns were imposed in 2020. There was also no concerted official government or law enforcement reaction to digital abuse.

The unrelenting exposure levels of sustained toxic online threats was emphasised when eight months after Suren spoke to me, his Google profile was hacked and compromised. Suren later made a police complaint on the breach.

Despite the signs, Suren said the media community was not equipped with the skills to make a reasonable assessment of the online threats. This was especially true when online threats were linked to offline dangers, he said. The newsroom he worked in did not carry out threat assessments to forewarn of the dangers. The restrictions and the changes to the work patterns exposed Suren and his colleagues even more to the toxic online platforms.

As mentioned in the preceding essay, Suren was also facing up to these threats without the safety net of his work colleagues and industry networks. Research has shown that stressors faced by journalists are not limited to those linked to their work. They encompass personal stressors like life circumstances and social stressors like the lockdowns and restrictions on movement.²⁰ Even though he said trolling and abuse had become part of his journalism, Suren found that working from home and isolated from others made the impact more pronounced than he had experienced before. Suren appeared refreshed when he spoke to me, but he often expressed his frustrations at his work condition especially, when he spoke of being restricted to an apartment with little interactions with his peer networks.

One incident forced Suren to analyse deeply the connection between content shared and consumed online. A few weeks before this interview, he forwarded a graphic video to a colleague. He told me he did not stop to evaluate the content, its usefulness to the recipient or the impact it would have on his colleague. As soon as his colleague opened the video, Suren

²⁰ Osmann et al., 2021, p. 8

received a message asking him why he had not thought of including a warning message on the content. Suren said soon after his colleague's reaction, he thought more about how he and his colleagues were habitually exchanging graphic content without weighing their usefulness or their impact.

Suren was of the opinion that working within a toxic online environment isolated from others had heightened the sense of vulnerability he and his colleagues felt, concurrently desensitising them to graphic content when sharing such content.

"Living in a country like we are in, this onslaught on democracy and democratic rights does get very difficult to cope with mentally, psychologically," he said.

When it became too much, he and his colleagues took the option not to invite or provoke abusive online reactions. They moderated their online interactions and some of them even censored their reporting in an effort to lessen online hate and attacks. They held back expressing their opinions when they felt they would attract online attacks. On other occasions, Suren said, they would disengage from online conversations connected to their reporting.

Self-censorship is the easiest option unskilled journalists opt for when online toxicity becomes overwhelming, Kavitha said. "I think dealing with it was just being careful, like taking extra precautions where you do [the] math and not touch anything," she said referring to minimising online engagement.

When the lockdowns were imposed, she, like many other colleagues, did not have the training to assess the risks and take appropriate action. She had not acquired a skill set that would have allowed her to deal effectively with these threats while continuing to work as a journalist without limiting online activity or resorting to self-censorship. She worked for a global wire service and had access to resources that journalists working for national or regional news outlets do not. But she confided she cannot seek assistance from her employer because the organisation does not have the resources or the personnel with such expertise. Nor, she added, had the organisation recognised online threats as a serious occupational hazard faced by journalists across the world.

Kavitha said she clearly saw that the risk dynamics of online threats changed during the pandemic. She pointed to the impact of fake news during the lockdowns.

"I don't like to use the term fake news, but unverified information about [the] virus like you can do this or you can do that. You know a lot of it was unverified, and because people

have the time to put these things out. Consumption also increased drastically, I'm sure because you are constantly on your phone," she said.

During the lockdowns and thereafter, the spread of fake news was higher than before. Similarly, as the interviews and the survey have established, journalists have also become more aware of the impact of fake news on their work and on their role as journalists.

"That is something you are exposed to only because you're online," Kavitha said of the online exposure to fake news, adding, "I don't involve, I don't engage because there are lot of fights and back and forth online."

Despite his years of experience and feeling confident that he can handle a pressure situation like reporting on the pandemic for months removed from his family, Sebastian limited his online engagements when confronted with fake news. His reasoning for self-censoring his online engagements was similar to Kavitha's. Both of them felt they lacked the skills to mitigate the impacts.

"I never got into discussion[s]. I think that's the best strategy because you cannot remove it from Twitter. That's very difficult. So better, just keep quiet and don't go into interactions and don't debate," he said.

Dr Cait McMahon, founding managing director of the Dart Centre for Journalism and Trauma, Asia Pacific, attributed the growing awareness of the impact of fake news among media communities during the lockdowns and after they eased, to the heightened emphasis it gained in general during the twenty months between January 2020 and August 2021.

"Little bit like [what] we call the cocktail party effect where you buy a Toyota car and then all of a sudden you start seeing a lot of Toyota cars out on the road. So, I'm wondering if the awareness has become a bit more attuned to some of the dangerous information. So, then they start seeing more dangerous information out there, not that they are imagining it is there, but they're just noticing it more," McMahon said.

The unrelenting nature of fake news, dangerous information, abuse and harassment faced by journalists was worsened by other factors. They were spending more time than ever online, increasing exposure levels. Their overall physical interactions were limited. They also found access to rituals and social networks which created safe space diminishing. There were also fewer opportunities affording the chance to discuss their work with others. The confluence of all these factors led to journalists censoring their online activity and journalism. It also made them lose confidence in their own work and its impact.

Kavitha's initial reaction to fake news and abuse was similar to that of Suren's. She considered them an annoyance and at worst, a disruptor. But she said with the COVID-19 lockdowns, she realised they were far more dangerous and impactful.

"[It] really impacts [the] next thing you put out online or next thing you write as a journalist, because you're afraid of the feedback you are going to get or the questions you are going to get. So, you might not write about something controversial, because then the trolls are going to come after you. And that of course impacts reporting overall," she said.

None of the journalists interviewed or who took part in the survey assessed that they possessed the skills to deal with online trauma threats effectively without censoring their journalism or their online engagements. Juana said that some colleagues became less communicative as the lockdowns endured.

"I noticed that they were like really, really bad and they never talked about what happened to themselves and it's the first time that I noticed that," she said. It was this level of reticence to talk of their experiences that prompted Juana to initiate peer-group meetings.

Suren said that journalists reacted better to proactive initiatives like peer support groups that create a safe environment to express themselves among peers.

"I think we need to have sessions where we talk about these things, because journalists typically don't like talking a lot about the difficulties that they are facing. I feel we don't have a culture where we talk about these problems," he said.

European Dart Centre's Gavin Rees pointed out that understanding the work environment during and after the lockdowns was crucial to assess the erosion of self-confidence in journalists on their own ability to keep the public informed. Journalists were working on a story with clear dangers to the community they lived in for months. Their main reporting tools were interfaced through a screen and digital platforms. The same interface and platforms were also conduits for fake news, abuse and threats that undermined their own reporting. Another factor was that some of the same platforms they used for their reporting were also their main forms of personal communications. Journalists were in receipt of fake news and dangerous information from their professional and personal usage of online resources. They also had lost most of the rituals which allowed them to discuss their reporting situation and feel a sense of strength within a physical community. Some, as the interviews and the survey detailed, faced personal circumstances preventing them from discussing their work situation with their loved ones or trusted colleagues.

Rees described a possible scenario: “So imagine you have done the report, you do a piece that goes on TV and then you watched to your horror, the channel’s social media feed is filled with people or people on Facebook are saying look, ‘you know this journalist found this fake doctor, who's getting money out of the coverage and out of vaccines and it's all a put up job’. So, the sense of moral injury and the sense of aggression come from a section of the audience.”

Kavitha explained a real-life experience linked to that hypothetical situation. “I've seen other people being trolled. I think that can be very stressful if you are trolled by certain people who believe something different than what you said.”

Journalists knew they were working within a corrosive bubble. Most of them wanted to get outside the bubble but lacked the skills to do just that. The research highlights the importance of evaluating the impact of the lived experience on journalism during the twenty months between January 2020 and August 2021 as a first step in the process to provide those requisite and urgent skills.

“The idea that the content, the stuff that you're working with, the words on the page, the testimony of people can have an impact is very difficult. It's been very difficult structurally because of ideas about objectivity within the news industry,” Rees said.

When their pre-pandemic social networks were disrupted, journalists sought reinforcements for mental well-being and self-evaluations of their work. But those reinforcements were not readily available. This essay, while exploring the long-term impacts of lockdowns, highlights the need for skills enhancement on digital safety and mental well-being, especially skills to promote trauma sensitive journalism.²¹

During the extended lockdowns and remote working, journalists acutely felt the absence of rituals that they had become used to. One such ritual which constituted an integral reinforcement of strength was interaction with others. Journalists had less opportunities compared to the pre-pandemic period to interact in person with others, especially with the journalism community. This was the same for work-related networks and personal connections. Clinical psychologist Professor Elana Newman of the University of Tulsa said that even she missed meeting colleagues at the coffee machine or the water-dispenser, and the casual chats that ensued at these chance meetings.

Kavitha and Suren, who worked alone and had little recourse to connections with others, expressed similar feelings of loss due to lack of physical connections. They both struggled with the restrictions on relationships and the effort needed to maintain them through the lockdowns. Suren faced a situation where he was denied not only the reinforcement of his peer network but also a job when he was furloughed. He found it difficult to work on stories remotely.

“Suddenly we were told we needed to work on stories sitting at home,” he recalled describing the complicated work life environment. The furlough announcements came without any prior warnings. Suren and his work colleagues were already spending hours online working on difficult and depressing stories. They used the same resources to discuss their personal and professional circumstances following the changes to their employment status.

“They should have dealt with it in a more humane manner, I think the pandemic was a huge factor mentally,” he said. When he finally decided to return to his family home from his city apartment, he had to rush to the airport and then spend ten hours securing his seat. He

²¹ All names of interviewed journalists have been changed

said that while working on stories on the pandemic, losing his job and fleeing the city, he longed for his network of friends and colleagues.

“I think the pandemic was a huge factor mentally in taking these big decisions without the sort of connections that would otherwise have been there,” he said.

Gavin Rees, head of the Dart Centre for Journalism and Trauma Europe, and two other colleagues spoke with 11 journalists from the United Kingdom during the lockdown for a research project examining the emotional impact of working through them²². He said that a common complaint the participants expressed was the lack of communication from their offices or managers that exacerbated the isolation due to reduced personal exchanges. As their concerns on reporting the pandemic increased, they found their interactions with their offices were restricted.

“They found these elements alienating; they also found the sense that they themselves could be the bearers of the virus, particularly troubling,” Rees said.

Sebastian also said that he felt demotivated due to the lack of effective communication from his Europe based headquarters. Rees and his colleagues identified an emergent trend from their interviews. As this lack of communication persisted journalists, mostly working on their own, thought more about its absence and tried to analyse the reasons. Coming on top of a high work volume and an extremely tense work and life situation, the lack of communication from managers and work colleagues led to what Rees terms as the strain of ‘workplace paranoia’. Journalists also faced the added burden of dealing with increased exposure to online trauma threats like toxic online threats and abuse, fake news and dangerous information.

Despite her attempts to limit her online engagements, Kavitha often analysed her own reporting and the fake information that was available online.

“[It is] so hard to differentiate between what you know, what is news [and] what is real. I think that's also part of [the] online format that you have so much information overload and you are sometimes not sure what to believe,” she said.

The lack of communication and the unrelenting digital exposure created a situation where journalists felt trapped. Dr Cait McMahon of the Asia Pacific Dart Centre for Journalism and Trauma described this as a concentrated focus on work without the opportunity to break out of it. All four journalists who took part in the interviews expressed the inability to disengage

²² Jukes et al., 2021

from the information cycle fueled by online connectivity. Additionally, digital interfacing like online resources and communication tools which became integral to work made non-work connections difficult to initiate.

“People are not accessing their normal social supports in the same way [as before the pandemic],” McMahon said, describing work routines during lockdowns where journalists were using the digital and other communication tools to connect for work and for very little outside of it.

“A lot of those normal, social, day to day chatting sort of things are gone. You don't get onto Zoom just to chat with someone. People focus only on work. I'm finding I'm on Zoom at 10:00 o'clock at night,” she said.

This is the same sentiment that Juana expressed when she described how she found it hard to concentrate through frequent online video meetings.

The content and nature of the work had a role to play in how journalists reacted to the circumstances. There was a feeling of immersion in the suffering and loss taking place around them, Kavitha said. As the pandemic spread, she worked on stories on the impact of COVID-19 on those who were victims of disasters in the past. She spoke to a man who had lost family members to a natural disaster. As the interview progressed the man became emotional as he began to describe his personal losses.

“He lost his mother and his house, and we were talking to him. And then he started crying,” Kavitha said. She had not anticipated such an overt emotional reaction. Working whilst in lockdown herself and cutoff from her own safety-nets, her reaction to the exchange was also emotional. She found the moment hard to deal with as a professional journalist. Not only was she facing personal and workplace stressors but within her work cycle she was also experiencing the ‘firehose’ effect of relentless and speedy receipt of information. As she detailed, even after taking down some of her social media profiles on Facebook and Instagram, she was still faced with a daily influx of authentic and inauthentic information linked to a deadly pandemic. She was a frontline recipient of information on the spread of COVID-19 through her own community, and globally. She said it was difficult to retell stories of lost relationships while she herself was trying to maintain personal relationships dear to her, disrupted by her work and the pandemic. On one level she felt guilty that her work had taken precedence over her family, while on another she felt derided by the level of fake news and online abuse.

There were few opportunities for journalists like Kavitha and Suren to discuss their professional and personal circumstances.

“You've got people who are working with lots and lots of negative material. Not necessarily directly traumatic, although some of it will be, but stuff that represents the misery of the world and this is a measure that is often represented in articles,” as Rees described. Relatedly, even when journalists broke off from the reporting cycle by linking into personal networks on Facebook or Instagram, there was no guarantee that they escaped the constant hum of negativity and danger around them.

“To what extent does that negativity or how does that negativity spring off from the screen, if you're spending 70% of your time reading really unhappy, unhelpful, potentially vile comments?” Rees questioned.

As the interviews and the survey explore, confronted online with information contradicting their reporting and abuse, journalists started to re-evaluate the importance they have placed on their profession and their own self-belief in their ability to fulfill the role of a professional journalist.

“If you go home in the evening after that experience or you log off in some way, then I think it's quite probable that you might feel down on yourself, maybe being self-critical, self-attacking because you've been reading all of these critical attacking voices during the day,” Rees said.

As the lockdowns extended through 2020 and into 2021, more signs of stress were visible within the journalism community.

The duration of the lockdowns, the severity of the pandemic, work and personal circumstances coalescing at a time when the opportunities for in-person interactions were minimal, were making her close journalism community vulnerable, Juana said.

“They were not sleeping. They were anxious, irritable,” she said, prompting her to initiate meetings with a small group of colleagues. “When you are in a group, the group supports you and you feel this support, you know that that is important,” she said.

The group meetings were well attended, and participants reported that they benefited from the opportunities to speak freely.

However, personally, Juana was facing difficulties adjusting to the new work-life rituals. Despite her efforts to create a safety net for her colleagues, Juana herself was feeling the impact of relying heavily on digital resources. Like Kavitha, she too proactively made efforts to limit her usage and the time she spent online, despite no prior skills training on how to

initiate either. She made it a habit to pretend to have a bad phone connection when it became hard for her to concentrate during online meetings. She started painting in her free time, an action she took to 'slow down'.

"The cell phone or the internet, that was one of the causes of this. This sensation, this anxiety because everybody wanted, needed to be connected, because you are doing articles and news," she explained.

She needed the technical skills on digital safety as well as similar skills on creating safe work rituals and practices that would enhance mental well-being.

This research emphasises the importance of contextualising the lived experience of the journalist and its impact on the journalism. Juana's urgency to effectively modulate her online habits was influenced by her experience as a journalist and the threats she encountered before the lockdowns. She was aware that she faced serious threats. This assessment was reinforced when investigations by digital experts revealed that her phone number was selected as a number for possible surveillance using the Pegasus spyware, a sophisticated and expensive software used to hack into and spy on mobile phones.²³ The revelation's severity must be assessed within the context of her work environment where journalists have been physically harmed and killed. Juana's anxiety of spending long time periods online for her work was heightened because she did not have access to the network of colleagues as before. It was compounded by the knowledge that she had been under surveillance in the past.²⁴ She also felt that she did not have the skills to mitigate these dangers and well-being concerns she experienced during the lockdowns.

Juana's struggles to create separations between her personal life and her professional life continued even after the lockdowns eased. When she took part in the interview in April 2021, she was still unable to initiate clear boundaries between work and life. She had tried taking up painting during her free time but said that she did not have the skills to create effective work life routines. Juana described herself and most of her close colleagues as 'addicted to news'. She expressed dueling desires to limit her online activity, and the need to be informed before others.

²³ Citizen Lab <https://citizenlab.ca/2021/07/amnesty-peer-review/>

²⁴ It was not confirmed that the phone she used at the time of the interview for this research was compromised because messages from the time of the suspected hack were not located on the phone. The interview was conducted on her computer using a secure Zoom link and there have been no indications either the computer or the interview was compromised.

“I think we need [a] detox, digital detox, or routines to shut off your social media,” she said. Juana’s desire to gain more skills on digital safety has already been highlighted as an emergent trend. The pandemic and the lockdowns increased the attention within the journalism community on mental well-being and online usage habits. Interview participants described this as a positive development. They, however, emphasised that the desire expressed by the journalism community to engage in a dialogue on digital well-being is a precursor for change. Proactive interventions from journalism educators are a must to direct this desire into a community skills’ enhancement campaign. The changes during the twenty months between the beginning of 2020 and August 2021 highlight the skills deficit within the journalism community linked to digital well-being. As Suren pointed out, there was little by way of action to reduce that deficit.

“When it’s talked about, [it is] people saying all that trolling is so bad but there are no steps being taken to actually look after the mental well-being. I think mental healthcare needs to be a company priority,” Suren said, describing the situation.

Even experienced journalists, like Sebastian reaffirmed the need for skills’ development to meet the contingency of the new online threat dynamics. He said that he has not seen the level of attacks on journalists and ‘false information’ at the levels he witnessed during the lockdowns and continued to witness thereafter. Journalists, he acknowledged, were aware of the threats, but due to the lack of skills were unable to take corrective actions.

Describing his own experiences during the reporting through lockdowns he said: “I’ve been wondering a lot about why, how come they [his Europe based headquarters] did not go more into that kind of risk and ask questions or give us instructions or whatever they knew. Of course, both of us are very experienced compared to many other crews that we have at the station. So, maybe they just trust [us]. I don’t know, but I don’t think that’s enough.”

The changes to the reporting circumstances since the first lockdowns during the first quarter of 2020, Rees recognised, have moved mental-well-being concerns to the front and center of journalism education.

“You really need to take care of yourself. You need to think about your own well-being and one reason is that unless you do that, you’re not going to be in a good space or the best place you could be to interview a victim of violence,” he said.

The lockdown effect on journalism could be the catalytic moment that fosters a wider and deeper understanding of digital safety and mental well-being.

“[If] someone in the newsroom said look, I just witnessed somebody shot in the head in [the] street. I need help. Then you'd probably get it because that is a kind of critical incident that people can understand. It is a single event; it is very traumatic. The difficulty with things like burnout and other forms of vicarious traumatisation is that they are kind of slow seeping impacts,” Rees said.

As this research confirms enhancing the skills to safely mitigate online trauma threats has a correlation to the quality of journalism and a community's access to valid, authentic and timely information. The impact of these skills' enhancement endeavours could be potentially widened if the lived experiences of the journalists and the emotional labour they expend on the job are researched further and contextualised with care and attention

Chapter Five: Conclusion

Recommendations

In summary, the research strongly establishes exposure to online trauma threats increased during and post COVID-19 coverage and lockdowns impacting the professional and personal lives of journalists. The lack of skills displayed by the journalism community hampers effective mitigative interventions. Measures like self-censorship and limiting online engagement in turn undermine free-expression and unobstructed access to information; two key core values of journalism.

The main recommendations of this project are:

Journalists

Changes to work conditions during the twenty months between January 2020 and August 2021 reaffirm the need to focus on the dangers posed by online resources on the work and personal lives of journalists. As such, journalists should be aware and possess the skills to identify and assess the dangers inherent within online reliant work conditions and to make appropriate, professionally informed decisions leading to a safe work environment.

- Journalists should pay attention to online usage habits, both professional and personal.
- Journalists need to create routines that allow for proactive breaks in workflow.
- Safety nets and trust circles are vital for mental well-being. As such journalists should aim to create, maintain, and actively engage with trusted loved ones and colleagues to discuss work and personal concerns within these communities.
- Journalism demands quick adjustments to fast moving and dynamic situations. Journalists will benefit from planning work schedules as much as possible and proactively being prepared for sudden changes.
- If work and personal concerns become overwhelming journalists should be prepared to take a step back from work.

Managers, organisational decision makers

This research establishes the importance of mental well-being and digital safety of journalists as urgent occupational safety concerns. Providing safe workspace and a professional work environment for journalists, even those working remotely is likely to increase productivity, diversity in reportage and professionalism.

- Managers and organisational decision makers should create and support dialogue to assess the impact of COVID-19 reporting and the aftermath on journalists and journalism. That dialogue needs to incorporate the expressed desire of journalists to create an effective balance between work and personal life, even when working remotely.
- An extension of that dialogue is the setting up of procedures that effectively monitor and assess work demands and deadlines on journalists, including those working remotely. Managers and decision makers should actively encourage journalists to discuss emotional stresses, if any, prompted by their work.
- Managers and decision makers are also in positions to initiate professional relationships with journalists which in turn would encourage journalists to discuss concerns and hazardous situations in confidence.
- Managers and decision makers should recognise and acknowledge online dangers as an occupational hazard.
- Managers and decision makers should invest resources and personnel to identify and effectively mitigate online dangers. An effective starting point is the appointment of a senior staff member or members as newsroom leads in discussing these dangers.
- Managers and decision makers should create and support efforts whereby journalists can enhance their professional skills to effectively intervene against online dangers

Journalism educators

Safeguarding online safety and mental well-being is crucial for maintaining a healthy press, pushing back against censorship, and guaranteeing unobstructed access to information. Journalism educators play a key role in developing skills to counteract the impacts of online

threats. They are also key early detectors of emergent threats. As identified in the research, journalism educators are in an effective position to develop easily applicable skills that journalists can use to mitigate against these emergent threats and create a safe work environment.

- Journalism educators should invest more personnel and resources into investigating online trauma threats faced by journalists, their manifestations and impacts.
- Journalism educators should invest more personnel and resources into developing effective and applicable mitigative skills against online trauma threats faced by dangers.
- Future research should appraise the effectiveness of skills enhancement programmes currently available to journalists to assess best training content and practices in light of the significant changes journalism has undergone in the last 20 months.
- Journalism educators should invest and promote future research investigating online trauma dangers faced by journalists as a long-term occupational hazard.

Journalists, managers, organisational decision makers and journalism educators

Ensuring the safety of journalists against the emergent dangers of online trauma threats requires a multifactorial approach with active participation of key stake holders, namely journalists, managers, organisational decision makers and journalism educators. Each has a key role to play. While the onus is on journalists to acquire new skills and awareness, managers and organisational decision makers can create a conducive work environment, which promotes such skills' acquisitions. Journalism educators possess the resources to investigate emergent and long-standing threats, analyse their impact and develop mitigative measures. Online trauma threats are dynamic and can change quickly, thus, all stakeholders have the responsibility to work together to deter these threats.

- Journalists, managers, organisational decision makers and journalism educators should work together to categorise online trauma threats faced by journalists as a long-term occupational hazard which can influence the quality of journalism and the safety of journalists.
- Relatedly, acknowledgment of these dangers as a key threat against free speech and unobstructed access to information can be an effective starting

point to counter the impediments they place on freedom of expression and functioning of a free press.

Contributions to field of research

Despite the changes and restrictions imposed on this research by the COVID-19 pandemic, it contributes new understanding about journalism and online trauma. Firstly, it details the available literature on journalism and online trauma. As highlighted in the literature review, despite the advances in academic research into journalism and trauma, such resources investigating online trauma threats faced by journalists remains emergent (Ureta & Fernández 2018). This research was among the first to examine the impact of an online reliant remote working regime imposed on journalists due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The results of the research help establish the importance of creating effective balances between work and personal lives of journalists. The research emphasises the expressed need among journalists for skills enhancement to effectively deal with online trauma threats. These enhancements, if they are to counter these dangers need to be professionally informed, practically applicable and formulated with inputs from academic research investigations and long-term studies.

A critical contribution of this research is identifying the need to reconceptualise how journalists, journalism managers, organisational decision makers and educators evaluate the impact of the lived histories of the journalists on their works of journalism. The same is true of the emotional labour they expend on the job.

As stated above this research shows that inclusive dialogue that takes into account the impact of personal and lived experiences is an effective starting point for this reconceptualisation. Given the results, this study contributes a new understanding of the importance of including online trauma threats and online usage habits as a core element in journalism training and skills enhancements endeavours. This study raises the dynamic situation faced by journalists, managers, organisational decision makers and educators in dealing with the impact of online trauma threats and maintaining journalistic objectivity. Lastly, the research highlights the impact of dangerous information and fake news as an online trauma threat of growing concern.

Future research scope

The dynamics of objectivity and the intimate nature of online trauma impact is a future research direction which this research identifies. As mentioned above, future research should investigate training programmes available on online trauma mitigation and digital dangers faced by journalists. They should seek to establish their effectiveness and practical applicability. An important future research scope identified in the research is the gender dimensions of online trauma dangers. Similarly future research should employ efforts to develop effective and practically applicable mitigative measures against online trauma threats faced by journalists and their short- and long-term impacts. In building awareness on and safety measures against online trauma threats, educators should investigate the impact of dangerous information and fake news on the mental and physical well-being of journalists and the gender aspect of online threats. Focused research on and comparing how online trauma threats manifest and impact in different reporting conditions is another future research direction identified in this project. Lastly future research should consider investigating the importance of creating a balance between work and personal life and multifactorial means to create that balance.

Limitations

Firstly, the research is restricted by the number of participants and the time frame. Despite journalists from across the globe taking part in the research, the scope of the research does not afford the opportunity to investigate the impact of online trauma threats manifesting within distinctly different reporting circumstances. Participants highlight that political persecution, physical threats, geographic location, and different personal circumstances play a role in how they react to online trauma threats. However, the scope of this research does not extend to investigating in depth how these different reporting circumstances influence the impact of online trauma threats. The research also does not differentiate between online trauma threats that journalists are exposed to in two distinctly different usages, namely their personal and professional online usage. Research participants frequently discuss the gender dimension of online trauma threats, especially when referring to abuse, trolling and attacks. However, the research does not extend into investigating the gender dimensions of these threats. Finally, the interviews and the surveys are curtailed by valid concerns of retriggering past trauma. This was a significant and ethical concern during the survey and especially during

the interviews as they all took place online without the option for in-person, participatory observation of the participants.

Conclusion

This research project investigates the influence of online trauma threats encountered by journalists during and after the COVID-19 lockdowns. It seeks to address the main question ‘how are journalists experiencing and responding to online trauma threats they face in the line of work during and ‘post’ COVID-19 lockdowns?’ While answering this question, the research also answers the following sub-questions.

- i. How did online trauma threats faced by journalists during COVID-19-imposed remote working regimes manifest themselves?
- ii. How did these threats impact on the professional and personal lives of the targeted journalists?
- iii. How did these journalists attempt to minimise the impact of online trauma threats?

The personal histories of the four journalists interviewed for this research and the survey explore the impact of online trauma threats faced by journalists during the COVID-19 lockdowns and after they were eased. They detail how COVID-19 related lockdowns suddenly disrupted the work and life rituals that journalists were used and felt safe within. Denied of their social and personal safety nets, the journalists felt isolated and overwhelmed while reporting on a deadly pandemic. As the demands of the job rose, these journalists continued work from remote locations. The same locations they shared with others as living, work and sometimes study space. In this unique environment, they realised the boundaries that created separation between work and non-work routines blurring. Some of them, despite lacking skills and training, tried to initiate breaks between work and activities outside of work to mitigate these impacts.

There are six key findings from the research:

- The time spent by journalists online and usage of online resources increased during and after the lockdowns.
- The new working conditions create disruptions in the work and personal life routines within which journalists feel safe.

- Journalists are aware of these threats and the impact on their lives. They also express their experience that the journalism community lacks the skills to effectively mitigate the challenges of online reliant remote working.
- Fake news and dangerous information are identified as the main online trauma threat during and after the lockdowns.
- Faced with online trauma threats, journalists resort to self-censorship and limited engagement online.
- There is an upsurge in the demand by the journalism community for skills enhancement to mitigate online trauma threats.

The lived experiences of these journalists emphasise the significance of the emotional labour they expend on the job: working within a relentless information cycle, including authentic and inauthentic information, and with few easily accessible peer support networks. Their need for skills to mitigate online trauma threats led them to question the value they place on their profession and their professional capacities. As journalists who took part in the interviews and the survey said, faced with a lack of skills to mitigate online trauma threats, journalists resort to censoring their online engagements in an effort to create a safe work environment. The reliance on self-censorship in turn leads to reducing the access journalists would otherwise have to timely information and their ability to debunk fake news.

This research emphasises the need to recognise the importance of the lived experiences of journalists as a vital influencer. In a work environment reliant on online and digital resources and compounded by the lack of access to in-person interactions as witnessed during and after the lockdowns, the impact of the lived experience is more pronounced and predominantly negative. This is due to the lack of resources and skills to mitigate the impacts. In conclusion, this research strongly emphasises the need for the development of skills to effectively mitigate online trauma threats. These skills will not only lead to a safe work environment for journalists, but also ensure access to authentic and timely information to the community they work and live in.

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Appendix A: Online survey

Online survey – The Impact of Online Trauma Threats Faced by Journalists: The Case of COVID-19

Q1 Declaration by Participant – I have read the emailed Participant Information Sheet. I understand the purposes, procedures and risks of the research described in the Information Sheet. I freely agree to participate in this research project as described in the Information Sheet. I understand that even if I agree to participate now, I can withdraw at any time during the survey or refuse to answer any question without any consequences of any kind. I understand that any data saved during the survey cannot be deleted but would be anonymised in the analysis. By proceeding to the survey, I am indicating that I have read the description of the survey, am over the age of 18, and that I agree to the terms as described above and in the Participant Information Sheet. Download the full survey information sheet and invitation here - https://cqu.sydney1.qualtrics.com/CP/File.php?F=F_cFUM7bQPgiGINzT

☐ I consent

☐ I don't consent

Q2 Where are you based in?

☐ Asia

☐ Pacific

☐ Middle East

☐ Africa

☐ Europe

☐ Americas

Q3 Do you identify as:

☐ Male

☐ Female

☐ Other

Q4 Did you report on the COVID-19 pandemic?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Q5 How long were you engaged in COVID-19 linked coverage?

☐ One week

☐ Two weeks

☐ One month

☐ Two months

☐ More than two months

Q6 What was your main platform for journalism – gathering information, dissemination, and audience engagement during the lockdown?

☐ Online

☐ Offline

Q7 How much time did you generally spend online per day during your COVID-19 reporting?

☐ 1hr

☐ 1 to 2hrs

☐ 2 to 3hrs

☐ 3 to 4hrs

☐ 4 to 5hrs

☐ 5 to 6hrs

☐ More than 6hrs

Q8 How much time did you spend online per day before COVID-19 reporting?

☐ 1hr

☐ 1 to 2hrs

☐ 2 to 3hrs

☐ 3 to 4hrs

☐ 4 to 5hrs

☐ 5 to 6hrs

☐ More than 6hrs

Q9 How much time are you spending online per day right now?

☐ 1hr

☐ 1 to 2hrs

☐ 2 to 3hrs

☐ 3 to 4hrs

☐ 4 to 5hrs

☐ 5 to 6hrs

☐ More than 6hrs

Q10 Were you aware of online trauma threats faced by journalists before you reported on COVID-19?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Q11 What do you understand as online trauma threats? (Only use text, no numerics or punctuations will be allowed by the system)

Q12 What were the most potent trauma threats you faced online during COVID-19 reporting?

☐ Disturbing information (including details of spread of COVID-19 locally)

☐ Graphic content

☐ Trolling

☐ Doxing

☐ Abuse and threats

☐ Fake news

Q13 What were the most potent trauma threats you faced online before the COVID-19 pandemic?

☐ Disturbing information (including details of spread of COVID-19 locally)

- ☐ Graphic content
- ☐ Trolling
- ☐ Doxing
- ☐ Abuse and threats
- ☐ Fake news

Q14 What are the most potent trauma threats you face online after the height of COVID-19 pandemic?

- ☐ Disturbing information (including details of spread of COVID-19 locally)
- ☐ Graphic content
- ☐ Trolling
- ☐ Doxing
- ☐ Abuse and threats
- ☐ Fake news

Q15 How did online trauma threats impact your professional work as a journalist?

- ☐ Made me nervous
- ☐ Made me anxious

- ☐ Made my reporting more negative
- ☐ Made my reporting more numbers based
- ☐ Made my reporting less in-depth

Q16 How did online trauma threats impact your personal life?

- ☐ Made me nervous
- ☐ Made me anxious
- ☐ Made me concerned about the safety (including mental wellbeing) of my loved ones

Q17 Did you notice any behavioural changes in you during COVID-19 reporting

- ☐ Angry
- ☐ Nervous
- ☐ Anxious
- ☐ Moody
- ☐ Prone to substance abuse
- ☐ Lazy

Q18 How did the COVID-19 coverage change your work life? (Only use text, no numerics or punctuations will be allowed by the system)

Q19 How did the COVID-19 coverage change your personal life? (Only use text, no numerics or punctuations will be allowed by the system)

Q20 What changes have you made to your work life since reporting on the pandemic? (Only use text, no numerics or punctuations will be allowed by the system)

Q21 What changes have you made to your personal life since reporting on the pandemic? (Only use text, no numerics or punctuations will be allowed by the system)

Q22 Do you think online trauma threats are a danger to journalists?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Q23 Why do you think that online trauma threats are a danger to journalists? (Only use text, no numerics or punctuations will be allowed by the system)

Q24 Do you feel that you have the necessary skills to understand, identify and mitigate these threats?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Don't know

Q25 Do you think more resources should be diverted to developing skills for journalists to mitigate online trauma threats?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Don't know

You may experience inconvenience in giving up your time to complete this survey. We do not anticipate that participation in this research will cause you any undue discomfort beyond that experienced in normal day to day living. However, if you are concerned, please consider viewing the support available at www.lifeline.org.au or contacting your General Practitioner, accessing professional support through your employee assistance program, visiting the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma for specialized awareness on journalism and trauma and specialized resources for media professionals at the Committee to Protect Journalists and the International Journalists' Network.

Appendix B: Industry engagements

2019

- Trauma Awareness Training, South Korean Journalists, Melbourne Australia – Dart Centre for Journalism and Trauma, Asia Pacific - 2019, August 29
- Reuters in-house training, Vicarious Trauma, Melbourne Australia (online) – Dart Centre for Journalism and Trauma, Asia Pacific – 2019, October 10
- ACOS Alliance, Trauma Awareness for freelancers, New York, USA (online)- Dart Centre for Journalism and Trauma, Asia Pacific representative – 2019, December 8

2020

- Trauma Awareness Tips for COVID-19 Reporting – Nepal Investigative Multimedia Journalists' Network (online) – 2020, May 4
- Mental Health and COVID-19 reporting, conversation with Muna Khan, Faculty member, Centre for Excellence in Journalism, Pakistan (online) – 2020, May
- Mental Health in Mojo – Mobile Journalism Conference, Asia, 2020 (online), Konrad Adenauer Stiftung – 2020, June 25
- Covering COVID-19 safety tips, dialogue with Bangladesh Journalists, Internews International (online) – 2020, July 15
- Covering COVID-19 and mental well-being, International Committee of the Red Cross, Internews International and Dart Centre for Journalism and Trauma, Asia Pacific (online) – 2020, August 31
- Journalism and Democracy, 2020 Transformations in Journalism Research, Education and Practice Conference RMIT University, Melbourne Australia – Journalism Education and Research Association of Australia – Online paper presentation 2020, December 4

2021

- Trauma Literacy for News Leaders, World Association of News Publishers, Dart Centre for Journalism and Trauma, Asia Pacific (webinar) – 2021 January 27
- Psychological and physical safety tips for Myanmar journalists (English and Burmese), Tip sheets, Dart Centre for Journalism and Trauma, Asia Pacific – 2021, March
- Trauma Aware Journalism and Resilience, East Asia Journalists, Institute for War and Peace Reporting, Dart Centre for Journalism and Trauma, Asia Pacific (webinars) – 2021, April
- How COVID-19 remote working regimes increased the potency and content of online trauma threats, Academic Conference, World Press Freedom Day 2021, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, paper presentation (online) – 2021, April 29
- Reporting Cross border issues of Mutual Concern, India and Pakistan Journalist, webinars, East West Center, University of Hawaii, Dart Centre for Journalism and Trauma, Asia Pacific – 2021, May
- Guest Lecture with Cait McMahon, Dart Centre for Journalism and Trauma Asia Pacific – Reporting Global Crisis and Trauma, Centre for Advancing Journalism, Faculty of Arts, The University of Melbourne, 2021, October 1
- Guest Lecture with Cait McMahon, Dart Centre for Journalism and Trauma Asia Pacific – Self-Defence for Social Media Reporting, Centre for Advancing Journalism, Faculty of Arts, The University of Melbourne, 2021, October 22

Appendix C: Ethics approval

Saturday, October 30, 2021 at 06:43:54 Australian Eastern Daylight Time

Subject: Human Ethics Modification outcome - 0000022459

Date: Tuesday, 6 July 2021 at 4:01:27 pm Australian Eastern Standard Time

From: Ethics Committee Secretary

To: amantha.perera@cquemail.com, m.a.perera@cquemail.com, Craig Batty, Sue Joseph

CC: Ethics Committee Secretary

Application reference: 0000022459

Title: The Impact of Online Trauma Threats Faced by Journalists: The Case of COVID -19 Imposed Remote Working Regimes

Your modification request to extend the data collection dates for this project has been approved. The period of human ethics approval will now be from 15/10/2020 to 31/10/2021.

It was also noted that the supervisory team has changed, namely the addition of A/Prof Sue Joseph replacing Dr Liz Ellison.

As stated below, the standard conditions of approval for this research project continue to apply.

Yours sincerely,

Suzanne Harten

Ethics Officer

On behalf of Chair, CQUniversity Human Research Ethics Committee

From: ethics@cqu.edu.au <ethics@cqu.edu.au>

Sent: Thursday, 15 October 2020 4:01 PM

To: amantha.perera@cquemail.com; m.a.perera@cquemail.com; Craig Batty <c.batty@cqu.edu.au>; Liz Ellison <l.ellison@cqu.edu.au>

Cc: Ethics Committee Secretary <ethics@cqu.edu.au>

Subject: Human Ethics Application outcome - 0000022459

Application reference: 0000022459

Title: The Impact of Online Trauma Threats Faced by Journalists: The Case of COVID -19 Imposed Remote Working Regimes

This project has now been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee, either at a full committee meeting, or via the low risk review process.

The period of human ethics approval will be from 15/10/2020 to 31/07/2021.

The standard conditions of approval for this research project are that:

(a) you conduct the research project strictly in accordance with the proposal submitted and granted ethics approval, including any amendments required to be made to the proposal by the Human Research Ethics Committee;

(b) you advise the Human Research Ethics Committee (email ethics@cqu.edu.au) immediately if any complaints are made, or expressions of concern are raised, or any other issue in relation to the project which may warrant review of ethics approval of the project. (A written report detailing the adverse occurrence or unforeseen event must be submitted to the Committee Chair within one working day after the event.)

(c) you make submission to the Human Research Ethics Committee for approval of any proposed variations or modifications to the approved project before making any such changes;

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(d) you provide the Human Research Ethics Committee with a written Annual Report on each anniversary date of approval (for projects of greater than 12 months) and Final Report by no later than one (1) month after the approval expiry date;

(e) you accept that the Human Research Ethics Committee reserves the right to conduct scheduled or random inspections to confirm that the project is being conducted in accordance to its approval. Inspections may include asking questions of the research team, inspecting all consent documents and records and being guided through any physical experiments associated with the project

(f) if the research project is discontinued, you advise the Committee in writing within five (5) working days of the discontinuation;

(g) A copy of the Statement of Findings is provided to the Human Research Ethics Committee when it is forwarded to participants.

Please note that failure to comply with the conditions of approval and the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research may result in withdrawal of approval for the project.

You are required to advise the Secretary in writing if this project does not proceed for any reason. In the event that you require an extension of ethics approval for this project, please make written application in advance of the end-date of this approval. The research cannot continue beyond the end date of approval unless the Committee has granted an extension of ethics approval. Extensions of approval cannot be granted retrospectively. Should you need an extension but not apply for this before the end-date of the approval then a full new application for approval must be submitted to the Secretary for the Committee to consider.

The Human Research Ethics Committee wishes to support researchers in achieving positive research outcomes. If you require an approval letter on university letterhead, please do not hesitate to contact the ethics officers, Sue Evans or Suzanne Harten or myself.

Yours sincerely,

Ms Susan Evans
Ethics Coordinator
on behalf of the Chair, Human Research Ethics Committee
Research Division - Central Queensland University