

Burnout among journalists, a symptom of discontent in newsrooms

The rise of new technologies and new ways of producing and consuming information have significantly changed the profession of journalism. Access to information has become more democratic and has increased the size of media audiences. Digital tools have made it possible to diversify journalistic formats and genres. Media companies, however, have focused on the web without defining their managerial strategy and without investing the necessary financial resources. This has had an impact on journalists' working conditions and welfare at work.

Hélène Brédart

Journalist

Internet and the social media have fuelled competition between different media, encouraging them to give precedence to headline news, in many cases to the detriment of information reliability.
Image: © Martine Zunini



In October 2015, a study by the French journalists' union (SNJ) and Technologia, a consultancy in the field of occupational risk assessment and prevention, revealed disturbing trends¹. Among the 1 135 journalists canvassed, over a third were thinking of leaving their jobs. Almost 65% of interviewees felt that their working life was affecting their health, with faster working speeds being pinpointed as the primary cause of fatigue and stress. The research showed that protective measures taken by journalists to alleviate work-related stress were mostly sound (relaxing with family, sleep, practising sport), though the need to monitor the risk of occupational burnout in newsrooms was underscored.

Academic research carried out in Flanders some years previously had studied the risk of burnout in the media². According to that study, more than one in five journalists (21.4%) had a high risk of burnout. The combination of pressure at work and poor work-life balance was a major contributor to the risk of occupational burnout.

Is journalism still a viable profession? Does it continue to offer the conditions required to build satisfying careers? Over the past decade, universities, trade unions and journalists' professional associations have been studying the development of journalistic practices. They have observed that the work of newspaper industry employees is becoming more intense and more profit-driven, while the boundaries between editorial lines (the 'popular' or 'quality' press) and media platforms (broadcast or print) are blurring. This process has implications for journalists'

welfare at work, respect for professional ethics and professional identity.

A growing demand for multi-skilling

Used originally merely as showcases for classical media, webpages are now recognised as information platforms in their own right. In Europe, many media companies have pooled their digital and traditional output through 'bi-media' strategies. Journalists as a whole have had to familiarise themselves with online tools, even if they had to expand their editorial, technical and/or image processing skills to do so. Nowadays, journalists have to produce content in and for multiple media formats, such as articles that combine text, photos and video, for example.

This demand for multimedia journalism calls for flexibility and multi-skilling, though it is not always backed up either by investment in training or additional payment proportional to the work provided. In this connection, a study in 2014 by the French *Observatoire des Métiers de l'Audiovisuel* [audiovisual professions observatory] found that: 'If journalists do adapt, it is still on the own initiative of individuals who train themselves on the job out of personal taste or by necessity, or who choose to ask for training in the use of the new media. (...) Organisations give little thought to training.'³ The study also showed that the proliferation of qualifications is very often not covered in written agreements or conventions, hence the lack of corresponding wage adjustments.

In the Netherlands in the same year, meanwhile, the Dutch Journalists Association

1. Bouéroux M., et al. (2015) *Changements et évolutions des métiers du journalisme*, Cabinet Technologia.

2. Teugels M., Van Hoof E., De Witte H. (2009) Is er een crisis op de redacties? Een onderzoek naar burn-out bij beroepsjournalisten in Vlaanderen, *Over.Werk*, 4, 120-126.

3. Brunel A., Bouéroux M., Chanut-Edert J., Lablanche P. (January 2014) *Etude sur l'évolution des activités des journalistes dans le cadre des nouveaux médias et les réponses en matière de formation* [Study of the development of journalistic activities in the light of the new media and training responses], Technologia SAS & CPNEF.

(NVJ) noted that the same opportunities for training were not available to all journalists. The NVJ was outraged, observing that, while all media companies now demanded multimedia skills, training for freelance journalists was financed only by magazine publishers (jointly, and with public aid). 'We hope that freelancer training will be included in the new collective agreement under negotiation this year, in 2017. Publishers would then be obliged to co-fund the training of all journalists,' explained Yvonne Dankfort, an NVJ representative.

An ever-increasing workload

While journalists now have to analyse a multitude of data on the web and produce copy for a range of media (print or broadcast, Internet sites, social networks, live interviews with journalists), these new tasks, rather than replacing their former duties, are additional to their daily work. The size of newsrooms has

not kept pace with this upward curve. Following the decline in advertising revenue, sales and/or state contributions to public service media, media companies have been unable to invest in additional human resources. In a great many cases, they have restructured their staff (via social plans and voluntary redundancies), leading to a scissor effect: fewer staff for an increasing number of platforms.

Unsurprisingly, a development of this kind puts journalists under time pressure. Research carried out by Cardiff University in 2008 found that British print journalists produced three times as much copy as they did 20 years previously. This study moreover took only printed press output into account. An increase of this size was shown to have an impact on information quality: journalists leave their offices less, have a limited time in which to check their sources and rely increasingly on press releases.⁴ 'Most journalists are now required to do more with less time, a trend that inevitably increases their dependence on "ready-made" news and limits opportunities for independent journalism.'

A study by Ghent University in Belgium showed that eight out of ten journalists who [...] work for online media had as their main occupation print or broadcast journalism.⁵ While the researchers stress that journalists do not 'multitask' all of the time (they generally focus on a single medium), they highlight the commitment implied by such a change on their working hours: multimedia journalists said that they spent an average of 48.9 hours a week on their work.

Steve Paulussen, one of the Belgian researchers, explains that 'the idea that technology leads to an increased workload may sound paradoxical since new technologies allow journalists to gather and produce news much easier and faster than ever before'. According to this academic, convergence projects, which require journalists to work on a variety of platforms, have been encouraged by a market rationale which seeks to lower the cost of the workforce in journalism. 'However, history shows that the successive implementations of new technologies in media organisations, from the telegraph to the Internet and its related technologies, have always been accompanied by processes of rationalization. (...) In other words, it is not technology per se, but the associated management's obsession with cost reduction and productivity maximization which leads to increased workload.'

This view is shared by Paco Audije, a Spanish freelance journalist and member of the European Federation of Journalists' Broadcasting Expert Group (BREG): 'One day,

4. Lewis J., Williams A., Franklin B., Thomas J. (2008) *The quality and independence of British journalism*, Cardiff, Cardiff University.

5. Paulussen S. (2012) Technology and the transformation of news work: are labor conditions in (online) journalism changing? in Siapera E., Veglis A. (dir.) *The handbook of global online journalism*.

6. Deleu C. (1998) Médias et nouvelles technologies: le journaliste pressé, *Les cahiers du journalisme*, 5.

press barons decided that it was "necessary" for journalists to work more, on several platforms, with fewer rights. Restructuring is not the natural consequence of technological renewal but a consequence of a discourse on the (global and highly political) speed of change.'

A new temporality: immediacy

Journalists' relationship with time has changed due to their increased workload but also because of a new web-driven temporality. The media have always exploited ways to increase speed. Havas, for example, the first press agency, used carrier pigeons to transmit London stock exchange prices.⁶ The rate at which information is produced, however, was radically altered by the Internet. On the web, there is no irreducible period in which to produce content. Information can be produced and broadcast immediately and updated continuously.

Information monitoring and content updating (journalists can now amend or enrich their copy) demand a considerable capacity to react and generate a significant mental burden. This is all the more true when journalists receive virtually instantaneous feedback on social networks. Many journalists now have a presence on these networks and like to meet their followers' expectations. Anette Andresen, a member of the EFJ Freelance Experts' Group (FREG), points out that

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journalists now publish their reports on social networks and have to follow the comments and discussions raised by their posts. That is what their employers expect of them. They have to use their private accounts and spend time after working hours to engage in discussion and answer questions from Internet users.

Andresen, the director of the freelance service of the Norwegian Journalists Union (NJ), paints a damning picture of the consequences of this development: 'These additional activities mean that they are constantly online. They blur the boundaries between working time and free time, and between professional and private life. Keeping up with social networks and monitoring information take place outside working hours, so journalists are not paid for these additional tasks. This creates a feeling of stress: your free time is limited but your work is endless.'

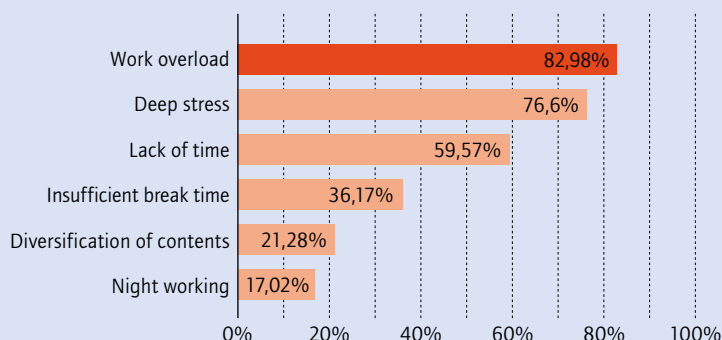
This new temporality has also caused journalists to pay less attention to professional ethics. In a competitive media environment, they must be able to publish information online at speed, and sometimes at whatever cost, since a correction can be made in a matter of seconds.

The following is just one of many examples of changes in this race for information. In an end-of-course thesis in 2014, a student at the University of Liège (Belgium) noted, in connection with a highly publicised shooting in Liège town centre, that the Francophone Belgian media as a whole broadcast what

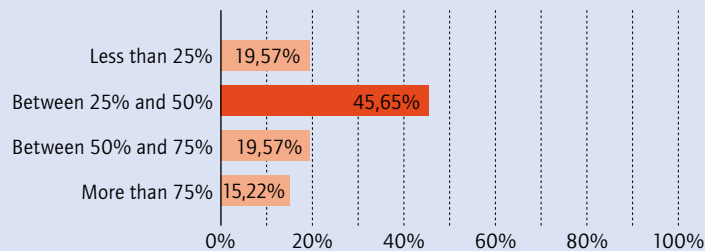
Taking the pulse of a profession

In the context of compiling this dossier on working conditions in the press sector, the European Federation of Journalists sent out a questionnaire to its member organisations in autumn 2016. Forty-nine national journalists' unions representatives from 19 European countries answered. The main results of the survey are presented below.

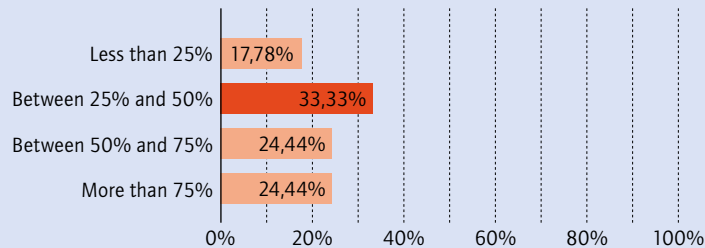
According to your experience or feedback received from members, which one of these concerns that could affect journalists' health and safety are the most common? (multiple answers allowed)



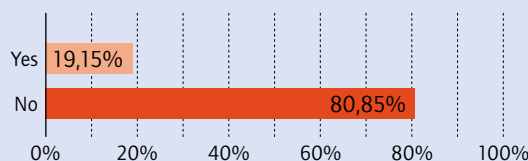
According to your experience or feedback received from members, what percentage of journalists ever felt any symptom of burnout (sleeping disorder, severe fatigue, declining self-confidence and motivation...)?



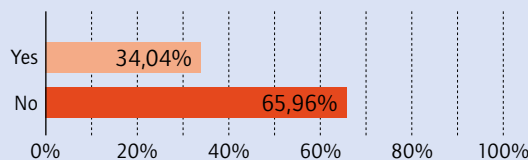
According to your experience or feedback received from members, what percentage of journalists ever thought of changing job because of their working conditions and/or health concerns?



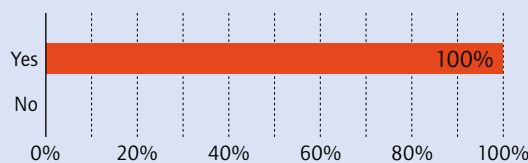
According to you, are the journalists' salaries fair in your country in comparison to the amount of work done?



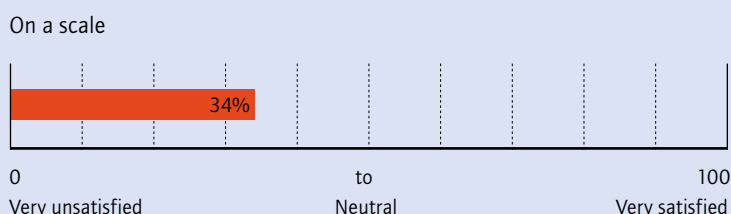
Do journalists get paid or given time-off for overtime?



Would you say that the working conditions for journalists have tended to deteriorate over the years in your country?



Please drag the cursor to define journalists' job satisfaction in your country



7. Wolf J., *La notion d'immédiateté de l'information à travers le traitement médiatique sur Internet de la tuerie de Liège*, Dissertation for a Masters in Information and Communication specialising in Journalism, unpublished, ULg, academic year 2013-2014.

8. Brédart H., *Des journalistes belges francophones quittent la profession: Analyse d'un phénomène socio-économique*, Dissertation for a Master's in Information and Communication specialising in Journalism, unpublished, ULg, 2013-2014 academic year.

9. Witschge T., Nygren G. (2009) Journalism: A profession under pressure? *Journal of Media Business Studies*, 6(1), 37-59.

In response to multi-skilling, rolling news and hyperconnectivity, initiatives calling for a return to a slower pace are now gaining ground.

turned out to be false rumours on their 'live' platforms.⁷ Journalists had in fact quoted each other and announced that several gunmen were on the run (whereas there was just one gunman who had been killed immediately by police officers).

She goes on to say that the new technologies enable different media to monitor each other in real time and find out instantaneously what competitors are reporting, which if anything is likely to encourage imitation. This self-referentiality raises issues regarding the accuracy and cross-checking of sources but also regarding information harmonisation. She also points out that the advertising revenue of digital media platforms is linked to the expected number of visitors and clicks. Journalists also use audience measurement tools, such as Google Analytics, which have changed the way they produce headlines for, write and illustrate their articles.

While rules of professional ethics are clearly not always complied with, several studies have shown that journalists are nevertheless anxious to carry out their work properly. In 2014, a Master's in Journalism student analysed the factors that motivate Francophone journalists to leave the media sector.⁸ The fact that it is not possible to carry out high-quality work (linked to a lack of time and influence over editorial choices) was a major motivation. 'Journalists are faced with a disparity if not a conflict between their aspirations, the idealised representation of their

profession and their own professional practices.' Dissatisfied with the quality of their articles, certain print journalists said they had adopted strategies to avoid responsibility for their content: concealing their identity, using their initials only, etc.

Towards a de-professionalisation of journalism

In a paper entitled *Journalism: A profession under pressure*⁹, researchers from the University of London and the University of Södertörn (Sweden) explain that journalism as a profession is becoming less professional because there is less time for creativity, tasks are becoming increasingly technical, sources are not cross-checked as much and data are verified less. The division of labour (journalists, printers, typographers, editors, photographers), which played an important part in organising newspapers, has become less clear cut.

The researchers find furthermore that journalists have lost their position as 'pillars of information' who select and transmit facts vertically. Nowadays, anyone can publish and distribute content on a large scale. People build their own channels on the web and also help to produce information, since it can be taken up again in the traditional media. In this context, the National Union of Journalists (UK and Ireland) believes that one of the main reasons

for the reduction in the fees paid to freelance journalists is the existence of a large number of amateur information providers who are unfamiliar with the market and who ask for unrealistic fees, or who simply offer their content for the kudos of being quoted by a media outlet. Many professionals have therefore begun to doubt the role and meaning of their trade.

Responses to multi-skilling, rolling news and hyperconnectivity now advocate a return to a slower pace. In 2010, a manifesto published in German (subsequently translated into English and French) defined 14 fundamental rules of '*slow media*'. These include ensuring rigour and respect for consumers and promoting worker specialisation (rather than multi-skilling). New media, such as the magazine *XXI* in France or *Jot Down* in Spain, respond to these criteria and favour long-format information without advertising or with advertising carefully selected to guarantee the independence of the journal.

The legislature also seems to have taken notice. A new provision in the French Labour Act now enshrines the right of workers to switch off. Since 1 January, French companies with over 50 employees must limit the intrusion of technology, particularly emails, into employee rest periods. This right seeks to ensure a better work-life balance. This is without doubt a world first that concerns all workers, including those whose life is heavily affected by inadvertent technological intrusion, i.e. journalists. ●