Covering Crises

Understanding Subjective Emotion in Contemporary War and Conflict Journalism

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Contents

Abstract	1
Introduction	2
Main Findings	4
Institutional Rules Constrain	4
Recognition of a wider range of emotions	7
Gender socialisation and emotional vocabularies	10
Conclusion	12

Abstract

This Issue Brief looks at contemporary war and conflict journalism within a sociological framework by analysing the journalists' subjective emotional experiences of reporting. It argues that rules about feeling, gender socialisation, emotional vocabularies, and institutional, social, and cultural contexts influence journalistic experience and expression of emotion. Thus, the journalists' mechanisms of collective emotional processing, meaning-making, and coping can provide insight into how media organisations understand the role of emotion in reporting. This Issue Brief proposes that media organisations should develop more acceptable repertoires of emotion, and assume greater responsibility for the well-being of contemporary war and conflict journalists.

Introduction

According to a report by the Committee to Protect Journalists, 2012 was one of the worst years on record for the number of journalists killed on duty.[1] Although war journalism has always posed threats to the physical and mental health of journalists, a lot of reporters agree that it has evolved into an "especially dangerous profession" in recent years.[2] Further, advancement in new technologies, such as digital media, has enabled ordinary citizens to generate and distribute content online, vastly increasing the scope of what constitutes a journalist and their unique conditions given they may not have institutional support.

Researchers have investigated the physical threats of war journalism, the psychopathology of war journalists, and the psychological costs of war reporting. For instance, Feinstein, Owen and Blair have explored the prevalence of mental health problems, such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), among journalists who cover war zones.[3]

This inductive and exploratory Issue Brief, however, analyses the journalists' subjective emotional experiences of reporting within a sociological framework. Open-ended questions guided the semi-structured interviews with the journalists. The flexible nature of this type of interview is conducive to the construction of the personal narrative. The

[1] 74 Journalists Killed: in 2012/ Motive Confirmed, Committee to Protect Journalists [Online], 2012, Available at: https://cpj.org/data/killed/2012/. (Accessed: June 1 2018).

[2] Bennett, D. (2013) The Life of a War Correspondent Is Even Worse Than You Think, *The Atlantic* [archive of *The Wire*], 10 July.

[3] Feinstein, A., Owen, J. and Blair, N., 2002. A Hazardous Profession: War, Journalists, and Psychopathology, *American journal of psychiatry*, *159*(9), pp.1570-1575.

personal narrative, in turn, can provide critical insight into the journalists' strategies of meaning-making and coping (Dworznik, 2007; Baumeister and Newman, 1994).

The semi-structured interview is also useful to navigate the ambivalence and contradiction of human emotion, particularly in professions such as war and conflict journalism. Some of the journalists spoke of stressful or even traumatic events, while simultaneously claiming that these events did not stop them from going back into the field to report. The fluid structure of the interview allowed a deeper consideration of such ostensible paradoxes in their narratives. Further, the conversational nature of the in-depth interview helped the journalists open up about complex topics, such as survivor's guilt, detachment, and even emotional suppression. Finally, this type of interview method is widely considered appropriate for gathering data on sensitive topics, such as subjective emotional experiences of wartime journalism.

The interview contained a basic set of predetermined questions, known as a schedule. The schedule guided the overall interview, serving as prompts for key topics to be covered. The rest of the interview was a free-flowing conversation. Journalists were able to tell their respective stories in their own words, focusing on the narratives that were most important to them. The sample of eight journalists recruited for the study reported for mainstream media outlets such as *The Atlantic*, *The Guardia*, *VICE News*, *The Hindu*, *The Times of India*, *NDTV*, *India Today*, and *Doordarshan*. Two of the journalists are currently based in the US, five are currently based in India, and one lives in the Middle East. Journalists from different countries were invited to participate in order to analyse emotional processing and meaning-making across various societal and cultural contexts.

Main Findings

- Institutional rules about feelings can constrain the experience and expression of emotions among war and conflict journalists;

- Media organisations need to recognise a wider repertoire of emotions in order to better support war journalists;

- Further research is required on whether or not gender socialisation and emotional vocabularies could play a role to assist or inhibit male and female journalists to cope with heightened emotion during war and conflict reporting.

Institutional Rules Constrain

During moments of crisis while reporting, the journalists initially seemed to either escape from experiencing an emotion or experience emotion to some extent. In four out of eight interviews conducted, journalists said that there was no time for them to process their emotions at the time of reporting. One of these journalists said that the processing of emotions happens later, sometimes years after the event has occurred. Another of these journalists claimed that she jammed herself to emotion in the moment, blocking out her

feelings. One journalist said that she was primarily interested in capturing the moment and often did not think about even her own security during a crisis. Finally, one journalist claimed that she wanted to have nothing to do with the scene. She elaborated in her interview that in the aftermath of the crisis, she stayed up all night watching MTV with the lights on in an attempt to detach herself from the situation. She plainly recalled that she stood in the shower with her clothes on, washing out pieces of flesh from her hair, and eventually threw out her clothes and bag.

Despite the lack of initial emotional processing, the journalists seemed to register some emotion shortly after the crises. One journalist spoke of experiencing huge shock after she made it out alive of a double bombing. She recalled feeling cheated, because she believed that “things were not supposed to blow up in [her] face.” She expected to cover events after crises had already occurred, rather than get caught in the crises themselves. Consequently, she experienced a fear of going back into the field and confronting the same places. Another journalist explained that even though he did not register a crisis event as it happened, he was just happy that he had survived. His response suggests that he experienced relief, and a sense of gratitude for his own safety.

In the remainder of the four interviews, journalists spoke more explicitly about experiencing some emotions, as opposed to not feeling anything at the time of reporting. One journalist claimed that he felt excited at the time of reporting on a crisis. Another claimed that he experienced an adrenaline rush and was unable to think of anything other than work during those crises. The same journalist also claimed that he experienced depression and lethargy, seemingly contrary to his feeling of an adrenaline rush. One claimed that he typically experienced anxiety while reporting on war and conflict because he never knew whether or not he could successfully complete the task. He clarified that the overwhelming part of the subjective experience for him—more than

the anxiety produced by the threat to life and limb—was the challenge of creating order within a story.

These emotions however also seemed to play a role in helping the journalist cope with the demands of the specific story at hand and the reporting conditions. One journalist claimed that his adrenaline rush would power him during reporting particularly when things looked grim. He claimed that he does not feel more alive than when he is at the heels of a big or important story. He also explained that his ego and guilt would drive him when he would feel like giving up on reporting. "You're living a comfortable life in a nice city and you're talking to people who are basically sending SOSs that they're under siege and they might die at any moment," he explained. He suggested that this dichotomy was part of the reason for him to carry on, despite the stresses of the profession.

Further, some of the journalists recalled that physiological or work-related conditions—rather than the intensity of a crisis—contributed to their emotional responses. For example, one journalist suggested that her sleep deprivation due to long-haul flights to foreign countries impacted her ability to process emotion while reporting on a crisis. Another journalist claimed that unhealthy eating habits, lack of sleep and loud noises contributed to his high level of agitation and irritability during reporting.

A lot of the journalists suggested that they experienced emotional processing or the physiological manifestations of unresolved anxiety long after they had been in the stressful situation. One journalist said that it disturbed his sleep and left an extremely unpleasant memory with him. At the same time however, he said that he believed that such events did not inflict any long-term trauma. Another journalist stated that reporters sometimes found out years later, after seeing counsellors, that some of their responses were the result of PTSD.

One journalist claimed that he would typically move on after reporting on a traumatic event, but later come to terms with the event after going through his notes or meeting with his friends and discussing the experience. Similarly, another journalist claimed that meeting victims often helped her process her emotions. She recalled thinking, typically a week after she had reported on a traumatic incident, “Did she actually tell me that?...What the hell was I thinking or doing?”

Recognition of a wider range of emotions

Many of the journalists interviewed expressed a desire for media organisations to provide more support through training programmes, precautionary measures, and recovery schemes. Broadly, the journalists seem to adopt material and activity-oriented coping mechanisms, internal coping mechanisms, or a combination of the two.

Three out of the eight journalists interviewed seemed to adopt material and activity-oriented coping mechanisms. One journalist claimed that he resorted to drinking, drugs, and food as a means to treat himself. He would also buy nice things and clothes. He said that he enjoyed coming home to a nice and clean apartment, which made him feel comfortable. He used exercise and spending time in nature as other strategies to cope with work. Importantly, he seemed cognisant of both the ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ coping mechanisms that he was using, commenting on the inherent value of these strategies. For instance, he specified that he made some questionable decisions and let some friendships fall to the wayside.

Another journalist said she would paint, bake, do gardening and write poetry in order to get her mind off work. One journalist claimed that he would read to relax. Other

journalists seemed to employ internal coping mechanisms, which involved changing their approach to the situation on a personal level. For example, one journalist claimed that he would maintain emotional discipline in order to not allow his reporting to take over his entire life. Another journalist claimed that meditation and yoga helped him to cope with the stresses of work. These strategies perhaps helped him be calmer or more still during challenging reporting situations.

Despite these coping strategies, some journalists expressed a need for greater institutional support from media organisations to ensure their safety and overall well-being. One such journalist suggested that media outlets must prepare their journalists before they go into the field to report. She explained that while journalists typically receive skills training in writing, recording, or shooting, they are “never trained about what to do when things go wrong.” In addition to preparing journalists, she proposed that media organisations ensure that journalists took the necessary precautions before going into the field. She explained that journalists have died from dehydration and malaria while reporting. She suggested that these fatalities could have been averted if the media organisations had given necessary precautions to the journalists.

At the same time, however, this journalist admitted that the media organisation that she worked for took care of both preparation for and recovery from war reporting. For example, her media organisation enrolled her in two courses on first aid and mental preparation for conflict reporting. This organisation also paid for her surgeries, treatment, and therapy after she was physically injured because of a bomb blast in the field.

The other journalists however did not share her experience. They either reported to not have received adequate institutional support or claimed to learn simply from their own reporting experiences. For example, one journalist suggested that she would often lose

out on sleep and vacations because her media organisation would call her at 3 AM or 4 AM in the morning. She claimed that working constantly eventually took a toll on her health.

Another journalist explained that he learnt the technicalities of the profession along the way. For instance, he realised that he should always be in touch with someone while he was reporting and only have things on his person that he could explain, in case he was interrogated. He suggested, though, that there might be no fool-proof plan to circumvent challenges while reporting. "…Given the idiosyncratic nature of going to a specific place at a specific time in a specific warzone, you at least are aware that when you go back out, the dangers are going to be different ones," he explained.

Finally, given the sensitive nature of the profession, some journalists suggested that they feel isolated from family or non-journalist friends in their emotional experiences. They therefore claimed that they were private about their reporting and did not share many details with their family or non-journalist friends. This was also important in order to ensure that others would not worry about them while they were away reporting. In light of this, some journalists suggested that journalists talk to each other in order to decompress after a stressful war or conflict reporting experience.

One journalist gave the example of media organisations that fly their reporters out to a major city—say, Dubai—after they cover an event in a warzone in the Middle East. This experience is an important part of the rest and recuperation process for the reporters. She admitted that it was important to acknowledge emotion rather than to "[bury] it somewhere deep." This experience further emphasises the need for media organisations to view journalists' emotional challenges as a collective problem that should be dealt with within the profession. It also provides another example of the role of money and

power in assisting journalists from specific media organisations to better cope with their emotions.

Gender socialisation and emotional vocabularies

Some men and women war and conflict journalists made references to specific gender-based qualities while narrating their subjective experiences of reporting. Three out of the four women journalists made references to family, maternal instincts, or to feelings of familial bonds.

One female journalist spoke of experiencing what she called a maternal instinct, after reporting on an infant's death as a result of an accident in the delivery room of a conflict zone. She described this experience as both grim and positive, because its negative nature drove her to report on it and to potentially make a difference. Another female journalist often referred to her own children while discussing reporting experiences. She explained that she thought about her duty toward her family—specifically her young children, aged one and three—at the time of such crises.

She recollected that her field reporting coincided with both her children growing up. She therefore made an effort to separate her reporting life with her life at home. One female journalist did not refer to children in her interview, but referred to the civilians that she was reporting on as family. She felt a sense of familial warmth and connection to the city at large when she witnessed everyone come together in the face of a crisis.

The male journalists spoke about their family and personal lives in a relatively less charged or emotional manner than the women journalists. One male journalist claimed that he had a boring and un-remarkable home life, which was perhaps not very different from that of his colleagues or friends in other professions. Another male journalist reported that his friendships and romantic relationships suffered in the face of work-related stress.

One male journalist described the changes in his family life, explaining that his family life was a “wreck” when he first began war reporting but gradually got better as he moved up the professional ladder. He shared his thoughts and feelings with his wife, who is also a journalist. Eventually, their household created what he called a “healthy dining table,” with constructive mutual exchanges about journalism. Similarly, another male journalist stated that he shared his reporting experiences with his wife, a Syrian woman who is familiar with the troubles of the region.

There are observable patterns of differences in the responses of the men journalists and the women journalists. While none of the women journalists referred to their partners or husbands, two out of four men journalists suggested that they benefit from the support of their wives. Further, none of the four men journalists spoke about children or any male-centric qualities, such as any paternal instincts. Three out of the four women journalists however spoke about their children or about female-centric qualities, such as a maternal instinct. One female journalist specifically spoke about managing the dual responsibility of being a reporter and a mother, while no male journalist referred to such multi-tasking.

Further, both the male and female journalists spoke of ostensibly ‘negative’ and ‘positive’ emotions in the interviews. Yet, there were noteworthy differences in the number of journalists within each group who mentioned specific emotions. For example, only

women journalists—three out of the four interviewed—recalled feeling "targeted" during reporting. Further, two male journalists claimed that they were excited during reporting, while only one female journalist spoke of feeling excitement. The men journalists also recalled feeling grateful and satisfied, while the women journalists spoke of being alert, thrilled, courageous, and committed.

Conclusion

From a sociological perspective, a consideration of emotional subjectivity could have practical implications for both war and conflict reporters and the media outlets that they work with.

Journalists could collaborate with one another, through unions or informal groups, in order to share their emotional experiences while reporting. Since the research suggests that people use the experiences of others as benchmarks to understand their own experiences, such collaborations could help journalists feel less isolated. For example, multiple journalists discussed their sleep problems in the interviews. These journalists could come together to tackle such problems and cope with related stresses of the profession. Merely speaking about an event, too, might prove to be the first step to make positive changes in favour of overall well-being. Such collaborations might also help war and conflict journalists to circumvent the bureaucracy of media organisations.

Similarly, smaller media organisations could come together to pool in resources for the emotional well-being of their journalists. They could also use fiscally responsible strategies—such as online support groups—in order to help journalists. Media organisations could also check in with their employees—through anonymous surveys—in order to keep track of their emotional well-being. Such endeavours might not only help

journalists collectively process emotion, but also eventually lead to a changed understanding of the role of emotion in the profession.

Larger media organisations could pay more attention to the emotional wellbeing of their journalists. For example, they could institute preparation programmes for journalists who report from the frontline. Such programmes could include preparation for both physical and emotional 'first aid.' They could also develop precautionary measures, such as a code of conduct, for journalists who report on war and conflict. This code could include precautions such as always having company or being in touch with someone during reporting. Larger media organisations could also create barriers in order to ensure that only those journalists who have met a basic standard of preparation report on war and conflict. This could include a mandatory examination for war and conflict journalists before they go out into the field to report.

A sociological framework such as the one employed by this Issue Brief also opens up avenues for future research in this field:

- A group of freelance or citizen journalists who do not report for mainstream media outlets could be interviewed for a study. Their subjective experiences could be analysed and then compared with those of the journalists interviewed in this study. This comparison might provide insight into the rules about feelings for journalists who are not regularly affiliated with the same media organisation. It could also throw light on the impact of an institutional support structure—or the lack thereof—on journalists' emotional experiences.

- More research could be done to examine the impact of the relationships between mainstream media outlets and their employees, especially when the journalists are out on the field. For example, there could be studies to assess if greater institutional

support—for example, more resource allocation—improves the emotional well-being of war and conflict journalists. Follow-up studies could then investigate the impact of such increased resource allocation on the journalists' emotional well-being.

- It could be useful to create a focus group of war and conflict journalists and analyse their interactions with one another. This focus group could then be measured for its therapeutic impact, if any, on the war and conflict journalists. Their interactions could also provide clues regarding the reference points for feelings that exist within institutions and social arrangements in the profession.

- It would be useful to share the results of this research on the subjective emotional experiences of war and conflict journalists with the rest of the world. This might impact the sociology of media consumption, the contemporary popular understanding of news, and even the nature in which journalists might go about their profession of war and conflict reporting. A longitudinal study might be useful to investigate the impact of sharing this research on the lives of the concerned war and conflict journalists. If significant, these changes could be incorporated at the institutional level to reform the policies of media outlets and improve the lives of contemporary war and conflict reporters.

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