What Makes You Happy also Makes You Sick: Mental Health and Well-Being in Media Work

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There is a mental health crisis across all media industries worldwide. Both industry reports and scholarly research on the mental health and well-being of media professionals suggest that they tend to score high on depression, stress and burnout, and suicidality. The main contributing factors to these problems tend to be particular to the working conditions of the media as industries. In this study, data and insights from surveys, focus groups, and interviews among practitioners across different media professions (film and television, popular music, games, and journalism) are combined to specify the aspects "on the job" that make so many people happy and excited to work in the media while also making them sick. In mapping and analyzing issues at work that impact media workers' mental health and well-being, a paradoxical conclusion emerges: what makes media work special is also what can make its people sick.

Keywords: media work, production studies, media industries, mental health, well-being

In recent years, across various media professions around the world, a series of reports and studies commissioned by unions, professional associations, and other organized networks document a mental health crisis among media practitioners. Practitioners in key media sectors—digital games, advertising/marketing/public relations, film/documentary/television, music/recording/performance, online content creation, and journalism—in surveys self-report experiencing anxiety and depression, claim that the work negatively affects their well-being, and score higher than national averages for burnout, substance abuse, and suicidality.

Mental health problems and a decline in the overall well-being of media professionals are common across all media professions. Although there are specific issues and factors at work in particular countries, fields of work, and certain sections or teams within companies, the research described in this study outlines that working in the media, for many, comes at a price. Media work at all stages of the creative process is pressured and precarious, where the emotionally charged aspects of passion and the meaning attributed to one's professional identity are principal to people's coping practices (Gill & Pratt, 2008). This puts health and well-being central to considerations of what working in the media is like.

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Claims of universality are problematic. There are differences in how labor "works" in various media professions (Deuze, 2007). Well-being and precarity mean different things in different contexts (Lee & Kofman, 2012; Ma-Kellams, 2014). That said, research including participants from all over the world suggests similar issues at work about the health and well-being of those who make media for a living. Furthermore, many media companies and firms are part of larger, internationally connected or incorporated business entities. The analysis in this study takes as its premise that the challenges for media work are chronic across industries and regions, whereas its articulations are particular to cultural, situational, and individual circumstances.

The mundane, everyday aspects of health and well-being related to the job, which affect everyone at work in the media, are of main concern here. The focus is squarely on health and well-being across media industries. Although professions in the media differ widely, what ties them together is a generally shared desire to tell stories and to do so with autonomy as the "*sine qua non* of creative work" (Holt & Lapenta, 2010, p. 224; emphasis in original). As so many practitioners survive by cross-subsidizing their work across professional boundaries—journalists as copywriters, game developers doing software gigs, filmmakers making commercial video—adopting a pan-industrial perspective seems warranted.

Even though industry surveys sometimes ask questions about practitioners' mental health and well-being, these concepts are generally not made explicit. Good mental health is not the same as having no mental illness symptoms; neither is it the opposite of mental illness (Agteren & Iasiello, 2020). Well-being tends to be seen as an aspect of positive mental health, yet it contains different elements. Importantly, health and well-being can refer to the physical health, mental health, psychological, and emotional aspects of workers (Danna & Griffin, 1999, p. 361). Despite such complexity, one can assume these are all independent yet related constructs to be investigated in conjunction when it comes to assessing what it is about work that can make people sick (Van der Molen, Nieuwenhuijsen, Frings-Dresen, & de Groene, 2020). Being sick refers to suffering from a work-related stress disorder as documented in surveys or notification systems for occupational diseases.

Although the early 21st century enjoys a surge of scholarly interest in media work (Deuze, 2007), production cultures (Banks, Conor, & Mayer, 2016; Caldwell, Mayer, & Banks, 2009), creative labor (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2010), and media production research (Paterson, Lee, Saha, & Zoellner, 2016), the health and well-being of media workers remain underarticulated. This may be in part because of the disciplinary background of the researchers involved and the historical lack of scholarly interest in work-related stress disorders (Gochfeld, 2005), as well as an overall low level of mental health literacy (Jorm, 2000). There is now extensive literature on how practitioners navigate precarity in the media (Chadha & Steiner, 2022), building on early assessments by McRobbie (1999) and Ross (2003). The personal impacts of such practices of negotiation and resistance on workers' health and happiness remain invisible. Following David Hesmondhalgh's (2015) call for "*a critical conception of exploitation centered on systemic unjust advantage and suffering*" (p. 33; emphasis in original), I draw attention to the link between exploitation and suffering as mitigated by the simultaneous flourishing of those who get to make media for a living. The project on which this study reports takes what making media professionally *feels* like as its starting point to understand and explain what it means to "make it work" in the media.

This study follows a hermeneutic approach, providing a narrative overview of the available research on professionals whose work contributes to products that are conventionally defined as media (Hesmondhalgh, 2015, p. 33). I opted to summarize findings from each sector separately to effectively convey the far-reaching nature of the issues at work. An integrated report listing findings side by side would yield limited results. As no single report or survey used the same questionnaire, data points cannot be systematically compiled. My narrative, hermeneutic approach—moving back and forth between the granular specificity of media work and the overall theme of a mental health crisis in media industries—follows the principles of writing as research unto itself (Mitchell & Clark, 2021).

In the project this study is part of, the focus is on the abovementioned six key professional groups in the media. Given the space constraints of the journal article format, in this study I focus on those pursuing creative careers in film and television, music, games, and journalism. Although the pattern of work-related stressors applies to all media professionals, the industry and academic research within these four fields is more established than in advertising and online content creation, allowing for nuanced, historically informed conjectures. Although research focusing on the health and well-being of media workers is relatively recent, studies documenting precarious working circumstances, oppressive production cultures, and widespread misconduct in the media date back to the 19th century for journalism (Fedler, 2004), the 1950s for film and television (Powdermaker, 1950), the 1980s in music (Raeburn, 1987), and the 1990s for software development (Sonnentag, Brodbeck, Heinbokel, & Stolte, 1994).[2]

This overview aims to describe how deeply entangled media work, mental health, and well-being are. By combining the insights gained from industry sources with scholarly research on media production, I address the question of what turns pressures, stressors, and other potentially problematic aspects of media work into people getting sick on the job. In doing so, I hope to contribute to the emerging scholarly work on what exactly "devastates" media professionals about their "dream job" (Kotišová, 2019). Through all of this, a somewhat paradoxical conclusion emerges: What draws people to the media—and what makes professionally producing media so attractive—also explains why so many get sick on the job.

"Quit Dreaming About Your Dream Job. It Doesn't Exist"

Before the mid-2010s, there were only a few reports, surveys, or studies on the mental (and physical) health and well-being of media workers. Ever since, research with such a specific focus has advanced, generally funded and initiated by the industry itself. Such work proliferated since the pandemic, providing a wealth of material available for secondary analysis. Most reports are based on online surveys, accompanied by anecdotal evidence in the form of interviews, focus groups, and expert commentaries. In a telling example, filesharing company WeTransfer (2022) conducted a global survey of 6,500 graphic designers, musicians, photographers, directors, illustrators, artists, media strategists, social media creators, and freelance writers from 150 countries for its 2022 annual "ideas" report, using a quote from a participant as its overall report heading and conclusion: "Quit Dreaming About Your Dream Job. It Doesn't Exist." Industry reports such as the WeTransfer survey suffer from all kinds of problems, including a lack of conceptual clarity and construct validity, as well as issues about sampling, generalizability, and

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[2] A caveat: This historical record is exclusively about U.S. workers.

reliability. However, similar caveats can be made about academic research on health and well-being (Agteren & Iasiello, 2020) and about illness at work, in particular (Harvey et al., 2017). In what follows, I explore the various reports and research within four key media industries in terms of what these sources say about the element and extent of mental health issues among the professional population and what the causes and concerns are.

Film, Documentary, and Television

In 2016, the Australian Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA) started an Equity Wellness initiative—including mental health first aid training—in response to the results of its 2015 survey among 782 actors, as 62% reported at the time feeling anxious or depressed because of the work (MEAA, 2016). In 2017, the British media union Bectu surveyed its members specifically about long working hours and lost productivity. The report included 476 respondents working in shooting crews, production offices, and other essential departments in film, TV drama and entertainment, commercials, and news. The industry was described as a "high-pressure treadmill with workers being treated like cogs" (Evans & Green, 2017, p. 5). Poor management, long working hours, and unpaid overtime were key concerns. Nearly three-quarters of respondents noted a "martyr culture" in the industry, typified by a working environment where "no one wants to be the first to leave" and people taking pride in how much work they do (Evans & Green, 2017, p. 6). In protest against nothing changing since the Bectu report, a group of U.K.-based editorial and production management workers set up a follow-up study in 2022, featuring an online survey with open-ended comments (Production is Broken, 2023). Most (85%) of 938 participants in this study considered changing careers because of various factors, including most prominently pay inequality, lack of appreciation and respect, an "always on" culture, unpaid overtime, and terrible working hours (Production is Broken, 2023, p. 27). Still, many were quoted as loving their jobs despite being treated so poorly.

In 2019, British nonprofit the Film and TV Charity considered the results of their commissioned survey of screen professionals a "mental health crisis" (Wilkes, Carey & Florisson, 2020, p. 8). Of 9,399 study participants, 87% reported mental health problems, and 64% experienced depression. Respondents mentioned working extremely long hours, feeling a lack of control, and getting little or no recognition from their managers. More than half (55%) of screen workers contemplated taking their own lives, and 10% said they attempted to (Wilkes et al., 2020, p. 15). A survey conducted just before the onset of COVID-19 by the Behind the Scenes foundation (2021) of among close to 3,500 American screen workers, found most respondents reporting feelings of anxiety (91%) and depression (82%) about work, especially at the end of show runs or during the cycle between jobs. Stigma turned out to be the most significant barrier for these professionals to speak up and break the cycle of suffering. Reporting on its research, the Film and TV Charity (2020) noted three key problematic areas in the field: "conditions of work, the industry's culture, and its capability to provide support for those who need it. The 'three Cs' interact and mutually reinforce one another to create a perfect storm" (p. 4). The charity subsequently launched a "whole picture toolkit" including a support line, training and self-help communities, production protocols, and a public campaign to reduce stigma around mental health. In a 2022 follow-up survey, only 11% (of 1,900 respondents) described their industries as mentally healthy places to work (Film and TV Charity, 2022, p. 3). The survey repeated in 2024, indicating worsening conditions: 35% of more than 4,300 respondents described their mental health

as "poor" or "very poor," compared with 24% in 2022 (Film and TV Charity, 2024). Almost two-thirds (64%) considered leaving the industry because of concerns about their mental health.

Next to long hours, a stressor consistently reported throughout the media industries is transgressive behavior at work, including bullying, harassment, and assault. Documentation of misconduct and toxicity used to be piecemeal, getting more structured attention since the 2017 news coverage of sexual abuse cases involving American film producer Harvey Weinstein. These reports prompted media professionals to share their experiences on social media using the hashtag #MeToo. The collective power of this social movement and the stories powerful women told of their abuse at the hands of even more powerful men inspired introspection throughout the media, exposing this sickening behavior.

In 2021, Bectu commissioned another survey featuring 1,184 screen industry professionals about the nature of management practices in film and television (Van Raalte, Wallis, & Pekalski, 2021). The study documented that 93% experienced or witnessed some form of bullying or harassment at work, with most people hesitant to report such misconduct. As the report concluded, "a lack of effective communication, feedback or support under these circumstances exacerbates the impact on staff well-being and, in particular, on mental health" (Van Raalte et al., 2021, p. 5). A 2024 report on the state of public broadcasting in The Netherlands found that 74% of 1,996 surveyed professionals had been a target or a witness of transgressive behavior at work, with 90% blaming a lack of leadership or egocentric and otherwise toxic management styles for the persistence of such problems (OGCO, 2024, p. 68). Similarly, a 2024 industry review by the Screen Well mental health organization for the Australian film and television industry recognized widespread "destructive" work conditions (Dutton & Briscoe, 2024). Underscoring earlier reports by health promotion charity Entertainment Assist in 2016 and the Australian Cinematographers Society in 2022, the review documented "a powerful, negative culture within the industry including a toxic, bruising work environment; extreme competition; bullying; sexual assault; sexism and racism" (Dutton & Briscoe, 2024, p. 7). Network organization Documentality in 2023 and 2024 explored what it defined as a perceived mental health and well-being crisis throughout the industry in a series of 21 focus groups with documentary filmmakers in Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom. The report noted how pleasure and pain coincide in making a documentary, as people's love for the work comes down to "the joy of it, and it's the hell of it as well" (Documentality, 2024, p. 8). In all the groups, makers shared stories of exhaustion, burnout, and vicarious trauma as a direct result of the work.

Scholarly research on the mental health and well-being of the people involved in producing television and film has dutifully recorded stress and anxiety-inducing aspects of the work—such as extreme competition for jobs, low (or no) pay, precarity, and working under constant pressure. Such work mainly consists of ethnographies of screen workers (see for early research: Jones & Walsh, 1997; Blair, 2001; Ursell, 2000), with studies among professionals beyond the Anglosphere emerging more recently (Meissner, 2021). However, the consequences about health and well-being remain underexplored. To investigate emotional responses to precarious working conditions, during 2006 and 2007, David Hesmondhalgh and Sarah Baker interviewed 63 professionals working in music, television, and magazines in the United Kingdom and conducted participant observation at an independent television production company. Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2010) found many "unhealthy and even psychotic" (p. 228) attitudes, behaviors, and coping mechanisms related to the chasm between what people aspire to—creative freedom and self-realization—

and what the media industry tends to offer. Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2010) described a "highly anxious and insecure" (p. 35) industry, where interviewees "spoke of nervousness, anxiety and even panic as a regular part of their working lives" (p. 122). Their research is a benchmark in the field, together with production studies by John Caldwell (2008, 2023), Vicki Mayer (2011), and Kevin Sanson (2024) on below-the-line labor in the U.S. screen industry, consistently documenting forms of exploitation by the industry as well as self-exploitation by its practitioners.

Music, Recording, and Performance

In 2014, industry charity Help Musicians UK surveyed 552 of its clients, showing that two-thirds of professional musicians experienced depression and other psychological issues and almost half (44%) having problems with alcohol (Help Musicians UK, 2014). Concerned about these findings, the organization commissioned a more comprehensive study (in 2016) among 2,211 musicians, agents, sound engineers, and tour managers, of whom 71% reported incidences of depression, anxiety, and panic attacks; Gross & Musgrave, 2016). The researchers challenged the romantic rhetoric of the tortured artist, as so many professionals struggled to bridge the distance between the myth and the reality of working in music.

Help Musicians UK conducted an updated survey in 2022, finding that 90% of more than 500 participating professionals said that their careers were impacted by poor mental health, with a similar number facing a "cost of working" crisis (Help Musicians UK, 2022). Being underpaid or not paid at all is a structural problem highlighted in almost every study. The Music Industry Research Association in 2018 conducted its inaugural survey, wherein 61% of 1,277 musicians said that their music-related income was not sufficient to meet living expenses (Krueger & Zhen, 2018). Half of the respondents mentioned regularly feeling down, depressed, or hopeless. More than one in 10 (12%) thought about self-harm or suicide, and almost three-quarters (72%) reported being discriminated and harassed at work (Krueger & Zhen, 2018, p. 6). Still, most loved the social, aspirational, and artistic aspects of working in music, although financial insecurity and time spent self-promoting stood out as the least preferred aspects of the work. In a 2023 survey among 567 musicians in Australia by the MEAA, half (49%) of respondents stated earning less than 15% of the minimum wage. Furthermore, 62% said they had been bullied, harassed, or discriminated against, and 86% felt musicians were treated unfairly by the industry (MEAA, 2024).

Online music distribution platform Record Union conducted a Web survey in 2019 involving 1,489 independent music makers. The proceedings were titled "The 73% Report" to feature the finding that 73% of respondents experienced stress, anxiety, or depression related to music creation (Record Union, 2019). Participants ranked fear of failure, financial instability, and loneliness as the main drivers behind negative emotions at work. Quotes by musicians highlighted a glamorization of "drugs and this big party lifestyle" and objectification of women throughout the industry (Record Union, 2019, pp. 13, 31). In The Netherlands, a 2024 survey among music workers to tackle lack of well-being, abuse, and discrimination showed that half of its 980 respondents experienced transgressive behavior at work, with only 9% reporting such experiences (Daru, Kros, & Mateman, 2024, p. 21).

Australian music industry association Support Act conducted health and well-being surveys in 2022 and 2024, finding half of 1,518 respondents (in 2024) reporting increased feelings of anxiety or depression

because of issues at work (compared with 63% in 2022), whereas 57% harbored suicidal thoughts (Elmes & Riseley, 2024, pp. 81, 103). In both surveys, job insecurity, low income, burnout, and fatigue were the most common issues mentioned. More than half of participants said they turned to drugs or alcohol for "calming reasons" (Elmes & Riseley, 2024, p. 101). Almost all practitioners signaled a need for broad systemic change within the sector, including fair pay and a code of conduct to protect the physical and psychological safety of people at work. The 2023 Musicians' Census in the United Kingdom allowed for similar conclusions, showing that 43% of 5,867 participating musicians earned a low income, with almost two-thirds (62%) needing to sustain their careers by sourcing other forms of income outside of the industry (MC23, 2023). A 2023 review for the European Commission signaled a "toxic" environment for music workers, leading to "depression, sleep problems, social isolation, anxiety disorders, and addiction" (Vermeersch et al., 2023, p. 9).

Research on health in the music industry has a long history, although traditionally focused on orchestra musicians, and more specifically on playing-related physical injuries such as vocal cords, hearing, and other bodily maladies. Scholarly work in this field subsequently considered performance anxiety and substance abuse, addressing popular musicians' coping strategies with occupational stress (Cooper & Wills, 1989). These issues persist, as studies carried out decades later confirm how depression and anxiety remain the key issues for rock and pop performers (Hernandez, Russo, & Schneider, 2009) and electronic music artists (Kegelaers, Jessen, Van Audenaerde, & Oudejans, 2022) to suffer up to the point of quitting the industry altogether. Recent research shows that financial stress among music workers is significantly associated with depression and anxiety (Berg, King, Koenig, & McRoberts, 2022). Alarming work details the twice-as-high mortality rate among popular musicians compared with the general population, noting excess fatalities from violent deaths (Kenny & Asher, 2016), as well as a lackluster response from the academic and medical community (Musgrave, Howard, Schofield, Silver, & Tibber, 2023).

A few studies stand out for their comprehensive approach to the psychosocial impact of precariousness on professionals across the sector, including musicians, songwriters, DJs, live and studio crew, producers, publishers, and managers. One such project emerged out of the earlier mentioned Help Musicians UK surveys, resulting in a tangily titled book: *Can Music Make You Sick?* (Gross & Musgrave, 2020). Low mental well-being among music workers was found to be the direct result of the way the industry operates. Principal investigators Sally Anne Gross and George Musgrave (2020) hypothesized that it is exactly that professional music makers so fully embody their labor that makes them vulnerable to the vagaries of precarity (p. 41). Gross and Musgrave (2020) point to the contradiction in a musical career between the lofty ideals of self-exploration and self-realization and "the stark reality of work that does not provide what those trying to build their careers as musicians had hoped for, even expected" (p. 42). They followed up with surveys in other countries, including among 254 musicians from 13 countries, with similar results (Loveday, Musgrave, & Gross, 2023). Jérémy Vachet's (2022) study among music workers in the United States, Sweden, and France comes to equivalent conclusions, as do Adam Ficek's (2024) interviews with British musicians. Practitioners in these studies talked about their present as "a constant emergency" (Vachet, 2022, p. 3) that impacts all aspects of their lives, leading to a range of unhealthy coping strategies and defense mechanisms, such as forming close networks of people within the industry at the expense of "noninstrumental" social relationships, fantasizing about better days ahead while being in denial about current challenges or becoming cynically detached from it all (Vachet, 2022, pp. 90–91).

Digital Games

A pivotal moment for the games industry about the well-being of its workers was the EA_Spouse controversy in November 2004. American game developer and writer Erin Hoffman posted a blog to LiveJournal sharply criticizing the labor practices of one of the largest digital game publishers in the world, Electronic Arts (EA), as experienced by her fiancé, EA employee Leander Hasty:

> EA's bright and shiny new corporate trademark is "Challenge Everything" [. . .] To any EA executive that happens to read this, I have a good challenge for you: how about safe and sane labor practices for the people on whose backs you walk for your millions? (Hoffman, 2004, para. 2)

Hoffman's post went viral, contributing to several employee class action lawsuits, influencing discussions throughout the industry, and raising awareness about the treatment of workers. Around the same time, the International Game Developers Association launched its first worldwide "Quality of Life" survey to map the issues that affect working life as a game developer, followed by an industry diversity study. In subsequent years, these reports combined and expanded into a regular Developer Satisfaction Survey among its members around the world. Of the 777 respondents in 2023, only 15% said "yes" when asked if there was equal treatment and opportunity for all in the game industry (in 2021, this was 12%), whereas almost half (43% versus 47% in 2021) reported microaggressions in the workplace as common (Weststar & Lentini, 2024, p. 17). The data over the years show high volatility within the industry, with people switching employers almost every year despite most having permanent contracts. More than half reported regularly doing extended work hours although only 13% received paid overtime, with freelancers in particular (74%) having to accept "crunch" as part of the job (Weststar & Lentini, 2024, pp. 22, 34). In 2023, the data indicated massive job loss because of layoffs, people unable to find a salaried position and earning low income, and those remaining in studios having to do more with fewer resources and colleagues.

The annual international Game Developers Conference (GDC) commissions attendee surveys since 2012, although it does not directly ask about gameworkers' health. The 2023 GDC survey documented deep frustration among more than 3,000 respondents about postpandemic mandatory return-to-office policies, a corresponding lack of trust, and escalated toxicity in teams (Omdia, 2024). More than half of respondents (56%) expressed concern that their companies could see layoffs next year, with about the same number (57%) supporting unionization to protect workers (Omdia, 2024, p. 29). Almost all (97%) participants expressed resentment about having to use social media to promote their work—a significant contemporary stressor reported in other fields such as music (Baym, 2018) and journalism (Bossio, Bélair-Gagnon, Holton, & Molyneux, 2024).

Mental health awareness nonprofit Take This (Crevoshay, Hays, Kowert, Boccamazzo, & Dunlap, 2019) and publishing platform 80 Level (Anchugin et al., 2023) published reports dedicated to the well-being of gameworkers. In its review, Take This identified job instability, workplace stress, ongoing dependence on crunch practices, and widespread instances of harassment (occurring within studios and coming from gamers) as the key issues negatively affecting well-being. For its report, 80 Level surveyed 503 developers from 56 countries, finding 74% of professionals unhappy with the workplace environment

at their current companies (Anchugin et al., 2023, p. 35). Unpaid overwork, regular rounds of layoffs, and a lack of managers' support were indicated as having a negative effect on employees' mental health. About half (52%) stated their company did not take any actions to support diversity, equity, and inclusion at work (Anchugin et al., 2023, p. 14).

The academic literature has been disciplined in its documentation of all kinds of problems with the production process in digital games—from the early 2000s on, scholars signaled the exploitative (Kline, Dyer-Witheford, & De Peuter, 2003), exhausting (O'Donnell, 2014), often alienating (Bulut, 2020), and volatile (Cote & Harris, 2023) nature of work in the global games industry. All observers connect a "labor of love" ethic that draws and keeps people in the field with the industry's generally uneven and capricious ways of managing work. Although there is ample discussion of the impact on practitioners' morale and anxiety, the psychosocial consequences of embodying what you love in a relentlessly industrialized context remain underarticulated. An exception is a survey among 192 (mostly Portuguese, Finnish, British, and American) game developers carried out between February 2019 and June 2020 to assess the effect of people's working circumstances on their levels of emotional exhaustion, engagement, and burnout (Mendes & Queirós, 2022). Most (85%) participants experienced crunch time during their careers, suggesting that persistently high emotional, time, and work demands best explain their exhaustion.

Journalism

In 2015, online magazine *HuffPost* published a five-part series on mental health in the newsroom, documenting numerous stories of reporters experiencing work-related trauma and concluding that "As much as journalists may fancy themselves superhuman observers of history, the truth is that we are as susceptible to trauma as the victims whose stories we tell" (Arana, 2015, para. 5). A 2015 report by industry nonprofit Eyewitness Media Hub (based on a survey of 209 American professionals and 38 in-depth interviews) on the consequences of viewing distressing materials found that 58% of journalists viewed such images and videos almost daily (Dubberley, Griffin, & Ball, 2015, p. 38). Many (40%) respondents said that viewing work-related traumatic eyewitness media adversely affected their personal lives, including having nightmares and stress-related medical conditions—yet most were uncomfortable requesting help from managers.

Since 2002, the U.K.-based National Council for the Training of Journalists commissioned three surveys to document the working conditions in the field, finding in its latest iteration (in 2018 with 885 respondents) that although one-third (34%) wholeheartedly agreed with the statement that "journalism is a job I enjoy doing," only 17% felt as strongly about journalism living up to their aspirations as a job (Spilsbury, 2018, p. 8). Changes in the industry, such as the ongoing digital transformation and regular rounds of redundancies and restructuring, meant increased work intensity, a widening of the range of tasks, and lower job satisfaction. Furthermore, the report noted a decrease in journalists' income, and 18% of journalists stated that they had been discriminated against at work, mainly based on gender, age, and family circumstances (Spilsbury, 2018, p. 81).

Although regular surveys among journalists have been part of scholarly research around the world since the 1990s (Weaver & Willnat, 2014), the only questions related to journalists' well-being ask about

material dimensions of the job, finding wide variation across countries about pay and job security, editorial policies, and degree of professional autonomy. Overall, surveys among journalists around the world consistently show levels of job satisfaction decreasing over time, which have been attributed to lower pay, increasing workloads, and ongoing digital transformations (Hanusch et al., 2019, pp. 259–260).

During and shortly after the pandemic, many professional associations around the world checked in with reporters and editors to see how they were doing. In 2020, the International Center for Journalists warned of a "deepening mental health crisis within the profession" (Posetti, Bell, & Brown, 2020, p. 8) based on a survey among 1,406 journalists from 125 countries. About two-thirds (67%) of respondents indicated suffering from financial hardship, lack of organizational support, and an intense workload, although a similar number (61%) said to be more committed to journalism than ever (Posetti et al., 2020). The most-cited negative reactions to doing their work during the pandemic were increased anxiety, exhaustion and burnout, difficulty sleeping, and a sense of helplessness. A 2020 Reuters Institute survey among 46 journalists working at international news organizations found 70% suffering from psychological distress, with 11% reporting symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (Selva & Feinstein, 2020). An online survey that same year, organized with the European Journalism Centre among 130 reporters from countries as varied as the Philippines, India, Brazil, Spain, France, Indonesia, and South Africa, found 77% of respondents mentioning work-related stress during lockdown, with 59% feeling depressed or anxious (Crowley & Garthwaite, 2020). In open comments, journalists talked about working harder than ever without management asking about their well-being.

The headline of a 2022 postpandemic survey among 11, 889 U.S. journalists by the Pew Research Center read: "Journalists Sense Turmoil in Their Industry Amid Continued Passion for Their Work" (Gottfried, Mitchell, Jurkowitz, & Liedke, 2022). This captured a theme across all industry reports: most professionals experience significant challenges to their health and well-being on the job while remaining intrinsically motivated about their work. In the Pew project, about half of journalists (49%) said their jobs had a positive overall impact on their emotional well-being, whereas a third (34%) reported experiencing negative consequences. The nonprofit Canadian Journalism Forum on Violence and Trauma commissioned a postpandemic survey with 917 participating professionals in late 2021, finding stress, trauma exposure, absence of organizational support, high-risk drinking, and a general lack of resiliency in all corners of the industry (Pearson, Seglins, & Lindeman, 2022). The report authors stated that "a large proportion of media workers are living with undiagnosed psychological conditions" (Pearson et al., 2022, p. 20).

Dedicated research on mental health issues among journalists stems from the early 21st century, initially focusing on war reporters and photographers. Such work showed that journalists covering combat tend to have significant difficulties, with rates of depression and other stress disorders similar to those among frontline soldiers (Feinstein, Owen, & Blair, 2002). Subsequent work consistently documents widespread stress-related mental disorders such as depression and burnout among journalists in various parts of the world, often in the context of reporting on conflict, exposure to work-related trauma, experiencing low levels of organizational and collegial support, or by doing their work in places where they and their families come under significant threat (MacDonald, Saliba, Hodgins, & Ovington, 2016). Systematic reviews of research on stress disorders and mental illness among journalists invariably lay out instances of

emotional exhaustion, major depression, and post-traumatic stress common among professionals worldwide (Aoki, Malcolm, Yamaguchi, Thornicroft, & Henderson, 2013; MacDonald, Hodgins, Saliba, & Metcalf, 2023).

Almost all journalists experience some kind of stress and trauma in their work, given the nature of the profession, which fundamental appreciation opens the door for much more research on "the intrinsic link between stress and the practice of journalism" (Monteiro, Marques Pinto, & Roberto, 2015, p. 766), and the overall emotional toll of reporting (Bélair-Gagnon, Mellado, Deuze, & Holton, 2024; Storm, 2024). A contemporary example of this is research on the personal attacks and harassment journalists experience when engaging online (Bossio et al., 2024; Westlund, Krøvel, & Orgeret, 2024). Although many of the issues practitioners in journalism face are not necessarily particular to the news industry, it could be argued that the repeated witnessing of other people's suffering and trauma—as well as dealing with traumatized colleagues—creates unique challenges (Šimunjak, 2023). The occupational norm of objectivity as embodied in the journalistic role of society's "neutral observer" complicates, yet is also necessary for how journalists handle their emotions at work. In other words, doing the job helps reporters suppress emotion, while suppressing emotion helps to do the job (Huxford & Hopper, 2020). Objectivity, as an "affect-sanitized ideal" (Rosas, 2018, p. 2117), additionally protects journalism from criticism, shielding them from rising levels of public distrust.

Discussion

In all the reports across the various media industries and professions, statistics about work-related health problems such as depression, anxiety, burnout, self-harm, and suicidality are considerably higher than the general population, and when such reports make an effort to parse the numbers, such stressors tend to disproportionally affect newcomers, professionals working freelance, women, and those with minority backgrounds, LGBTQ+, or disabled (Anchugin et al., 2023, p. 31; Elmes & Riseley, 2024, p. 155; Storm, 2024, p. 22). Although the various industry reports use different methods, questionnaires, and scales, all of them ask media professionals whether the work affects their well-being. On average, two-thirds of all practitioners across media professions worldwide directly link poor health to their working circumstances. Workers generally point as culprits for their miseries to *material* aspects of the industry—its business models, management styles, and working conditions—as well as *affective* elements—such as a lack of perceived organizational justice, receiving little or no managerial support or recognition, feeling as if only an unfailingly optimistic demeanor at work can secure work.

What is also clear from this review is the ambivalent experience of media work—experienced as a stark conflict by people getting to do what they love yet feeling frustrated, miserable, or defeated at work (Musgrave, 2023). Suffering in silence, workaholism, alcohol and substance abuse, and other maladaptive coping mechanisms are consistently romanticized through industry lore as much as in the personal narratives of practitioners. Considering the available evidence about the health and well-being of media workers, the broader institutional context within which media work takes place, and what the research tells us about media production cultures, we are faced with a paradox: What makes media work special is also what makes its people sick.

Given the (however piecemeal) historical record, available research suggests that the media industry's more predatory characteristics—persistently heavy workloads, a range of exclusionary and otherwise problematic organizational practices, and a lack of reciprocity between what workers bring to the job and what the industry gives in return—are not a *bug*, but a *feature* of a system bolstered by the passion of its professionals (Deuze, 2023). Research in occupational medicine suggests it is exactly these three stressors—effort and reward imbalance, low organizational justice, and high job demands—that together exhibit between 60% to 90% of the risk for stress-related disorders at work (Van der Molen et al., 2020). It is therefore no surprise that so many media professionals report problems and get sick on the job.

I embarked on this project without knowing what I would find, starting with summarizing a single survey report and taking it from there. Each time I found another study, I treated it as a separate and unique archive, writing as a stream of consciousness that allowed the data to take me on this tragic journey. Responding to project updates shared on social media, numerous media professionals from around the world offered to provide feedback on working drafts. Although this wealth of materials, the meandering writing process, and backroom conversation enrich understanding, it also highlights some limitations of the research: it misses primary data, cannot formally claim generalizability, and because the context of survey self-reports is lacking, its functional equivalency suffers.

The question remains what the consequences of this mental health crisis in the media industry are, including its implications for the study of media work. Although a causal link between unhappy workers and the quality of media content is difficult to establish, there is no reason to assume that excellent media can only be made by treating workers cruelly—the opposite assumption seems much more likely to hold (Von Rimscha, 2015). There is some evidence suggesting that precarity and its corresponding emphasis on entrepreneurial subjectivities—considering yourself as a "business of one" always competing with everyone else—contribute to the lack of diversity, equity, and inclusion in the media workforce (Gill, 2014). The industry's celebration of creativity and innovation is questionable, as the research shows that precarious and maladaptively coping media workers tend to feel unsafe speaking up, experimenting, and otherwise participating freely in the creative process (Porcu, Hermans, & Broersma, 2022).

In his essay on the pleasures of eating, American novelist, poet, and farmer Wendell Berry (2019) writes about how people forget what it takes to make food and, in their ignorance, lose out on some of the pleasure of having a meal. Comparing our ignorance of the global industrial food system with the uncritical experience of "patrons of the entertainment industry," Berry (2019) reckons:

> People do not think of themselves as participants in agriculture. They think of themselves
> as consumers . . . They buy what they want—or what they have been persuaded to want—
> within the limits of what they can get. They pay, mostly without protest, what they are
> charged. And they mostly ignore certain critical questions about the quality and the cost
> of what they are sold. (para. 3)

Berry's argument and comparison of eating with how people enjoy films, music, games, and news is a reminder of Roger Silverstone's (1999) charge to take the "erotics" of media seriously: the pleasure of

making media comes at a price (p. 55ff). This is perhaps the pivotal answer to the "so what" question of this project: How can we derive genuine pleasure from that which incorporates so much suffering?

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