

Workplace well-being and support systems in journalism: Comparative analysis of Germany and the United Kingdom

Journalism
2023, Vol. 24(11) 2474–2492
© The Author(s) 2022



Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/14648849221115205
journals.sagepub.com/home/jou



Maja Šimunjak 

Department of Media, Middlesex University London, London, UK

Manuel Menke 

Department of Communication, University of Copenhagen, Copenhagen, Denmark

Abstract

Contemporary thinking of journalism as a high emotional labour profession calls into question the systems that are, or should be, in place to support journalists with this labour and in this way mitigate any of its potentially negative consequences, such as those on well-being, mental and physical health, and job performance. By drawing on organisational and social support theories, this article examines the perceptions, expectations, and support needs of journalists in Germany and the United Kingdom, the two European countries with the biggest bodies of practising journalists. Qualitative interviews with 32 German and 34 British journalists reveal important similarities but also differences between the two countries. Specifically, in both countries journalists reported primarily relying on their psychological capital to deal with emotional labour, although many were unsure what exactly constitutes it or how it has been developed. In Germany the social and supervisor support were often mentioned as effective, while in the UK social support was at times found to be hindered by newsroom culture and supervisors' lack of understanding of the job pressures. Finally, it has been suggested by journalists in both countries that organisational support could be improved by an offer of training in emotional literacy for both journalists and managers, establishment of a point of contact tasked with pastoral care, and fair, transparent and formal structures that encourage and enable journalists to effectively deal with emotional stressors in the job.

Corresponding author:

Maja Šimunjak, Department of Media, Middlesex University London, London NW4 4BT, UK.

Email: M.Simunjak@mdx.ac.uk

Keywords

emotional labour, comparative research, organisational support, social support, well-being

Introduction

Until fairly recently, discussions of journalism rarely revolved around emotions. Some of the reasons often put forward for neglect of inquiry into emotion in journalism were views that journalism's role is to support and promote rationality (Wahl-Jorgensen and Pantti, 2021) and that journalists are objective and detached disseminators of information (Kotisova, 2019; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019). As such, any discussion of emotions appeared to be at odds with the principles of the profession. In line with this, acknowledging the emotional pressures in the job seemed to have been incompatible with how journalists were trained and socialised. Indeed, even journalism textbooks have long accentuated the 'macho' and 'thick skin' culture in journalism, characterised with emotional detachment from sources, stories, and reactions to them, as well as the ability to hold one's emotions in check (McCaffrey, 2019). This has arguably contributed to de-legitimising open discussions of emotional challenges in the profession, inhibiting journalists' abilities to recognise and manage these and their effects, and impeding the development of organisational support systems that would support journalists' well-being.

By focusing on the interplay between journalists' emotional labour, workplace well-being, and support systems, the aim of this article is to explore how journalists perceive support when dealing with emotional labour which can have negative consequences on their well-being, job satisfaction and even quality of work (Thomson, 2021), and ways in which they see the support systems being improved to better safeguard their well-being. In doing so, this comparative study draws on theory of emotional labour, as well as organisational and social support theory. Emotional labour is understood as effort that workers, in this case journalists, employ in managing their work-related emotions when facing emotionally challenging situations in the job. It is argued that in performing this labour, journalists can rely on their 'emotional literacy,' that is, psychological capital such as emotional intelligence, resilience and/or self-efficacy, as well as receive support from peers (social support) and/or their organisations (organisational support).

Emotional labour is positioned and discussed as a prerequisite to the (perceived) need for support, with the main focus of the article being on the latter. Indeed, the article primarily contributes to literature on workplace well-being and support systems in journalism, discussing elements of support in an industry that has historically neglected this issue (Thomson, 2021). Particular emphasis is put on structures and strategies which journalists deem helpful and/or they would like to see implemented in this context to assist their well-being and job performance. This line of inquiry is important given that early findings suggest that poorly managed and/or unsupported emotional labour can affect the quality of media output, as well as journalists' job satisfaction, well-being, physical and mental health (Thomson, 2021).

The study also contributes to scholarship on European journalism, as its international perspective based on comparing data from the two biggest European markets in terms of the number of practising journalists, i.e. Germany and the UK, sheds light on the support systems, working conditions, and journalistic culture in this part of the world. There are also several practical takeaways from the study, especially for media organisations, concerned with the bottom-up understanding of the ways in which workplace well-being support systems can be improved to benefit both journalists and organisations employing them.

Emotional labour in journalism

Emotional labour as a concept has been developed in sociology to capture the efforts that labourers put into managing their work-related emotions to meet the requirements of their profession (Hochschild, 1983). It has been extensively studied in public-facing professions where it is expected that labourers need to manage their true emotions in social interactions. And while studies in journalism are still rather scarce on the topic, there is a growing body of evidence suggesting that journalism always was, and is nowadays increasingly, a high emotional labour job. The early studies focused on the ways in which conflict and trauma reporters manage the emotional pressures of their job (e.g. Beam and Spratt, 2009; Dworzniak, 2006), but the field of inquiry has since widened to capture journalists' work more generally (see, for example, Kotisova, 2020; Miller and Lewis, 2022; Thomson, 2021). This scholarship has revealed that journalists put effort into managing a range of emotions in all stages of the story production process (Hopper and Huxford, 2015; Thomson, 2021), but also, importantly, that work-related emotions need managing in journalists' lives 'beyond journalism' as well (Deuze and Witschge, 2018; Fedler, 2004; Miller and Lewis, 2022). Indeed, it has been argued that journalism is an increasingly high emotional labour job due to transformations in the industry, particularly those in the past decade. These include, but are not limited to, the rise of precarity (Siapera, 2019), the need for multi-platform production (Menke et al., 2018), working with social media and engaging with its audiences (Deuze and Witschge, 2018), and dealing with social media abuse (Binns, 2017; Lezard, 2020).

These, and other, emotional pressures related to work have been found to be correlated with a range of negative effects, including poor well-being, physical and mental health, as well as decreased job satisfaction, work commitment, and quality of journalism (Monteiro et al., 2016; Thomson, 2021). Some of the most discussed consequences of ineffective management of emotional pressures in the profession are stress, burnout, and depression (Deuze and Witschge, 2018; Fedler, 2004; Gascón et al., 2021). Indeed, journalism ranks high on the lists of most stressful occupations (Monteiro and Marques Pinto, 2017), and the levels of stress and burnout are reportedly so high among practitioners that many decide to, or at least consider, leaving the profession (Deuze and Witschge, 2018; Reinardy, 2009). With this in mind, it is perhaps telling that a systematic review of studies examining journalists' occupational stress carried out in the mid-2010s found no research focusing on preventive measures that might mitigate the stressors affecting journalists' well-being (Monteiro et al., 2016), in spite of their obvious importance.

Organisational and social support

Definitions of workplace well-being vary, but in general they seem to capture physical, psychological and social elements, referring to physical and mental health combined with satisfaction with social networks, processes and practices in the workplace (Grant et al., 2007; Jain et al., 2017). It is considered to be 'indispensable' for both labourers and their employers (Jain et al., 2017: 111). For workers, it contributes to their job satisfaction, as well as mental and physical health. This translates into work commitment and affects turnover intentions that benefit the employer who attains a dedicated and well-performing workforce committed to its values and practices (Brunetto et al., 2014; Grant et al., 2007). Importantly, Edwards (2004) emphasises the transactional element of some of these effects, suggesting that well-being influences stress levels, but also that stressors affect well-being. Emotional pressures of the job, which result in the need for emotional labour, could be seen as a potential stressor, influencing workers' well-being and job performance (Kinman et al., 2011). Existing research suggests that (perceived) organisational and social support, together with labourer's personal psychological capital, can mitigate negative effects of emotional labour and in this way contribute to workplace well-being (Aldamman et al., 2019; Brunetto et al., 2014).

The central construct in the organisational support theory is the 'perceived organisational support' which refers to a labourer's perception of the extent to which their employer cares about their well-being and values their contributions (Brunetto et al., 2014). This practice of forming general perceptions of organisational support has been found across industries and cultures (Shanock et al., 2019), having strong effects, direct or mediating, on workers' well-being and performance. Specifically, employees who feel assured that there is organisational support for their work and well-being are found to be happier, experiencing less stress and higher job satisfaction. They are also more likely to accept extra role duties, perform better, and are less likely to leave the organisation, which are clear benefits for employers (Chen et al., 2009; Shanock et al., 2019). There are a range of factors that influence perceived organisational support, such as the relationship with a supervisor, opportunities for training and development, recognition of accomplishments, and fair and transparent procedures and policies (Brunetto et al., 2014; Rhoades and Eisenberger, 2002; Shanock et al., 2019).

Supervisor's (perceived) support is at times also recognised as an element of (perceived) social support, which is in the context of a workplace usually defined as support from colleagues and line managers (Chou, 2015). It can be offered as a specific support to solving a problem, in the form of advice and/or practical support, and as emotional support which, mainly through social interaction, contributes to feelings of belonging, respect and affection (Daniels and Guppy, 1997). Social support too has been found to positively contribute to workers' well-being by mitigating negative effects of emotional pressures and contributing to job satisfaction (Kinman et al., 2011). Importantly, both organisational and social support have been found to influence self-efficacy, an element of a worker's psychological capital that refers to belief in one's capabilities to manage challenges they face, which in turn contributes to a sense of well-being (Aldamman et al., 2019; Chou, 2015).

Employee's psychological capital, considered to include self-efficacy, hope, resilience and optimism, can be understood as individual-level ability to support oneself when experiencing emotional and other types of pressures in the workplace. Its key role of being the mediator between support systems in the workplace and an employee's well-being indicates that these support systems should contain elements of training and development that aim to enhance employees' psychological capital, and in this way, develop employees' personal resources for coping with emotional and other challenges and contribute to their well-being. For example, organisations may invest in training in resilience, emotional intelligence, problem-solving, mindfulness, and so on, to assist their workers' development of psychological capital. As well as being better prepared and able to cope with stressors, workers are likely to perceive the offer of training as organisational support (Aldamman et al., 2019; Roemer and Harris, 2018).

In sum, a holistic approach to support in the workplace seems to be needed to benefit employees' well-being (Roodbari et al., 2021). Firstly, training which can enhance their personal resources for coping with emotional labour and other work-related challenges should be offered to employees. Secondly, such support structures and policies should be in place that employees see as fair and transparent, showing care for their well-being and assistance when they face challenges. And thirdly, a workplace culture should be developed, and promoted by supervisors and other leading figures in the organisation, that fosters an environment in which support is readily sought and proactively offered.

In journalism research, the role of support systems has mainly been explored in cases of trauma and conflict reporting (e.g. Al Muala, 2017; Dworznik, 2006; Dworznik-Hoak, 2020; Kotisova, 2019) and more recently in the context of dealing with online abuse (e.g. Binns, 2017; Holton et al., 2021). Qualitative exploratory studies regularly found that journalists mainly rely on their personal resources and individual coping strategies in dealing with emotional labour and job stressors (Holton et al., 2021; Huxford and Hopper, 2020; Miller and Lewis, 2022). The development of this psychological capital has been addressed in some journalism studies under the concept of 'emotional literacy,' primarily by signposting the need for greater awareness of own and others' emotional states, and, if needed, skill in management of arisen emotions (Fowler-Watt, 2020; Richards and Rees, 2011). In addition, a range of studies have found social support from peers, particularly in terms of verbal processing of emotional situations, to be effective and helpful in alleviating emotional strains and managing work-related emotions (Hughes et al., 2021; Miller and Lewis, 2022; Thomson, 2021). Finally, quantitative studies examining the relationships between the organisational support and journalists' well-being and job satisfaction confirmed that very much the same trends are in play as found in other industries mentioned earlier. For example, research suggests that the perceived organisational support contributes to journalists' job satisfaction and well-being (Hoak, 2021) and moderates the impact of stress (Al Muala, 2017). Further, Reinardy (2009) concluded, based on his survey of American journalists, that it is primarily the lack of organisational support, rather than stressors such as deadlines, long hours, and lack of work-life balance, that are encouraging journalists to leave the profession. A decade later, Holton et al. (2021) found that it was the lack of organisational support in cases of online abuse that motivated American journalists to consider doing the same.

This literature suggests that there may be a lack of organisational support in the journalism industry, with journalists primarily relying on their personal resources and peer support in dealing with emotional labour and other work-related challenges. However, the evidence is primarily derived from the American context, leaving the open question of whether the lack of organisational support is endemic to the industry or varies with country-dependent conditions. In addition, there is a gap in our understanding of the type of support that journalists themselves would welcome in promotion and safeguarding of their workplace well-being. In other words, we know very little about how journalists perceive and imagine effective workplace support that would meet their well-being needs. This study aims to contribute to the literature on workplace support systems and well-being in journalism by exploring these two issues.

Research design

In order to answer these research questions, two qualitative interview studies with journalists conducted in the United Kingdom ($n = 34$) and Germany ($n = 32$) were revisited and combined in a comparative approach, focusing on shared themes of emotional labour, well-being, and support systems in the workplace explored via semi-structured interviews in both studies.

The study in the UK was conducted in the context of a larger research project in early 2021 via video calls with British journalists. The German study was developed in the context of a seminar on emotions in journalism with journalism students. Interviews were conducted in December 2019 in person or by phone. Both samples cover a broad variety of established media outlets of different scopes in respective countries, which gives insights into typical yet potentially diverse experiences with support systems (see [Table 1](#) for details of the sample). While research has shown that changes in newsroom structure and journalism culture underlie processes of many years and often decades ([Menke et al., 2018](#)), it is important to note that interviews were done in Germany pre- and in the UK mid-Covid19 pandemic. Emotional labour and evaluation of support systems during the

Table 1. Characteristics of the sample.

		Germany	UK
Gender	Female	15	14
	Male	17	20
Experience	Early career	18	10
	Mid-career	6	10
	Senior	8	14
Primary media platform	Digital	13	7
	Print	15	13
	Broadcast (incl. social media)	4	14
Position	(Senior) reporter	21	20
	Editor	11	14
Total N		32	34

pandemic have been raised in interviews with British journalists, who reported remote work as the most significant trigger of emotional labour and the newly introduced digital support systems as rather ineffective (Šimunjak, 2022). As this data has been reported elsewhere, the current study is based on British journalists' reflections on their general experiences with perceived and expected support in their line of work, similarly to the German sample. That said, it can be assumed that British journalists have spoken in the context of a heightened awareness of their emotional labour and workplace support.

While the studies were developed independently, they share the same topical angle and are based on similar interview questions, allowing for a comparative analysis. Aside from covering emotional labour and well-being in comparable ways, similar questions have been posed regarding experiences with support systems. In the UK interviews, these were 'Do you feel your well-being is well supported in your workplace?' and 'What kind of systems do you think should be in place for journalists' well-being?' In the German study, they were posed similarly as 'If you find certain experiences emotionally stressful, do you have a point of contact in the newsroom?' and 'Would you like to get more support in the workplace and if so, what would that look like?' All questions were designed to explore journalists' general experiences and perceptions of support in their workplace in relation to their well-being. As agreed upon with participants, their names and media outlets have been anonymized. Ensuring anonymity allowed the participants to openly answer personal questions and voice criticism regarding their employers' and colleagues' support without having to fear subsequent repercussions.

After the interviews were transcribed, the authors employed thematic coding using QDA software and developed a shared coding scheme built on the core concepts of psychological capital, organisational and social support, emotional labour and well-being. While these main categories were created deductively from the literature introduced in the theory, additional sub-categories emerged inductively from the material to capture specific aspects (Reichertz, 2014), such as the different types of support systems or particular emotionally challenging experiences. Following qualitative comparative practice (Palmerberger and Gingrich, 2014), the analysis entailed authors sharing and discussing findings with a comparative focus on the similarities and differences in samples. In these sessions, preliminary findings were challenged until mutual interpretations were acquired based on the insights into the material, the literature, and the authors' expertise on the respective country of their study, as is suggested by procedures in collaborative analysis of qualitative data (Cornish et al., 2014).

The comparison of journalists' perceptions of their workplace well-being in the UK and Germany has significant potential to offer insights into the conditions at play in European journalism, as well as offer evidence on the issue of deficient support systems as potentially an endemic problem in journalism beyond the American context. Specifically, the European labour market data indicates that in 2019 over 40% of all journalists in the European Union, which included the UK at the time, worked in the UK and Germany (Eurostat, 2020). Further, an advantage of comparing the UK and Germany is that in both countries journalists work in a media system that can be classified as 'central,' which means they are 'mainly characterized by strong public broadcasting, strict ownership regulation, and low press subsidies' (Brüggemann et al., 2014: 1056). They also share

legislation imposing a duty of care on employers to protect the health, safety and welfare of workers, including journalists. On a cultural level, even if British and German journalists might stem from countries with different cultural expectations towards emotions, the focus on objectivity and detachment in the Western journalistic culture socialises most journalists to align their emotions and emotional expressions in accordance to professional *feeling rules* (Hochschild, 1983; Lünenborg and Medeiros, 2021: 1722). Thereby, differences and similarities in findings might be attributed to variability in newsroom structures and journalism cultures rather than elements of the media systems or culture. For example, Donsbach and Patterson (2004) observed significant differences in role conceptions among journalists of these two countries. They found that political journalists in the UK see themselves as more passive-neutral (i.e. neutral reporter, disseminator) while journalists in Germany follow an approach of active-advocates (i.e. ideologue, missionary, interpreter). Hanitzsch et al. (2019) additionally showed that journalists in Germany perceive less pressure on their work from political and organisational influences compared to those in the UK. These findings suggest that while journalists from the two countries share many similarities, existing organisational varieties can still exert noticeable differences in (perceived) support.

Findings

The findings are presented along the four key areas of analysis: (1) emotional labour, (2) psychological capital, (3) social support and (4) organisational support.

Emotional labour

Journalists from both countries mentioned a variety of forms of emotional labour as being challenging for their well-being. Unsurprisingly, and in line with former research (e.g. Beam and Spratt, 2009; Dworzniak, 2006), conflict and trauma journalists, such as court or war reporters, disclosed that they are confronted with violence and tragedies that affect their health and emotional well-being. Interestingly, other journalists often use them as a benchmark and consequently belittle their own emotional challenges. Yet, most editors and journalists report emotional challenges in their everyday work. These are tied to a variety of activities, including, but not limited to, dealing with sources and interviewees, writing about controversial or sensitive topics, chasing deadlines and working long hours, dealing with online audiences which are often abusive, and so on, as previously observed (e.g. Kotisova, 2020; Miller and Lewis, 2022; Thomson, 2021). This perception of journalism as an emotionally challenging profession with potential risks for one's well-being has three key implications. First, it implies that media companies have a duty of care to support their employees. Second, it justifies journalists' demands for support systems. And third, it makes research into their development and implementation necessary.

Against this backdrop, the various reflections of journalists from the UK and Germany can be assigned to three levels constituting the conditions under which they manage their emotional labour: *drawing on their own psychological capital, social support and organisational support*.

Psychological capital

It emerged as a common theme among journalists in both counties that *'having a thick skin'* and being able to *'handle it,'* is widely deemed essential in the profession to cope with the emotional challenges in the job. However, few were able to explain how this psychological capital is developed and sustained. Those new to the profession as well as senior journalists commonly said that this is something they expect to, or have, learned on the job. Hence, the individual coping strategies, which have most often been mentioned when queried about the ways in which emotional challenges are managed, seem to have been developed independently over time and without institutional guidance.

Those who recognised the need for psychological capital to manage the daily challenges in their work reported that they consciously invest into their well-being in order to mitigate the negative effects of emotional labour, in line with observations by [Brunetto et al. \(2014\)](#) and [Aldamman et al. \(2019\)](#). Often mentioned in this regard are physical exercise and healthy diet. Evidently, general well-being is here seen as a physical resource in mitigating stress. For example, a British mid-career editor described how exercise makes him more resilient and that the resulting optimistic mindset prevents him from a *'negative form of anxiety'* which can affect both well-being and job performance. Recognising one's own emotions and the need for their management has also been mentioned as a personal resource that is used to effectively deal with emotional challenges. A German journalist (female, senior editor) described this psychological capital in this way:

'I know my limits very well. And I don't really want to exceed them. So I make sure that I always have a certain level of fitness, that I have a good diet and that I take care of myself.'

While individual coping strategies have been mentioned in relation to various forms of emotional labour, journalists in both countries have mostly emphasised them in cases tied to online abuse. Similarly to findings of previous studies in the UK and the US ([Binns, 2017](#); [Holton et al., 2021](#)), British journalists perceive that they have to individually cope with audience harassment because they have little support from peers. Indeed, some expressed the worry that they will be labelled oversensitive or unfit to do journalistic work by colleagues or managers because, as a female British senior editor put it, especially in regard to her male colleagues, *'it doesn't happen to them in the same way, so they don't understand. So, it's quite lonely.'* On the other hand, German journalists report being able to rely on social support offered by colleagues in this context, alongside their psychological capital.

Social support

Social support from peers, both in terms of practical advice and emotional support, has been mentioned as common and important in both samples and, beyond the cases described earlier, hailed as quite effective in dealing with emotional challenges. Specifically, journalists welcome opportunities to verbally process their challenges and frustrations

with peers who can easily understand where they are coming from and can offer practical and emotional support. While this has already been reported in other research (Hughes et al., 2021; Miller and Lewis, 2022; Thomson, 2021), this study uncovered that this support additionally depends on the newsroom structure and culture. With regards to the former, journalists in both countries spoke in terms of being ‘fortunate’ and ‘lucky’ to work with colleagues willing and able to give emotional support. This indicates that this form of support is not something that is taken for granted.

With reference to the latter, British journalists may have somewhat different experiences of social support in relation to German, as several British journalists perceived their newsroom culture as not being as conducive to social support. Specifically, in those newsrooms where emotional labour is not acknowledged and verbal processing with peers not practised, journalists felt they could not turn to their colleagues for support. For example, a British early career journalist disclosed that she does not feel like she can trust her colleagues with her emotions. She describes her newsroom culture in this way: *‘If you do share emotion, and if you are affected by something, then you are somehow a bad journalist. [...] We need to do the opposite of that, and, you know, talk about the things so we can deal with them.’*

Several journalists spoke about the need for changing this ‘thick skin’ and ‘macho’ culture in journalism, which has been perpetuated in the journalism education and industry (McCaffrey, 2019), so journalists could be better able to manage the emotional pressures of the job and consequently their well-being. In their view, the responsibility for this lies both with the organisations and the journalists themselves. A male British mid-career journalist sums it up by saying: *‘Maybe from both sides, you know, reporters need to maybe be a bit more kind to colleagues, but also maybe editors to not push that mentality downwards as well.’*

Organisational support

On an organisational level, journalists in the larger UK media have spoken of the corporate support that is organised by Human Resources, mentioning as particularly useful private health plans that include counselling, as well as offers of seminars and access to well-being apps. While many were aware of HR’s well-being initiatives, these were often described as corporate ‘box-ticking’ and not particularly useful to journalists. A male British mid-career journalist offered this example:

‘I don’t mean to be unkind to sort of the HR, but they send through things like, ‘Oh, you can do chair yoga or whatever,’ right? [...] It’s always, like, timed for, like, when there’s a massive political debate or something like that. Like, it doesn’t necessarily take into account of what the structure of the job is.’

Major HR well-being programs seem to be uncommon in Germany and only few journalists mentioned offers of counselling as an option. Among other suggestions, this lack of organisational support has been discussed with a call for a better offer of training that would enhance journalists’ capability to maintain their well-being, which would

reflect good practice as outlined by [Roemer and Harris \(2018\)](#) and [Aldamman et al. \(2019\)](#). For example, a German mid-career journalist expressed his concern with the lack of training in emotional literacy that might equip journalists with psychological capital they need:

‘Especially with trainees, I find it unprofessional not to prepare them. [...] I am already of the opinion that the publisher is not doing everything right. And trainees in particular are sent to appointments for which they are not emotionally prepared. And then they see who can cope with it and who can’t and they screen them out, that’s for sure.’

That said, a few journalists from both countries mentioned seminars and training offered by their employers that they perceived as aimed at building resilience. Interestingly, senior reporters who recognised the emotional toll of the job often assumed that the younger entrants receive appropriate training, as they expected that this educational agenda might have developed in the industry. This is, however, rarely the case, with the exception of some programs in German journalism schools. It has also been suggested that such training, aimed both at managers and journalists, could assist with a culture change by normalising discussions around emotional challenges, as well as enable managers to recognise emotional strain in their staff, and help journalists develop psychological capital to deal independently with emotional challenges. The literature on perceived organisational support promotes this approach ([Roodbari et al., 2021](#)).

Furthermore, supervisors, i.e. editors and line managers, have been identified as especially important elements in the perceived organisational support, as was established in previous research too (e.g. [Beam and Spratt, 2009](#); [Hoak, 2021](#)). However, the current study revealed them to be also particularly weak links. Journalists who spoke about having good support from ‘bosses’ described their proactive approach to checking in and offering practical and emotional support. They often spoke about bosses as being ‘friends’ not just colleagues. The latter point is particularly problematic to many who perceive that support is not offered to everyone in the same way, calling into question fairness and transparency in organisational support. A female British mid-career journalist described it like this:

‘Maybe there’s just a culture of... Bullying might be too strong a word for it... But I think there’s a culture of, you know... It’s favourites who get asked questions or have close relationships, and actually well-being isn’t about, you know, your friendship with your boss.’

However, even if this relationship exists, supervisors often only recognise extraordinary circumstances and disregard the everyday emotional challenges, such as long and irregular hours, precarious conditions of work, stress around deadlines, live performances, dealing with audiences, and so on. This is in line with the research from the US, where the perceived lack of understanding and support from supervisors was found to be correlated with higher stress levels and motivations to leave the industry ([Holton et al. 2021](#); [Reinardy, 2009](#)). British journalists speculated that the reason for these blind spots in their newsrooms could be the disconnect between the lived experiences and/or socioeconomic

status of supervisors and journalists. Several German journalists spoke of their editors implementing a range of effective preventive strategies in this context, such as filtering hateful comments or emails before forwarding audiences' feedback to a journalist, or anticipating the impact of an output and discussing possible emotional reactions it might cause.

Alongside more diversity among management and their training in recognising the emotional challenges among their staff, it has also been frequently mentioned in both samples that organisational support requires more formalised structures. Journalists argue this would make the organisational support fairer and more transparent, proactive and timely. One such suggestion was to introduce a point of contact within the newsroom tasked with pastoral care. It has been argued this should not be a line manager, nor HR staff, as they are both perceived as lacking emotional intelligence, and the latter are also seen to lack an appropriate understanding of the pressures of the job. A female British senior editor describes the ideal pastoral care position in this way:

'This may be an impossible dream... But somebody who understands the way in which news operates, ways journalists work, the pressures that we're under... But has enough emotional intelligence to, you know, have a conversation with you that's more informed than that of your line manager, who's just a former journalist who's been promoted into being a manager.'

Another example of good practice has been mentioned in the German sample. A young social media news team holds regular formalised debriefings in which the staff is invited to share their emotional experiences. This arguably contributes to a culture that acknowledges emotional labour and offers organised and equally available support to journalists. In the words of a male German early career journalist:

'We have a feedback session once a week where we consciously complain together. So, at some point we established the mechanism that you write down the moments you're angry about, and then you can present them in the feedback session. And the feedback sometimes lasts half an hour, but sometimes they last three hours and there are tears. But that's what they're there for and that's absolutely okay.'

Discussion and conclusions

While it is not possible to generalise from this data, there is little evidence to suggest that a holistic approach, as [Roodbari et al. \(2021\)](#) describe it, is being implemented in examined German and British newsrooms. In both countries interviewed journalists have referred to all three levels of support – psychological capital, social, and organisational support – with some observable differences in how they perceive the latter two but significant similarities in what they see as potential improvements in these which could benefit their performance and workplace well-being.

Specifically, it appears that in both countries journalists primarily rely on personal resources, i.e. their psychological capital or emotional literacy, to manage emotional challenges they face in the job. This is consistent with previous research in journalism

which showed that journalists often perceive to be left to their own devices in dealing with emotional labour (Holton et al., 2021; Huxford and Hopper, 2020; Miller and Lewis, 2022). Social support, which has been deemed as an important support system across the sample, as was found previously in other countries as well (Hughes et al., 2021; Thomson, 2021), seems to be more efficient in Germany than in the UK. The newsrooms in the latter have more commonly been described as having ‘macho’ culture in which some journalists feel uncomfortable engaging in verbal processing of emotional situations given they feel their colleagues would see them as weak and/or unfit to do their jobs. While outside of scope of this study, it is possible to hypothesise that this difference might at least partly stem from the different role conceptions between journalists in these two countries (Donsbach and Patterson, 2004). Specifically, British focus on detachment and neutrality might be hindering the embrace of emotional labour in the industry, while in Germany journalists who more commonly see themselves as advocates and interpreters could be more willing and able to acknowledge and normalise the discussion of emotions in the profession. Next, there also seem to be differences in the perceived organisational support, as British journalists primarily perceive the Human Resources as being tasked with supporting their well-being. They report this support is often misguided or inappropriate to what they would find useful. On the other hand, although German media companies have similar legal duty of care towards their workers’ well-being as British, German journalists primarily spoke of supervisors’ support in this context, outlining several examples of good practice, such as editors institutionalising individual or group debriefing sessions that aim to allow fair and transparent opportunities for emotional release and support. However, this support seems supervisor-driven and, hence, relies on their efforts and skills, meaning it can easily be withdrawn with newsroom re-structuring and personnel changes.

It is evident that journalists see the lack of holistic approach as an issue in the support for their well-being, as they have identified a range of improvements to existing systems (see Table 2 for an overview), which are consistent across the two samples, and in line with the theoretical discussions of what constitutes an effective workplace well-being system (Aldamman et al., 2019; Chou, 2015; Roemer and Harris, 2018; Roodbari et al., 2021). Primarily, there was a call for better formalised and structured organisational support which would enable fair and transparent support and show care for workers’ well-being. Suggestions, here, also included better training in emotional literacy for supervisors, enabling them to recognise their workers’ emotional challenges, adequately support them, and create a culture in which experiencing emotional labour is considered a normal part of the job; the offer of training and development of journalists’ own emotional literacy, so they are better equipped to cope with the emotional challenges in the job; and a point of contact tasked with journalists’ pastoral care within newsrooms who journalists can turn to when needed. It has been suggested that the organisational, and in particular supervisor support, in acknowledging journalism as a high emotional labour job, as well as journalists themselves becoming more aware of the emotional strain they face and its effects, could help change the still common ‘macho’ and ‘thick skin’ narratives which are seen by many interviewees as detrimental to journalists’ well-being. All of these elements, from the offer of training to the importance of supervisor support in encouraging

Table 2. Summary of key suggestions for improved support.

In journalism education
Journalism positioned as a high emotional labour job
Early development of psychological capital & coping strategies
In the newsroom
Fair and transparent organisational support systems
Institutionalised support for development of psychological capital
Institutionalised support for development of supervisors' emotional literacy
Employment of proactive support strategies
Pastoral care offered by professionals who understand the needs of journalists
Regular (de-)briefings to discuss and process emotional challenges
In the industry
Acknowledgment of everyday emotional labour in the profession
Normalisation of conversations about emotional labour in the profession
Implementation of organisational support systems as an industry standard

conversations about well-being, have been previously found as essential elements of perceived organisational support (Aldamman et al., 2019; Roemer and Harris, 2018; Roodbari et al., 2021).

There are several implications of these findings. In the first place, journalists in both countries seem to be bearing the brunt of care for their and their colleagues' well-being, engaging personal resources to deal with emotional challenges and offering emotional support to colleagues experiencing emotional strain, which contributes to unrelenting pressure. Better tailored support from Human Resources, the offer of formalised pastoral care within a newsroom, and managers better attuned to emotional challenges their staff experiences, could go a long way towards alleviating some of the emotional labour journalists currently engage in, and, importantly, ensure that everyone has equal access to support independent from their personal resources or peer network. As found elsewhere, fair and transparent support structures are an important element of the perceived organisational support, which affects workers' job performance and well-being (Brunetto et al., 2014; Rhoades and Eisenberger, 2002).

It is evident that supervisor support is deemed particularly important, as German journalists have often used it to describe positive, and British negative experiences. Their role in perceived organisational support has been persistently found across journalism industries (Beam and Spratt, 2009; Hoak, 2021). Even if, as suggested, managers become more aware of emotional strains in the job and able to support their staff with emotional labour, there arises the question of added workload and emotional labour they would experience. Given the political economy of media in both examined countries, characterised by transformations seeing less workers do more, often in precarious financial conditions, it is important that supervisors' tasks in supporting their staff's well-being do not go unrecognised, both in terms of workload, but also support for skills development and care for their well-being.

Further, the question of emotional literacy was high on the agenda of both British and German journalists, with a clear call for training and development of psychological capital that would assist journalists in dealing with emotional labour. However, journalists claiming to have learned how to deal with job's emotional challenges, as well as those calling for more support in developing this resource, struggle with articulating what emotional literacy entails and how it could be developed. Here, evidently, there is scope to engage with mental health and well-being specialists in order to develop and implement a tailored development programme that would suit journalists' needs. There seems to be an evident need to embed this in journalism education, and there are indications that educators are starting to develop this agenda (Fowler-Watt, 2020; Richards and Rees, 2011). Given the number of journalists coming into the profession with non-journalism degrees, as well as through graduate and trainee schemes, it is equally important that media organisations acknowledge that journalists require development of emotional literacy alongside traditional journalism skills and offer this type of training. In addition to training that some organisations already offer, such as that on hostile environments, trauma interviewing, or dealing with online abuse, investment into developing journalists' psychological capital seems wise as it can equip them with resources to deal with diverse challenges, which is particularly important for an industry that has experienced many transformations, and more are likely to come.

Finally, there is a clear call for a change of journalism culture from its 'macho' image of hardened and detached individuals with 'thick skin' who emotionlessly go about their daily business. Obviously, we report here the experiences and thoughts of journalists who volunteered to speak about the issues surrounding their emotional labour, which means that the sample might be somewhat skewed towards those who find this issue important to discuss. Still, it is telling that at least a section of the practitioners, particularly in the UK, thinks that the culture needs changing, not only to be more supportive of their well-being, but also to attract and retain talent in the light of the number of journalists leaving the profession due to stress and burnout. Some strides are being made in this context, with the HR seemingly trying to support the change in the UK, as well as individual editors in Germany, particularly those in younger newsrooms. Yet, it would appear here again a more holistic approach is needed which would see journalists and their managers becoming more emotionally literate and organisations supporting this through training and structures that encourage and enable support with emotional labour.

Evidently, one of the key limitations of this study is its qualitative nature which prevents us from establishing clear trends and generalised conclusions. Future research drawing on more quantitative approaches often seen in social and organisational support studies could shed more light on the extent to which discussed issues are prevalent in the industry and the strength of their effects. It might also be worth exploring further the suggestions of some British journalists related to the impact of diversity among management on support for staff's well-being. More research is also needed to establish the specific failings, as journalists see them, in the support offered by organisations, and building on this, the type of tailored training and support that they would find useful. With this, there may be a way forward in the industry to battle precarious and emotionally

demanding conditions, offering excellent journalism without sacrificing the well-being of journalists.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council under Grant AH/V00543X/1.

ORCID iDs

Maja Šimunjak  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8263-272X>

Manuel Menke  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4215-3713>

References

- Al Muala I (2017) Job stress in journalism: interaction between organisational support and job demands–resources model. *Journal of Management and Sustainability* 7(4): 150–161.
- Aldamman K, Tamrakar T, Dinesen C, et al. (2019) Caring for the mental health of humanitarian volunteers in traumatic contexts: the importance of organisational support. *European Journal of Psychotraumatology* 10(1): 1694811.
- Beam RA and Spratt M (2009) Managing vulnerability: job satisfaction, morale and journalists' reactions to violence and trauma. *Journalism Practice* 3(4): 421–438.
- Binns A (2017) Fair game? Journalists' experiences of online abuse. *Journal of Applied Journalism & Media Studies* 6(2): 183–206.
- Brüggemann M, Engesser S, Buchel F, et al. (2014) Hallin and Mancini revisited: four empirical types of western media systems. *Journal of Communication* 64(6): 1037–1065.
- Brunetto Y, Shacklock K, Teo S, et al. (2014) The impact of management on the engagement and well-being of high emotional labour employees. *International Journal of Human Resource Management* 25(17): 2345–2363.
- Chen Z, Eisenberger R, Johnson KM, et al. (2009) Perceived organizational support and extra-role performance: which leads to which? *Journal of Social Psychology* 149(1): 119–124.
- Chou P (2015) The effects of workplace social support on employee's subjective well-being. *European Journal of Business and Management* 7(6): 2222–2839.
- Cornish F, Gillespie A and Zittoun T (2014) Collaborative analysis of qualitative data. In: Flick U (ed) *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Data Analysis*. Los Angeles, CA: SAGE, pp. 79–93.
- Daniels K and Guppy A (1997) Stressors, locus of control, and social support as consequences of affective psychological well-being. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology* 2(2): 156–174.
- Deuze M and Witschge T (2018) Beyond journalism: theorizing the transformation of journalism. *Journalism* 19(2): 165–181.

- Donsbach W and Patterson T (2004) Political news journalists: partisanship, professionalism, and political roles in five countries. In: Esser F and Pfetsch B (eds) *Comparing Political Communication: Theories, Cases, and Challenges*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 251–270.
- Dworznik-Hoak G (2020) Emotional labor during disaster coverage: exploring expectations for emotional display. *Journalism Practice* 16: 864–882. DOI: [10.1080/17512786.2020.1816858](https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2020.1816858).
- Dworznik G (2006) Journalism and trauma: how reporters and photographers make sense of what they see. *Journalism Studies* 7(4): 534–553.
- Edwards JA (2004) *Stress & well-being in the workplace: a longitudinal cross-lagged structural equation modelling investigation*. PhD thesis, Middlesex University London, London, UK.
- Eurostat (2020) How many journalists in the EU? Available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/-/edn-20200503-1> (Accessed 21 February 2022).
- Fedler F (2004) Insiders' stories: coping with newsroom stress: an historical perspective. *American Journalism* 21(3): 77–106.
- Fowler-Watt K (2020) New journalisms, new pedagogies. In: Fowler-Watt K and Jukes S (eds) *New Journalisms: Rethinking Practice, Theory and Pedagogy*. Oxon: Routledge, pp. 117–138.
- Gascón S, Fueyo-Diaz R, Borao L, et al. (2021) Value conflict, lack of rewards, and sense of community as psychosocial risk factors of burnout in communication professionals (Press, radio, and television). *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 18(2): 365.
- Grant AM, Christianson MK and Price RH (2007) Happiness, health, or relationships? Managerial practices and employee well-being tradeoffs. *Academy of Management Perspectives* 21(3): 51–63.
- Hanitzsch T, Ramaprasad J, Arroyave J, et al. (2019) Perceived influences: journalists' awareness of pressures on their work. In: Hanitzsch T, Hanusch F, Ramaprasad J, et al. (eds) *Worlds of Journalism*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, pp. 103–132.
- Hoak G (2021) Covering COVID: journalists' stress and perceived organizational support while reporting on the pandemic. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 98: 854–874. DOI: [10.1177/10776990211015105](https://doi.org/10.1177/10776990211015105).
- Hochschild A (1983) *The Managed Heart*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Holton AE, Belair-Gagnon V, Bossio Det al. (2021) Not their fault, but their problem?: organizational responses to the online harassment of journalists. *Journalism Practice*. DOI: [10.1080/17512786.2021.1946417](https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2021.1946417).
- Hopper KM and Huxford JE (2015) Gathering emotion: examining newspaper journalists' engagement in emotional labor. *Journal of Media Practice* 16(1): 25–41.
- Hughes S, Iesue L, de Ortega Barcenas HF, et al. (2021) Coping with occupational stress in journalism: professional identities and advocacy as resources. *Journalism Studies* 22(8): 971–991.
- Huxford JE and Hopper KM (2020) Reporting with emotion: a comparison of journalists' engagement in emotional labour across media types. *Journal of Applied Journalism & Media Studies* 9(1): 39–60.
- Jain A, Dediu V, Zwetsloot G, et al. (2017) Workplace innovation and wellbeing at work: a review of evidence and future research agenda. In: Oeij P, Rus D and Pot FD (eds) *Workplace Innovation: Theory, Research and Practice*. Cham: Springer, pp. 111–128.

- Kinman G, Wray S and Strange C (2011) Emotional labour, burnout and job satisfaction in UK teachers: the role of workplace social support. *Educational Psychology* 31(7): 843–856.
- Kotisova J (2019) The elephant in the newsroom: current research on journalism and emotion. *Sociology Compass* 13(5): 1–11.
- Kotisova J (2020) An elixir of life? Emotional labour in cultural journalism. *Journalism* 23: 789–805. DOI: [10.1177/1464884920917289](https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884920917289).
- Lezard BT (2020) *NUJ Survey Reveals Shocking Evidence of Abuse and Harassment of Journalists*. National Union of Journalists. Available at: <https://www.union-news.co.uk/nuj-survey-reveals-shocking-evidence-of-abuse-and-harassment-of-journalists/> (accessed 7 July 2021).
- Lünenborg M and Medeiros D (2021) Journalism as an affective institution. emotional labor and the discourse on fraud at der spiegel. *Journalism Studies* 22: 1720–1738. DOI: [10.1080/1461670X.2021.1873820](https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2021.1873820).
- McCaffrey R (2019) Stoicism and courage as journalistic values: what early journalism textbooks taught about newsroom ethos. *American Journalism* 36(2): 220–241.
- Menke M, Kinnebrock S, Kretzschmar S, et al. (2018) Convergence culture in European newsrooms: comparing editorial strategies for cross-media news production in six countries. *Journalism Studies* 19(6): 881–904.
- Miller KC and Lewis SC (2022) Journalists, harassment, and emotional labor: the case of women in on-air roles at US local television stations. *Journalism* 23(1): 79–97.
- Monteiro S and Marques Pinto A (2017) Journalists' Occupational Stress: A Comparative Study between Reporting Critical Events and Domestic News. *The Spanish Journal of Psychology* 20(34): 1–17.
- Monteiro S, Marques Pinto A and Roberto MS (2016) Job demands, coping, and impacts of occupational stress among journalists: a systematic review. *European Journal of Work & Organizational Psychology* 25(5): 751–772.
- Palmberger M and Gingrich A (2014) Qualitative comparative practices: dimensions, cases and strategies. In: Flick U (ed) *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Data Analysis*. Los Angeles, CA: SAGE, pp. 94–108.
- Reichertz J (2014) Induction, deduction, abduction. In: Flick U (ed) *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Data Analysis*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage.
- Reinardy S (2009) Beyond satisfaction: journalists doubt career intentions as organizational support diminishes and job satisfaction declines. *Atlantic Journal of Communication* 17(3): 126–139.
- Rhoades L and Eisenberger R (2002) Perceived organizational support: a review of the literature. *Journal of Applied Psychology* 87(4): 698–714.
- Richards B and Rees G (2011) The management of emotion in British journalism. *Media, Culture & Society* 33(6): 851–867.
- Roemer A and Harris C (2018) Perceived organisational support and well-being: the role of psychological capital as a mediator. *SA Journal of Industrial Psychology* 44(1): 1–11.
- Roodbari H, Axtell C, Nielsen K, et al. (2021) Organisational interventions to improve employees' health and wellbeing: a realist synthesis. *Applied Psychology* 71: 1058–1081. DOI: [10.1111/apps.12346](https://doi.org/10.1111/apps.12346).
- Shanock LR, Eisenberger R, Heggstad ED, et al. (2019) Treating employees well: the value of organizational support theory in human resource management. *Psychologist-Manager Journal* 22(3–4): 168–191.

- Siapera E (2019) Affective labour and media work. In: Deuze M and Prenger M (eds) *Making Media*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, pp. 275–286.
- Šimunjak M (2022) Pride and anxiety: British journalists' emotional labour in the Covid-19 pandemic. *Journalism Studies* 23(3): 320–337.
- Thomson TJ (2021) Mapping the emotional labor and work of visual journalism. *Journalism* 22(4): 956–973.
- Wahl-Jorgensen K (2019) Challenging presentism in journalism studies: an emotional life history approach to understanding the lived experience of journalists. *Journalism* 20(5): 670–678.
- Wahl-Jorgensen K and Pantti M (2021) Introduction: the emotional turn in journalism. *Journalism* 22(5): 1147–1154.

Author biographies

Maja Šimunjak is a Senior Lecturer in Journalism at Middlesex University London and a Leadership Fellow of the Arts and Humanities Research Council. She holds a PhD in Political communication from the University of East Anglia, UK. Research projects she recently participated in address issues such as journalists' labour, social media journalism, digital diplomacy, and political campaigning. Šimunjak has worked on projects funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, European Commission, and CREATE. She also has experience working as a professional journalist and editor.

Manuel Menke is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Communication, University of Copenhagen, Denmark. He holds a PhD in communication from the University of Augsburg, Germany. His research interests comprise (theories of) social and media change, mediated memory and nostalgia, mediated affect and emotion, digital public spheres, and journalism. In his journalism research, he studies convergence culture, digital and multimedia journalism, and the role of emotion in journalism. He is vice-chair of the ECREA Temporary Working Group *Affect, Emotion & Media*.