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The Emotional Toll on Journalists Covering the Refugee Crisis

JOURNALISM SAFETY RESPONSIBILITY ACCOUNTABILITY



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This document is a summary of a longer report which was published for INSI by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. **Please see [here](#)** to read the full 42-page report which provides more detailed findings, information about the methodology used in the data collection, interviews with industry leaders and the personal narratives of journalists who covered the refugee crisis.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

The current refugee crisis reached a peak in 2015 when more than one million migrants arrived in Europe by sea. This report examines the emotional toll experienced by journalists covering a story of such unprecedented scale.

The vast majority of those individuals who arrived in Europe in 2015 were fleeing conflict in countries such as Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Many had already experienced significant physical and psychological trauma before embarking on their difficult journeys. And for some, the journeys themselves were so dangerous they ended in tragedy. It is therefore important to acknowledge that what the refugees endured far transcends what journalists as a group experienced.

A number of proposals stem from the data collected, suggesting ways the media can prepare better for similar stories and provide support to those journalists in need.

Background to the Research

The immediate impetus for this research came from an industry-wide meeting of members of the International News Safety Institute held in January 2016. During this meeting, several news organisations noted the challenges their journalist colleagues had experienced covering the refugee crisis which had unfolded on the relatively safe shores of Europe, often close to home and bureaus, and on an unprecedented scale for which many news organisations were unprepared.

It was clear that not all in the media were affected the same way, but among the most common reactions that emerged during a series of conversations with journalists and news managers were feelings of guilt at not having done enough personally to help the refugees, and shame at the observed behaviour of others. Emotions such as these were the unforeseen byproduct of journalists feeling compelled to step outside their traditional role as neutral observer, by helping refugees in ways that ranged from rescuing them from the water to giving them food, clothing, and money.

Study Methods and Results

The quantitative study that underpins this report was carried out by Professor Anthony Feinstein in conjunction with Hannah Storm, co-authors of this report. Data were collected in late 2016.

Nine European and American news organisations took part, each providing a list of their journalists who were covering the refugee crisis. To protect the confidentiality of participants, the organisations are not named. Of 114 journalists approached, 80 (70.2%) agreed to take part: a sample size and response rate which compares favourably with other studies published on the subject of journalists' emotional responses to their work.

The results revealed that journalists reported few symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression and were not drinking to excess. However, many reported difficulties related to moral injury, defined as the injury done to a person's conscience or moral compass by perpetrating, witnessing, or failing to prevent acts that transgress personal moral and ethical values or codes of conduct. While moral injury is not considered a mental illness, unlike PTSD and depression, it can be the source of considerable emotional upset.

The data also showed that moral injury was linked to working alone in the field, having no previous experience covering war, being a parent, and to significant guilt, which in turn was associated with providing direct assistance to refugees, an increased workload, and a perceived lack of support from the individual's news organisation.

The Importance of These Results

This marks the first time a study of this kind has been carried out looking into journalists' responses to covering a humanitarian crisis. Previous surveys have shown journalists can be adversely affected emotionally by their work, covering war, natural disasters, or local news with a traumatic crime or accident content.

Earlier studies of journalists focused on post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression,

highlighting the fact that the proximity to events can cause significant stress to journalists, who are often first responders to a trauma scene. What is unique and unprecedented about the current results is that they show how journalists can be affected by the issue of moral injury, linked as it is to guilt and a sense of having lost one's moral compass. Research in the military, where extensive work has been done on the topic, suggests that, if moral injury is not addressed, individuals can have trouble reintegrating after a tour of duty. It is also considered a harbinger of PTSD.

Of note is that our empirical data meshed with the content of industry-wide interviews with several journalists and news managers. Taken together, these two strands of information allowed us to formulate a set of suggestions for news organisations, geared towards promoting mental health and resilience in the workforce.

Conclusions

Moral injury rather than PTSD or depression emerged as the biggest psychological challenge confronted by journalists covering the migration crisis. Given that moral injury is strongly associated with journalists becoming actively involved in helping refugees, the industry needs to reach consensus on defining appropriate expectations in situations such as these.

Good journalists will of course feel moved by the migration crisis, but they cannot fix it and should not attempt to do so. Guilt, which is often misplaced, can be a faulty motivator of behaviour. So too can moral injury. Here journalists need to understand where their emotions are coming from and that it is okay to feel distress in the context of what they are witnessing. However, when the lines are blurred and journalists start regularly assisting migrants, emotions can unravel.



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Will Vassilopoulos

**Freelance Journalist,
Agence France-Presse**

"You do feel that with your friends you're on different frequencies, all of a sudden. I hate it when a friend is like – 'OK, what's happening with the migration issue?' [I think] you just wouldn't understand. I will give you a sterile generic answer [when they say] 'Is it as bad as they say in Idomeni?' You don't want to put them in your world, may be because you don't want to keep on reminding yourself of this world."

If I were to say what is more difficult in this crisis, getting over the images of the dead people, or going on a mission that is long – 10 days long – and then going home, opening the door and automatically being a father and husband, I think that is the most challenging thing."



Yannis Behrakis

Photographer, Reuters

"A lot of times you are not sure what to do: leave the camera and actively help people come out of the sea or do practical things for them, drive them up the road, or give them clothes, or take their pictures. Of course, I always think this is the way I help and this is my job to make sure that everybody around the world knows what is happening and that is my mission."

PHOTO ©GIACOMO ZANDONINI

To prevent this happening, it is best that education with respect to moral injury and other potential emotional challenges that come with this work, should begin before deployment and be part of individual debriefings on return.

Senior journalists and managers need to lead by example and have conversations with their staff about their experiences and expectations. Reaching out for assistance in dealing with it should be encouraged and not come at the risk of endangering future career prospects.

While our current findings have been derived from a study of the migration crisis, the conclusions are in principle applicable to other news content as well, for example, domestic terror threats, stories in challenging, but non-conflict areas, or locations of post-conflict or humanitarian crisis, particularly where journalists may be covering a story local to them.

Breakdown of the results

From the shores of Lesbos to the barricaded borders of Hungary, by the end of 2015, the plight of a million migrants had become one of the biggest news stories in recent times. Large numbers of journalists were deployed to cover the movement of hundreds of thousands of people. As the crisis continued, stories and anecdotes started to be shared within the industry suggesting that for some in the media bearing witness to the plight of those displaced was taking an emotional toll.

This observation was the impetus for the present study, the aim of which was to investigate how journalists were reacting psychologically to their work on the migration crisis.

There were two strands to the data collected. The first encompassed personal reflections from news managers and narrative accounts

from journalists in the field. The second was quantitative. Here the approach was to record and quantify symptoms of emotional distress using tried and tested psychometric rating scales developed for conditions such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), major depression, and moral injury.

Of the 80 journalists studied 47 (59.8%) were male. A similar number were married. The average age of the sample was 42.9 years. Just under 40% of the journalists had children. Journalists had been working for an average of 18 years in the profession. This experience was reflected in the fact that just over two-thirds had previously covered wars or disasters. When it came to coverage of the migration crisis, one-third were working alone.

The psychological data revealed few PTSD-type symptoms. Scores on the intrusion, avoidance, and arousal subscales were low. The same result was found for depression. The amount of weekly alcohol consumed by both men and women journalists was well below the threshold considered medically healthy. A different picture emerged for moral injury. The most frequently reported difficulty pertained to witnessing behaviour amongst colleagues, aid workers, or the local population that participants regarded as morally wrong. Almost two-thirds of the journalists highlighted this concern. Of note is that journalists in general did not regard their own behaviour as morally compromised, instead seeing such behaviour in others, and yet they divulged experiencing a moderate amount of guilt.

The results from the work survey gave a somewhat mixed message. Although the majority of journalists felt supported overall by their news organisation, approximately 50% believed their editors had failed to acknowledge the traumatic aspect of the assignment.

Given the degree to which journalists reported symptoms of moral injury, a closer look was taken at the demographic, work-related, and clinical factors associated with it. Journalists with children recorded more moral injury-related distress, as did those with a higher workload within the past year.

Journalists working alone rather than with colleagues reported that they were more likely to have acted in ways that violated their own moral

code. Those who had not covered war previously were more likely to record violating their own moral code by failing to do something they felt they should have done. Those who said they had not received the necessary support from their organisation were more likely to admit seeing things they perceived as morally wrong. Less control over resources required to report on the refugee crisis correlated significantly with moral injury and depression. Moral injury scores correlated significantly with guilt. Greater guilt, in turn, was noted by journalists covering the story close to home and by those who had assisted the refugees. There was no correlation between scores on the Moral Injury Experience Scale and gender, age, education, marital status, or alcohol consumption in men or women.

Finally, the relationship between moral injury on the one hand and symptoms of PTSD (intrusion, avoidance, arousal) and depression on the other were explored. The results revealed that only symptoms of intrusion and guilt were statistically significant predictors of moral injury.

We did not embark on this study anticipating that moral injury would emerge as the major issue affecting journalists in their coverage of the migration crisis. While it is important to reiterate that moral injury is not considered a mental illness, unlike PTSD for example, the potential hazards posed by it are all too familiar to the military. Here research has shown that it is associated with significant emotional distress and can compromise a veteran's ability to reintegrate back into society following a tour of duty.

Our data did, however, reveal a complex triad of guilt, moral injury, and behaviour that entailed journalists stepping out of their media role to provide direct assistance to migrants. This meshed with a theme that had emerged earlier in discussions surrounding the role and responsibilities of journalists in the refugee crisis, namely where to draw the line when it came to personal involvement. The traditional notion of the journalist as the neutral observer seems to have been called into question in part because journalists – in Lesbos at least – were often among the first responders, in part because they were often reporting on something that was happening on their home soil, and in part because, by providing help, they were unlikely to put themselves in significant danger.



Alice Petré

Migration Correspondent, Swedish Radio

"Migrants are treated by officials mostly as numbers and groups without names. They are Africans, they are migrants, they are black people. I'm in Sicily at the moment and in front of me now I can see six or seven [migrants] walking on the square and people will say 'they shouldn't be here', so that's the attitude and of course when you're a policeman or a coastguard they are no longer individuals.

I think it is important to understand that as a journalist my job is to make them individuals, that everyone has a dream of healthy children, nice friends, good economy or whatever it is, on a human level, they are universal dreams."

PHOTO ©ALICE PETRÉN

Recommendations for Consideration

During the cross-industry 2017 meeting mentioned earlier, news managers and journalists discussed ways in which organisations and individual journalists could work better from a mental health perspective. This interaction should begin with pre-deployment planning, and continuing into the news story and the period thereafter. It was widely acknowledged that any final approach should be well thought out, planned, and coordinated in advance, based on a consensus understanding of what might work. What is not required here is a hastily constructed, ad hoc approach that runs the risk of causing more harm than good. Therefore, we list here some guidelines for consideration.

Given the early stages of this research, the points raised should not be regarded as a set of definitive recommendations. We also recognise that these ideas extend beyond the challenges

posed by moral injury and address the wider, important question of how news organisations need to look out for the emotional well-being of journalists dispatched to cover a story.

Before and During Deployment

- » News managers, assignment editors, and bureau chiefs should develop relationships based on trust with those they are deploying.
- » The planning for deployments should include informed conversations about the potential emotional responses that may arise and what can be done to boost resilience.
- » Individuals should try to establish their personal parameters and rules of ethical involvement ahead of time and ensure that they recognise their roles, responsibilities, and the value of their work as journalists (to mitigate any blurring of the fine line between managing their humanity and over-extending themselves).

- » Sensitivity is key from managers and those dealing with individuals in these scenarios. News organisations should consider guidelines for news desks about how to respond to calls from the field where people might be troubled by their experiences.
- » Managers should be aware that economic pressures and the decisions that stem from this can undermine the emotional health of journalists in the field. We recognise that mitigating this will remain challenging. There are clearly no easy solutions to this conundrum, but rather than gloss over this study finding, we believe it is important to bring it to the attention of news managers.

Post-Deployment

- » Organisations should look to provide support to journalists who may be affected by their work. Journalists should be made aware of what is available if they want help. It is important that managers do not make journalists feel this is compulsory. However, it is also important that there is institutional expertise in recognising the journalists who need help and ensuring they get it.
- » Journalists may find it difficult to reintegrate after a deployment and it is imperative they, their families, and their organisations recognise this.
- » Organisations might consider the value of educating families about moral injury and psychological well-being in general.
- » Managers should recognise that journalists vary in the ways they reintegrate. This underlines the importance of managers knowing individual staff and the fact that some may need time off,

whereas others may not, hence the need for some flexibility in the guidelines.

Next Steps

Journalists are generally resilient. The current study reveals that notwithstanding their long hours in the field and bureaus covering an emotionally wrenching story, as a group they show few signs of PTSD and depression. However, work of this emotional intensity can leave a mark and we have shown that writing about, photographing, and filming the plight of vast numbers of refugees making their way to Europe, has engendered a degree of moral injury amongst the journalists. While moral injury, unlike PTSD and depression, is not a mental illness, it does come with its own emotional fallout, as data from the military demonstrate only too clearly.

Journalists are not soldiers of course, but the challenges posed by reintegrating back into society are common to both professions and it is here that moral injury can prove a significant stumbling block. We hope that the media will see our study as a first step in understanding and addressing a different kind of injury as they look out for the welfare of the men and women working on stories that can prove stressful and emotionally distressing.

This study is the first to explore the important topic of moral injury in journalists and so the findings should be seen as necessarily provisional. But these data should alert journalists and the industry to the condition and the need for further research. This is particularly relevant because the conclusions of this report will be applicable to stories beyond the current refugee crisis.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Anthony Feinstein is professor of psychiatry at the University of Toronto and director of the Neuropsychiatry Programme at Sunnybrook Health Science Centre. He has undertaken numerous studies looking at how journalists are affected psychologically by their work in zones of war, conflict, and disaster. He is the author of **Journalists Under Fire: The Psychological Hazards of Covering War** (Johns Hopkins University Press) and **Shooting War**.

Hannah Storm is Director of the International News Safety Institute (INSI), a UK registered charity whose members include some of the world's leading news organisations. INSI's work focuses on physical, psychological, and digital safety and it provides a network for members to share information to ensure journalists stay out of harm's way. Storm is author of **The Kidnapping of Journalists: Reporting from High Risk Conflict Zones** (with Robert G. Picard) and **No Woman's Land: On the Frontlines with Female Reporters**. Before joining INSI, she worked for organisations including the BBC, Reuters, ITN, and Oxfam.

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