



Trauma vs. Duty: Confronting the Moral Obligation of Newsrooms to Protect Journalists from Psychological Harm

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Abstract

Journalists are at the forefront of many dangerous and hazardous situations like wars, crimes, and natural disasters. Recent research in the field of psychology suggests that workers exposed to events like these have potential to develop trauma, which can in turn develop into mental disorders like post-traumatic stress disorder or PTSD. This is why think tank Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma has been backing calls for additional organizational support from media companies for the protection of their journalists from trauma, as a proposed inclusion to the ethical and legal duty of media companies to keep their workers safe. A perceived duty of resilience and stigma attached to mental health however appears to drag efforts of opening up newsrooms to discussions on mental health.

This paper thus seeks to contribute to the discussion by providing an ethical analysis on the dilemma. Such an evaluation may pave the way for an understanding on the liability of the concerned parties to the consequence of potential psychological trauma in sending journalists out to cover traumatic events. In the ethical evaluation, it is found that both journalists and media companies have the moral obligation of protecting journalists' mental well-being and among the steps to do so is eradicating the stigma surrounding mental health and resilience in newsrooms. This decision has been based on deontological evaluation of media companies' duty to protect their workers, and the journalists' duty to serve the public interest, as well as a consequentialist evaluation of other possible courses of actions to the dilemma.

Keywords: Trauma; Resilience; Post-traumatic stress disorder; Stigma

Introduction

Research of clinical psychologists from think tank Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma showed that Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder or PTSD is among the many hazards faced by journalists covering traumatic events like wars, accidents, violence, and crimes, among others. The think tank's research showed that majority of journalists have been exposed to traumatic events that are duty related. This by seeing first-hand the aftermaths of events like automobile accidents, plane crashes, murders, and wars including their repeated exposure to graphic or violent content [1-6].

Though it has long been established in international standards that employers are ethically and legally liable for the safety of their workers in legislation [4], clinical psychologist Petra Skeffington, in an article by ABC News [7], noted a discrepancy in how different professions manage work-related psychological injuries of their workers. Dr. Skeffington noted that workers in areas like the military, policework, or fire or ambulance services receive better management of psychological trauma than other professions like media because the nature of their duty of handling traumatic scenarios is more recognized. Although journalists are also exposed to such events, Skeffington [8] said to this day, media companies continue to lack the recognition of their responsibility to protect their workers or journalists from psychological harm.

This issue goes on top of the glamorized idea of resilience in journalism or what Morell [9] in an opinion article described as the "stigma of admitting a mental health challenge... among people who view their work as a calling." During the pandemic, journalist Hannah Storm [10] shared a similar sentiment in another opinion article, arguing that although some newsrooms are already taking steps in supporting the mental wellbeing of their colleagues, the media industry remains to be a "strong"

industry, where discussing mental health continues to be a taboo as PTSD is recognized as more of a badge of honor, especially for those who covered conflicts, rather than something that requires clinical and organizational attention.

The attached duty of resiliency appears to be in line with universally accepted principles of journalism which state that journalists have a primary duty or obligation to serve the interests of the public and to do so, they are expected to “commit to the elimination of war and other great troubles confronting humanity” [4]. It could thus be argued that part of a journalist’s duty is to go out in the field, cover such events, and accumulate adequate data or material to provide the public with sufficient information on issues concerning security and public interest. This is a significant duty that journalists are expected to perform and while it is of utmost importance, the emerging concerns on post-traumatic stress among journalists that are highly related to this duty of covering such traumatic events are becoming more difficult to ignore [3]. This issue amplified the calls of journalists and members of the academe, both in media and psychology, for additional support from media companies in protecting journalists’ mental health [3,10,5].

Such a notion suggests that the moral obligation of protecting the mental health of journalists ultimately and automatically fall on media companies. According to the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma in 2019 [8] which was noted in an article by ABC [7], past cases of journalists challenging their companies for PTSD are usually settled in court. It was only in 2019 when the legal world saw its first successful case in Australia of a journalist receiving a \$180,000 compensation due to occupational trauma [8]. The ruling was treated by advocates of occupational mental health safety for journalists as a significant development that could spur change in the media profession, especially on how media companies from around the world deal with psychological trauma among their journalists [8].

With all arguments considered, an ethical evaluation of the situation is crucial to assess the expected obligation of media companies to provide support for journalists traumatized in their line of duty. Due to the mentioned duty of journalists to cover events of public interest, the dilemma surrounding the moral obligation of protecting journalists’ mental health has become an issue of journalist’s duty versus the consequence of this duty that is psychological trauma—one that could be further explored through an ethical lens. There are many layers to this ethical dilemma, and this paper seeks to dissect the problem by assessing the duties of both journalists and their respective media companies, and the consequences of expected solutions to the dilemma, especially the expected moral obligation of media firms to provide mental health support for their journalists.

Research Methodology

With the growing demand for newsrooms or media companies to provide additional mental health support for their journalists [3] the main research question that this paper seeks to address

through an ethical evaluation is as follows:

Do media companies have the ultimate moral obligation to address the psychological consequences of their journalists’ duty of covering traumatic events?

Such a question suggests that this ethical evaluation does not automatically assume that all moral obligations must fall on media companies. This as the research has identified three parties involved in the ethical dilemma of psychological trauma among journalists. These are the individuals or groups of individuals that may be affected, may benefit from, or may suffer the negative consequences of any course of action that will be tackled in the paper: (a) Journalists who cover traumatic events, (b) Media companies, (c) and the public served by the media (the media, in this case, consists of both the media companies and their journalists).

Two ethical frameworks will be used to address the moral dilemma mentioned above: the consequentialist framework and the duty-based framework of ethical analysis.

Consequentialist framework

A consequentialist framework or approach shall be applied to assess the identified main consequence tackled in this research which is the possible Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder that could affect journalists covering traumatic events. To expound on this, the paper investigates the depth of the damage of psychological trauma to journalists covering traumatic events which will allow a wider perspective on the mentioned dilemma. Due to limitations of the researcher’s expertise on the field of psychology, the researcher will cite studies made by clinical psychologists from the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma and other research in the field of psychology.

After establishing the potential damage of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder on journalists based on psychologists’ data or evaluation, the consequentialist framework shall compare the main consequence to possible secondary consequences that may arise if substitute courses of actions will be taken to avert the risk of journalists experiencing trauma in their line of duty. The consequences of each will be weighed and will be compared to the main consequence so that the paper will be able to systematically pinpoint the consequence that could provide the most desirable outcome to all parties involved, as provided in Brown University’s framework of ethical analysis [11].

The duty-based framework

The duty of journalists to cover traumatic events and the supposed stigma attached to this duty could potentially hamper conversations on mental health protection in newsrooms, as suggested by Storm [10]. With this, the research will tackle the calls for additional support from media companies for journalists reporting on trauma and the basis of why some journalists still believe that psychological support for them remain to be inadequate [10,3].

This study will also seek to question whether these calls are warranted based on the very duty that journalists signed up for when they entered the profession. The assessment of a journalist's duty shall not only assess the widely or universally accepted duties based on ethical principles of journalism. It will also provide an assessment of the supposed stigma of resilience that has been incorporated with this duty, as proposed by McMahon and McLellan [5] on their paper on resiliency and trauma.

Without considering the consequences of possible courses of actions to address the dilemma, this framework will evaluate if:

- It is ethically or not ethically permissible for media companies to continue sending out journalists in the field to serve the public interest
- Journalists have the duty to serve the public interest and should be held responsible for their own mental wellbeing
- Media companies have the duty to protect journalists who serve the public interest and thus media companies are responsible for protecting their journalists from psychological trauma
- Journalists and media companies have the shared duty or responsibility of both serving the public interest and in protecting journalists from psychological trauma

Brown University [11] provided that these ethical frameworks have their own limits and are not mutually exclusive. Thus, in providing an ethical analysis using these frameworks, some ethical evaluations or arguments may overlap with each other. These areas of convergence will serve as guides towards coming up with an answer to the main research question concerning the moral obligations of newsrooms in addressing the psychological consequences of their journalists' duty of covering traumatic events.

Literature Review

The wake-up call

Australian media company The Age made headlines in 2019 after a Victorian court in Australia found the firm responsible for the psychological trauma of one of their former journalists [7]. Edraki and Carrick released a detailed article on the matter on ABC Australia, describing the case as a "legal world first" and a "wake-up call" to media organizations around the world [8].

To break down the facts of the case: former reporter, only anonymously known as YZ, sued The Age for PTSD which she claimed she developed while covering traumatic events including at least 30 murders, many gangland-related crimes, suicides, car accidents, and natural disasters [8]. The court found the media company responsible for the journalist's psychological injury noting that The Age provided insufficient psychological support to YZ. In the end, the court ruled that YZ must be awarded \$180,000 in damages due to PTSD [8].

The landmark case was considered a wake-up call to media

firms not only in Australia but also around the globe. In the ABC article, The Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma [8] noted that previous cases are usually just settled in court. What sets YZ's case apart from similar cases that failed to succeed in going into trial is how YZ's camp was able to prove that The Age failed to provide enough support for her mental health and breached their duty of care, despite YZ repeatedly telling the firm that she is mentally incapable of handling certain coverage [8]. The plaintiff's lawyer was even quoted by ABC saying, "She said on three occasions, 'I don't want to do that, and you know why', and it was ultimately pressed upon her that she must" [8].

In defense of the Age newspaper, Australian Associated Press [7] reported in an article on The Guardian that the company's lawyer claimed YZ was supported by the company's employee assistance program and was said to have been seeing her own psychologist. The Age's argument also included that the company deemed it best not to intervene or ask about an employee's psychological state as this could go in conflict with their "privacy and internal autonomy" [7].

This research pivots on this particular case, not only because it is first in the world for such a case to win, but also to weigh out the arguments from both parties from an ethical perspective. An employer is expected to perform its duty of protecting its employees, in this case, their reporters or journalists (International Labor Organization, n.d.). The Age argued that they have performed this duty through their employee assistance program, yet the court ruled this as inadequate to support YZ who was clinically traumatized in her line of duty [7].

On the other hand, journalists like YZ are expected to carry out their role as seekers of truth or as "first responders" as Rupar [12] puts it, to various events including those that have potential to be traumatic [3]. This case begs for an ethical evaluation on this duty, in line with consequences from the impact of work-related PTSD especially upon journalists covering traumatic events. To effectively carry out this evaluation, a psychological evaluation of the impact of PTSD must first be established.

Disclaimer: As discussed, the researcher lacks the expertise to provide a concrete evaluation on PTSD among journalists. The researcher thus collated data from experts in clinical psychology to help paint a picture about the real impact of trauma both occupationally and personally to journalists.

Psychological trauma and PTSD among journalists

Experts on clinical psychology from the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma [3] released an overview of research regarding the impact of covering trauma to journalists. The research found that majority of journalists are exposed to psychologically traumatic events in their line of work [2]. For a more accurate definition, the American Psychological Association or APA defines psychological trauma as any disturbing experience that results in significant fear, helplessness, dissociation, confusion, or other disruptive feelings intense enough to have a long-lasting negative effect on

a person's attitudes, behavior, and other aspects of functioning. Traumatic events include those caused by human behavior (e.g., rape, war, industrial accidents) as well as by nature (e.g., earthquakes) and often challenge an individual's view of the world as a just, safe, and predictable place [13].

Research by Dworzniak in 2011, Feinstein et al., in 2002, Newman et al., in 2003 Pyevich et al., in 2003, [2] and Teegen and Gotwinkel in 2001 as cited by Smith [2] found that at least 80% to 100% of journalists have been exposed to traumatic events that are related to their duty as journalists. Common traumatic events that journalists are exposed to, as pointed out in Smith [2] collated research include automobile accidents, fires, executions, murder, wars, disasters, as well as prolonged exposure to violent content or footage.

Experiencing trauma however is different from developing PTSD or Posttraumatic Stress Disorder as noted by Kissen and Lozano [14] on the Anxiety Depression Association of America. Kissen and Lozano (n.d.) wrote that trauma is "time-based" [14] and that constant exposure or revisiting of traumatic events can lead to PTSD which they described as a "longer-term condition" [14]. According to the APA (n.d.), PTSD is a disorder that may result when an individual lives through or witnesses an event in which he or she believes that there is a threat to life or physical integrity and safety and experiences fear, terror, or helplessness [13].

In this regard, Smith [2] through collated research, noted that though majority of journalists experience work-related trauma, they exhibit low rates of developing PTSD and other psychiatric disorders, noting that "most journalists exhibit resilience" [2]. According to their research, journalists may experience a strong reaction or set of reactions to covering harrowing events such as war, disasters, and other human suffering. This is not necessarily a problem, but simply a signal of the emotional challenges of news gathering, and a signal to practice self-care [2].

Smith [2] likewise admitted that there are limited studies on the occupational impact of both exposure to traumatic events and PTSD but citing initial dissertation results by Drevo, Nelson and Smith [2] said the severity of PTSD symptoms has the potential to lead to greater occupational dysfunction which may result to tardiness, missing deadlines, and difficulty of concentrating at work [2].

Recent data by Brooks [1] in a study on the psychological wellbeing of workers exposed to disasters or emergency show that there are positive consequences from exposure to such experiences including a "massive boost in morale and confidence" if workers "responded well" to such incidents. "Deliberate detachment" was cited as a way of cushioning the impact of traumatic events [1]. On the flip side, most of the reported impact in the study are negative. These include shock, helplessness, worries about colleagues, fear of future incidents, and guilt [1]. These negative consequences shall be analyzed later in the paper through an ethical lens.

Of duty and resiliency

The research has explored the impact of psychological trauma and its potential to develop into long-term psychological damage like PTSD on journalists exposed to traumatic events. For the purposes of this paper, this impact shall be the main consequence of journalists performing their duty of covering traumatic events. At this point, the research moves on to analyze the duty of journalists, and whether or not this consequence has been implicitly stated in accepted ethical practices of journalism as a field.

The Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics [15] provides that "the highest and primary obligation of ethical journalism is to serve the public". This alone makes the purpose of journalism a form of public duty. Under a duty-based approach, journalists are ethically expected to carry out the very core of their duty, despite the consequences it may pose on the mental health of the subject (in this case, the journalist). A more specific principle for journalism that concerns events that have potential for trauma was provided under the International Principles of Professional Ethics in Journalism [4] which requires a journalist to have the ethical commitment to the elimination of war and other great evils confronting humanity". Furthermore, the International Principles of Professional Ethics in Journalism [4] also provides that the foremost task of the journalist is to serve the people's right to true and authentic information through an honest dedication to objective reality... with due deployment of the creative capacity of the journalist, so that the public is provided with adequate material to facilitate the formation of an accurate and comprehensive picture of the world in which the origin, nature and essence of events, processes and state of affairs are understood as objectively as possible.

In a strictly deontological sense, devotion to the principles of this duty is expected of a journalist [16] and should a Kantian notion of moral duty be followed, the actions towards which journalists assume this duty should be considered to be applied universally [17]. Thus, if journalists are given the task to cover wars or crimes in line with their obligations to serve the public, they have to do so even if it results in consequences to themselves or in this case – potential psychological harm.

It could be argued, therefore, that it is not just ethically permissible for media companies to continue sending out their journalists to the field even in circumstances that may pose potential trauma to the journalist, it is actually morally correct to do so in accordance with the duty of the media to serve the public interest.

If behaviors towards this duty provide the opposite of not performing the duty itself, say for example, media companies allow journalists to refuse to take on their roles as reporters of traumatic events or if media companies do not at all send journalists to cover such events in the interest of protecting their mental health, the universality of the decision must then be assessed. According to Day [17] the Kantian notion of moral duty provides that moral agents, in this case journalists and media firms, must "check the principles underlying their actions

and decide whether they want them applied universally. If so, these principles become a system of public morality to which all members of society are bound". Following this principle, deciding not to send journalists out in the field on the basis of protecting them from trauma, when applied universally to all journalists and all media organizations implies harm to the public which they serve in such a way that providing them sufficient information regarding issues like security and public health are put to risk.

Likewise, in a consequentialist sense, merely relying on secondary sources and not sending journalists out in the field to gather sufficient information for their reports could pose negative harm to the public's interest. Citing the philosophy of John Stuart Mill, Day [17] pointed out that under teleological or consequence-based theories, the correct course of action "produces the best consequences... for the greatest number of people". The interest of more people or the public in general, will thus be harmed, if they are provided with information that is potentially insufficient especially in times when their security is at risk.

Simply put, it would be morally wrong for media companies to stop sending journalists to cover potentially traumatizing events, in the basis of the principles of duty and the negative results it poses to the greater population under teleological perspective. This paper argues though that this all-encompassing stand is not morally sound and could undermine the severity of the possible consequences or harm of trauma to journalists.

Day [17] noted that some Kantian philosophers have come to accept that some moral duties cannot be separated from their consequences, especially in the contemporary setting when moral dilemmas have become more and more complex. This paper argues that in this case, it is justified to refuse to take on the action based on the extremity of the possible circumstances posed on the mental health of a journalist that could last for the long term. A more reasonable take, this paper argues, would be to allow journalists to choose whether or not they would accept an assignment to cover potentially traumatic events bearing in mind its potential risk to their mental health, like in the case of YZ where she asked to be transferred to another beat in consideration of her mental health [7].

Under the International Principles of Professional Ethics in Journalism [4], a journalist must have professional integrity in such a way that the journalist has the "right to refrain from working against his or her conviction". By allowing journalists to discern whether they would or would not take on an assignment that could potentially be dangerous to their psychological health, media companies are protecting their journalists' right to protect their own professional integrity. In such a way, the duty of sufficiently serving the public interest by gathering adequate information or material on the ground is not ultimately disregarded and people who are more mentally capable to do the job will have the opportunity to do so.

It could also be argued that the duty of a journalist does not stop from covering events that could potentially cause trauma. In line with the social responsibility of journalists to serve the public

interest is their responsibility to care for themselves to effectively serve this mentioned purpose [5]. There are many self-care or self-help methods that journalists can follow to support their own mental health. Some of the key points for self-care suggested by experts from the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma [18] are listed below:

- Journalists must open up about "possible emotional risks" of a potentially traumatic assignment with their supervisors.
- Journalists must "maintain strong social supports and peer networks".
- Journalists must recognize why the "journalism of trauma matters" and why its "important and worthwhile".
- Journalists must view distress as a "normal human response" and not a sign of "weakness".
- Journalists must take breaks and acknowledge their feelings.

The Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma [18] also encourages journalists to watch out for possible manifestations of trauma or common responses to trauma which include "disorientation or 'spacey' feelings," "difficulty of doing simple tasks or problem solving", "sleeplessness", "avoidance of the reminders of trauma," among others. The think tank recommends that journalists facing such reactions to trauma must seek professional help. With such strategies in place, this paper argues that journalists must take part in the responsibility of taking care of their own psychological health and be made aware of the existence of trauma so as to build positive resilience and minimize its potential damage to both their personal lives and their careers.

But what if such an expectation of self-care and resiliency becomes the measure of the capabilities of a journalist? It could be argued that this expectation may actually be counterproductive in such a way that those with mental health concerns refuse to speak out in fear of being deemed incapable. If one journalist refuses to take on a potentially traumatic assignment to avoid trauma, does it make this journalist less of a journalist? If another decides to take on the assignment despite the risk of trauma, is this other journalist better than the one who refused to take on the assignment?

Such a dilemma brings us to the expectation of resilience in the field of journalism. McMahon and McLellan [5] brought this issue to focus, tackling both the negative and positive impacts of the expectation of resilience to journalists and their mental health. McMahon and McLellan [5] highlighted that the culture of expecting resilience from journalists, especially those covering potentially traumatic events like natural disasters drive journalists to "cover 'hard-edge' stories that may put them in harm's way". According to their research, some journalists have a strong sense of identity attached to their duty that allows a tendency for them to be thrill seekers [5] or adventure, experience, and sensation seekers [5].

Such a culture is recently being criticized by journalists bearing the brunt of the expectancy of resilience in the field. McMahon

and McLellan [5] cited this excerpt from a speech by journalist Kimina Lyall in 2005 speaking at a conference after covering the 2004 Asian Tsunami. Lyall said, in traumatic events, we are dealing, by definition, with big news stories, and that means big competition. Much as we like to sanctify this to lay people, the reality is that often the greatest stress in stories like this is simply the pressure to deliver, preferably exclusives or a dramatic new angle. This pressure, often added to by the inbuilt aggressiveness of the hungriest reporters, is always delivered by the news desk.

These stories are career makers or breakers for journalists, and we know it.

This is why we, as a group, cling to an outdated culture that values toughness over sympathy, cynicism over understanding, and a fight-to-the-end attitude to a news assignment [5].

Other journalists have also made similar criticisms to the nature of the field and in the expectation of resilience which for the purposes of this article shall be referred to as a “perceived duty” among journalists. In an article published by Reuters, Storm [10] who covered the coronavirus pandemic noted that mental health issues have become a taboo topic in newsrooms as the field is a “macho industry” that drives journalists in a spiral of silence due to fear of the implications of admitting mental health issues to their careers. Storm [10] also pointed out that PTSD among journalists is seen as “badge of honor” especially among those who covered wars or conflict, overlooking those who cover for instance, day-to-day crimes that could also have a potential to inflict trauma [3]. This perceived duty arguably nurtures a culture in journalism that looks down on journalists that may have a more vulnerable psychological state than those who can prove to be more tough and resilient in their line of duty.

McMahon and McLellan [5] noted that a common practice of “professional detachment” allows journalists to deal with covering traumatic scenes, noting the importance of carrying on with their duty in covering newsworthy events, as also tackled earlier. A recent study in the field of psychology also suggests that deliberate detachment is a way for some workers to lessen the emotional impact of disasters or work-related traumatic situations, but this only serves as a short-term or so to speak, a band-aid solution to reduce trauma [1]. The perceived duty of resilience can also lead to negative impacts among journalists like “denial, numbing or dissociation” [5].

Journalists, according to the International Principles of Professional Ethics in Journalism [4] have an ethical duty to be show their utmost “dedication to ‘objective’ reality”, and though the nature of a journalist’s objectivity remains debated, detachment appears to be of the essence in reporting crucial events to draw the line between the personal and the professional life of the journalist. However, as pointed out earlier, there is a blurring line between the personal and professional life of a journalist when it comes to mental health, as the personal wellbeing of a journalist may be affected by trauma and it may also lead to occupational dysfunction [2] which could arguably affect the quality of the work they produce for their audience.

This is not to say however that the perceived duty of remaining resilient among journalists must be entirely demonized. McMahon and McLellan [5] also proposed positive outcomes of trauma when journalists are aware of self-care strategies that could minimize psychological harm. According to McMahon and McLellan [5] with sufficient awareness and adequate education on trauma, journalists can achieve positive resilience that could lead to growth in their careers. In psychological research, Brooks [1] found that among the positive consequences of workers experiencing traumatic events include “a massive boost in their morale and confidence” if they responded well to the situation. But without proper education on trauma, covering traumatic events can potentially lead to deep and negative psychological impacts that could not only affect the performance of a journalist, but also affect their lives in the long run [5,3,1].

What media companies owe their journalists

In the case of YZ, The Age was found responsible for its inadequate response to the trauma experienced by the journalist during her 10-year stay in the organization [8,19]. The Age released several arguments to refute YZ’s claim including the firm providing support through their employee assistance program [7]. Though the court did not rule in favor of The Age based on the legalities of the case, an ethical assessment on the moral obligation of companies like The Age is of the essence to further the discourse. This dilemma begs the question: to what extent should media companies be held ethically liable for the work-related trauma experienced by their journalists?

A deontological assessment of the duties of the media company is perhaps the most crucial assessment of this research as various organizations and journalists have been calling on media companies to provide more support to address issues related to trauma among their journalists [3,10].

In a more general sense, all employers are expected to protect their workers from work-related hazards [20,21]. Though laws may vary from one country to another, globally, Occupational Safety and Health legislations of different nations have one clear duty: mandating employers to provide a safe workplace to all their employees [22]. In its 2011 brief, the International Labor Organization [23] included psychological health as a category of “insidious hazards” in workplaces. The World Health Organization [24] has also outlined the importance of mental health safeguards in policies and programs of workplaces in a module aimed at helping governments and employers craft policies concerning the psychological health of workers. The WHO wrote “One major source of stress for employees is exposure to critical incidents, such as assaults, sexual or psychological harassment, and accidents. Acute stress disorders and post-traumatic stress disorder are potential consequences of critical incidents that need to be managed. Post-traumatic stress disorder, in particular, can lead to personal distress, significant disability and reduced work performance”.

It must thus be clear, in a broad sense, that media companies, like any other company, have the moral, legal, and ethical duty to protect their workers from harm, including psychological harm. However, calls for more mental health support from employers remain as evidence suggest that it is not a main priority of companies. A survey by the Harvard Business Review showed that less than half of their respondents believe that mental health support is a priority of their respective managements. The survey also noted that mental health remains to be a taboo in workplaces in general as around 60% of employees have “never spoken to anyone at work about their mental health status” [19].

Though there is a seeming lack of prioritization to support the psychological health of workers in many kinds of workplaces, the dilemma has a deeper context in the media industry. Commenting on YZ’s case, clinical psychologist Dr. Skeffington [8] said the recognition for adequate mental health protection is more prominent for those working in fields like the military or police than those working in the media. This even though journalists are also exposed to traumatic events and are also regarded as “first responders” with a specific role to play during a disaster [5]. Skeffington [8] added that the lack of mental health support stems from media companies’ lack of recognition of their duty to provide adequate protection for the mental health of their journalists. It could be inferred that this lack of recognition is connected to the expectation of resilience among journalists which fosters the so-called “strong culture” in the industry [5]. During the COVID-19 pandemic, more and more journalists have also come forward to seek improvements in mental health support from media companies [25,10,26,27].

Based on the earlier discussed impact of trauma on journalists and the duties of companies to protect their workers from harm, it is clear from a duty-based perspective that media companies do have the moral obligation to improve their response to mental health issues of their journalists. Under a consequentialist perspective, leaving the obligation of protecting their mental health to the journalists alone could pose further potential risks to their psychological health (Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma, 2009). While due to the lack of evidence, it can only be theorized that if all obligation to protect journalists’ psychological wellbeing fall on the media companies, this could lead to financial or possible organizational problems, especially to small companies. This however is still arguable as all companies are deemed liable to protect their workers under legal and ethical standards of occupational health and safety [23].

Studies like that of McMahan and McLellan [5] noted the important role of newsrooms in providing mental health support for journalists include the appointment of a newsroom mentor, referring, or providing access to mental health professionals, providing education on trauma, and building a culture that ensures open communication among colleagues. McMahan and McLellan [5,1] and Smith [2] also noted the importance of breaking the stigma surrounding mental health of journalists through education on trauma. To give this study a clearer view of what media companies owe their journalists, the researcher deems it

worthy to note the following excerpt from a collaborative article between A Culture of Safety (ACOS) Alliance and the Dart Center of Asia Pacific [18] which provides a guide for news managers in dealing with freelance journalists that are exposed to trauma: If you have asked someone to cover a story for you, you have a legal and ethical duty of care to that person... no news organization can assume that their responsibilities for responding to trauma as it affects their staff, including freelancers, are minimal. It is no longer possible for news organizations to ignore the evidence about the potential impact of covering trauma as a news gatherer. As a manager, you need to understand, manage and respond to these risks before, during and after the freelancer works on the assignment.

This is not to assume however that all responsibilities must fall on the media company. While newsrooms have a long way to go to improve on performing their duty of providing mental health support for their journalists both legally and ethically, journalists need to help themselves or meet their respective media organizations in the middle by fostering positive resilience and growth amongst themselves and educating themselves about trauma, in line with their crucial duty as seekers of the truth. All principles of a journalist’s duty still stand, and as argued above, no amount of mental health pressure must stop the media (both the company and its journalists) in performing its duty to the greater public.

Aside from self-care, this paper argues that part of a journalist’s responsibility is to take part in eradicating the mental health stigma in the media industry by avoiding the glamorization of the culture of toughness and encouraging a healthier environment where journalists like themselves can openly discuss mental health issues related to their work without the fear of being stigmatized or bearing repercussions in their careers.

Conclusion

Ethical analyses on the duties of journalists to the public, and the media companies to their journalists show that media companies and journalists themselves have a shared responsibility or obligation of protecting journalists’ mental health, especially when they are tasked to cover potentially traumatic situations.

This paper found that it is morally correct for media companies to continue sending out journalists in the field to cover potentially traumatic events in the interest of the public good, but journalists must be allowed to choose between refusing or pursuing the coverage of an event that may have possible implications on their psychological state and must not be pressured by stigma and the perceived duty of resilience in making this decision.

Media companies and journalists must also be equally liable in erasing the harmful stigma that causes journalists with mental health issues to refuse to come forward and seek psychological support from their supervisors.

Should journalists choose to pursue or agree to take on an assignment that may cause harm to their psychological wellbeing, the media company must be prepared to provide compensation

like additional pay and adequate support, which includes training and education about risks of trauma reporting and ways to adapt to such situations. Journalists must also take part in pursuing education and self-help strategies to encourage positive resilience among themselves so that they would recognize early signs of trauma and minimize its impact in their professional and personal lives.

To break down the shared responsibilities, this paper proposes that media companies, based on their duty to protect journalists from potential harm including trauma are ethically responsible for:

- Creating a safe space for journalists to express concerns about their mental health
- Taking steps to eradicate the stigma surrounding resilience and mental health discussions in newsrooms
- Providing mental health support like education on trauma through workshops, providing access to professionals dealing with trauma, and providing adequate compensation to journalists assigned to cover potentially traumatic events and accepted such assignments

Journalists meanwhile are ethically obligated to:

- Educate themselves on trauma by attending workshops or seminars on mental health provided by their respective media companies
- Following self-help methods provided by psychologists like those from think tank Dart Center.
- Help eradicate stigma in the newsroom by providing their colleagues a safe space to discuss mental health issues.

In this manner, media companies are able to perform their duty of care for their journalists, and journalists, for their part will be able to perform their duty of covering potentially traumatic events without fear of not receiving enough support or compensation from their companies. In line with removing the stigma surrounding resilience of journalists, media companies must continue providing opportunities for journalists who opt not to cover potentially events, by, for instance, giving them other assignments that fit their psychological capabilities.

The decision to make the two parties equally liable for psychological trauma experienced by journalists also provides the most reasonable consequence: that is for media companies exhausting all necessary means to protect and provide compensation for journalists exposed to traumatic events (including providing journalists the freedom to decline or accept a potentially traumatic assignment), and for journalists to be equally ethically obligated to protect their own mental health through self-care and positive resilience, so that they can perform their duties and continue serving their purpose to the public.

Such an arrangement, this paper infers, fulfills all expectations on the duty of media companies and their journalists, and offers the most reasonable consequence for both media companies and

journalist, that does not deprive the public their right to accurate and adequate information.

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