



Journalism in the time of Covid

Journalism was in a quandary well before Covid-19, the victim of technological disruption, disinformation, a broken advertising model and an inflated sense of its own self-worth. Distrusted by the public and vilified by politicians, the industry was slow to adapt its business to the so-called information age it covered.

The pandemic is keeping the Fourth Estate in the spotlight, posing questions about the role of journalists in delivering news, politics and culture, when they are the ones who also shape and influence the stories they report on.

This feeling of being at the centre of the conversation gives a false reading on journalism's ability to be an influential force for good.

Market forces and changing consumer habits are stripping the industry of the power and prestige from which it derives its credibility. Questions around journalistic advocacy, objectivity and truth are dealt with in far more detail [elsewhere](#). But amidst the sound and fury, one constituency is still being ignored – the journalists themselves.

Seemingly beset on all sides and fearful for their futures, large numbers are tired and demoralised by working long hours during Covid-19. This is affecting the quality of their work.

By now, newsroom leaders really shouldn't need to be told that many of their staff are burned out. But they stand transfixed, making minor lateral movements and seemingly unable to adapt as a tempest engulfs them.

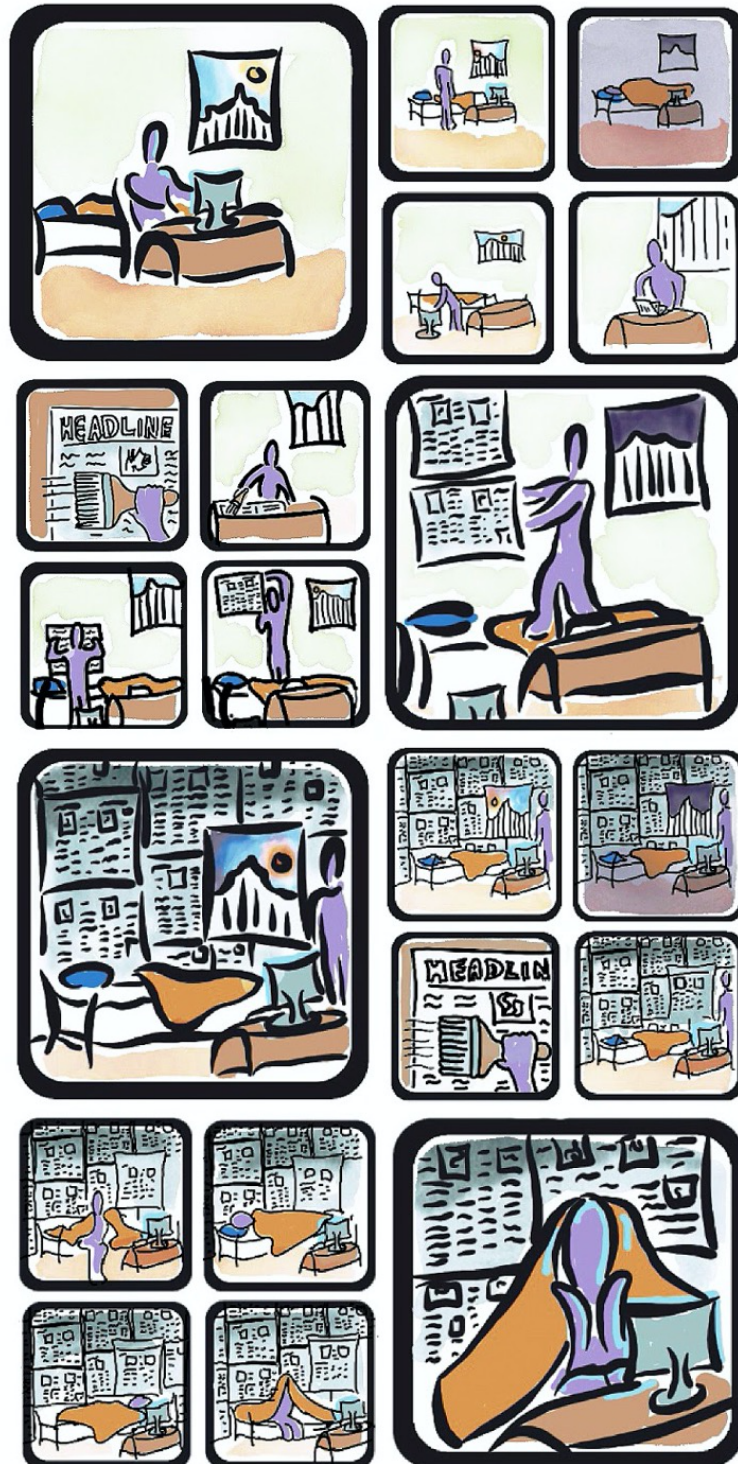
They need to be shaken out of their stupor. This is the message from those on the shop floor, and from freelancers who keep news sites going on a pittance.

The 130 respondents to [my survey](#) on the impact of Covid-19 on journalism want concerns about their mental well-being to be heeded.

But the pandemic has also sped up the transformational change that was pummelling the industry. Trends and developments that might previously have taken five years to incubate have been co-opted in a few months.

While this report documents the mental strain Covid-19 has placed on journalists, I believe the pandemic also represents a once-in-a-generation opportunity to hit the reset button.

New tools, workflows and processes have come into play. This is genuinely exciting. Both newsprint and digital products have successfully been created, edited and published from bedrooms, sofas and kitchen tables.



The wider public needs to know that the custodians of our liberty are at breaking point. But it may seem strange to say that it is not all doom and gloom. One respondent wrote

that Covid-19 “may well get journalism to shed a lot of old skin and proceed remade in the future”. Time will ultimately tell.

About the Authors

My name is John Crowley and I’m a burned out journalist. I have worked long hours, run newsrooms and have been made redundant. I’m a news obsessive. It took until lockdown to publicly admit that the trade I love and have worked in all my adult life has exacted a heavy toll on my well-being.

I have more than two decades of experience working for local, national and international news titles. I have taken on digital and managerial roles for The Daily Telegraph, The Wall Street Journal, Newsweek and The Irish Post among others. As a freelancer, I am well versed in distributed working, writing and editing commissioning content around business, tech, newsroom management, disinformation and burnout.

I have spoken to dozens of journalists around the world about the events of 2020. This report is a tribute to them. Despite my best efforts to attract interest, this report has been self-funded. I welcome any moral or financial support in continuing my research.

Andrew Garthwaite is a journalist, statistician and illustrator recently honoured by the Royal Statistical Society for statistical excellence in investigative journalism. He has surfaced trends found in the survey and provided the visuals as well.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In April 2020, I issued an appeal to journalists around the world of all backgrounds and experience levels – whether working in a newsroom or freelancing – to **complete a quick, anonymous survey** “around stress and what news organisations will look like post-Covid”.

As well as asking reporters and freelancers about their own situation, I sought their thinking about how the industry should evolve post-lockdown. Two years before, I had **run a survey** to investigate how journalists were wilting under the weight of the **emails, alerts, and notifications**.

As part of the European Journalism Centre’s News Impact Network, I **published research** on the findings to illustrate how they were being overwhelmed by the information they process in their working day.

For the 2020 survey, I received responses from the Philippines, India, Brazil, Spain, France, Australia, Indonesia, South Africa, the Netherlands, Ireland, the US, the UK and beyond. It

was important to me that the insights were as global and representative as possible. Most of these responses came in April and May.

Here are my findings.

- When asked if they'd had a positive experience of lockdown at work, 64% said no. Rather more surprising was that more than a third (36%) said they had had a positive experience of lockdown when it came to their journalistic work.
- Some 59% said lockdown had come with further worries and stress. The question was posed through the prism of their working environment. It was clear that working from home either with families, flatmates or being on your own had exacted a toll.
- When asked directly about the coronavirus pandemic's effect on their mood, 77% of respondents reported some kind of work-related stress which came during lockdown. Of these, 57% said lockdown-associated stress had affected their productivity. More than 44% said it had impacted their relationships with family and friends, and 59% said they had experienced moments of feeling depressed or anxious.
- When asked if lockdown would radically or somewhat change newsrooms, 94% agreed.
- When asked about their work-from-home conditions, 87% said they felt their employer should be responsible or somewhat responsible for their conditions of work.

Of those who agreed that their employers held some responsibility for their working-from-home conditions, and that the lockdown would bring lasting changes to the newsroom:

- 56% who reported feelings of depression during lockdown said their employer had a responsibility to check in on their wellbeing.
- 88% of those who said lockdown had affected their relationships said they wanted to improve their workstations/setup at home.
- 80% of those who wanted an improvement in communications from managers reported lockdown-associated stress having a negative effect on productivity.

Rank-and-file journalists are rarely consulted about their industry or the direction of travel. This is why I set up the [SurveyMonkey questionnaire](#). Most spoke anonymously because they feared for their job if they were seen to criticise management or employer. I have also conducted on-the-record interviews with five journalists to ask them how they have dealt with journalism in the time of Covid.

1. NEWSROOM LEADERSHIP

The advent of Covid-19 would utterly transform how news organisations function.

There was an acknowledgement that most newsrooms had swiftly – and in several instances, seamlessly – transferred to a distributed working model.

However, the overall impression was that while newsprint and digital products had undergone this transition, little thought had gone into how journalists were coping from home.

In a series of conversations as the UK went into lockdown, national newspaper staff told me that their well-being was an afterthought. One editor on a newsdesk had been so poorly treated before that he never expected a helping hand to be extended.

“The company hasn’t done anything really,” the journalist said in March. “It didn’t even occur to me they had a responsibility to me until someone pointed it out.

“They’ve been scrambling how to respond to the crisis. After two weeks of lockdown, I feel HR should have sent something around saying people are struggling.

“The online team which I work for independently set up a WhatsApp group because they all went to work from home. That was an active group for a day or two. Its tone was positive. No one admitted to any genuine problems because there were so many in the group. If people are having conversations in private, I didn’t know about it.”

“I was moved to another desk and that exacerbated the shock. You go through denial and shock and then you adjust. I spoke to friends [for support] and that was enough for me.”

Asked if any manager had asked after their well-being, the journalist burst into laughter at the suggestion. "No-one said: 'Are you ok?' It's the culture of the place. There are priorities on the job and the impression is it doesn't seem to have affected [other members of the desk] greatly."

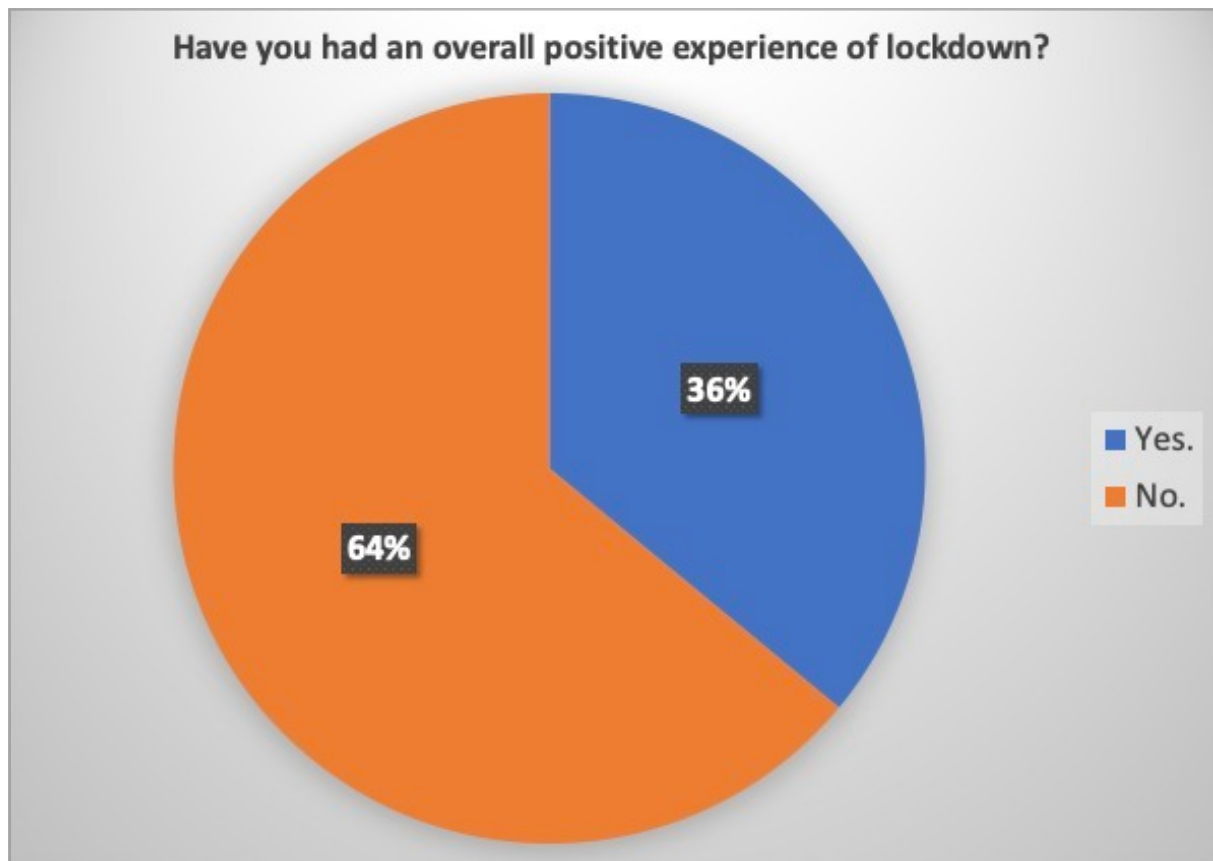


Fig 1: The percentage of survey respondents that reported they had a positive experience during lockdown.

The interviewee agreed that these journalists may have hid their feelings to mask them from being seen as "weak".

"You feel isolated," the journalist added. Coping "depends on your personality and what social contact you need. We are going from an office environment to a solitary one. You have to be careful with that".

He said that the solution certainly wasn't "a one-size-fits-all approach". Another news editor at a UK newspaper said at the start of April: "On the days that I am working I will put in close to 12 hours and, because of the lockdown, do not take much of a break.

"More than the hours, it is being in the pandemic bubble that bothers me. I feel like I don't have a clear perspective on what is going on and feel the need to ask non-journalists about their view of the situation to help me find a balance."

Asked how the transfer from the office to working from home has gone, the journalist responded: "The transfer has its positives – not having three hours commute every day. In general, the move to working from home has been OK. I work from the kitchen table which is comforting in that it's a nice place to be but I don't have an office chair so my back is hurting."

"My family and I have worked hard to be understanding of each other under difficult circumstances. We take the positives of being together more as the biggest part of the move."

Did the journalist genuinely feel consulted and had anyone said thank you or acknowledged their work? "I didn't feel consulted at all and corporate communication about this was very poor initially. However, in recent times there have been thank you emails from the editor and higher."

What could your company have done to alleviate the pressure to make things 'better'? "For me, my relationship with my line manager and news desk colleagues is so good, I feel that they could help me with any emotional, mental issues that may arise."

"What would help me to improve my working environment? A work chair, better computer and exercise facilities would make me feel physically better."

Some news organisations did step in to offer help. One news editor at a global news institution said bosses had told staff they had £150 to spend on "setting up" a workstation at home.

One theme which respondents unsurprisingly returned to was a feeling of insecurity about their own job prospects. This was linked to a lack of transparency and communication from management. Of those who worked in a newsroom, many felt their leadership had not given them a clear long-term vision. "If they have any at all," one remarked with derision.

Another interviewee felt that there was a "paucity of thinking" from those above. "We are just managing decline," the journalist opined.

Another journalist working on a wire service said of early lockdown: “Every team wanted to write stories at double the length, every first take of a story seemed vital, markets were moving in a ridiculous way.

“The place where I’ve worked has been stressful and intense for the past five years.

“I have gone on the journey from news junkie to a moderately burned out 40-something. Most people don’t have an unending capacity to keep on taking on more information. Maybe some working practices need to change.

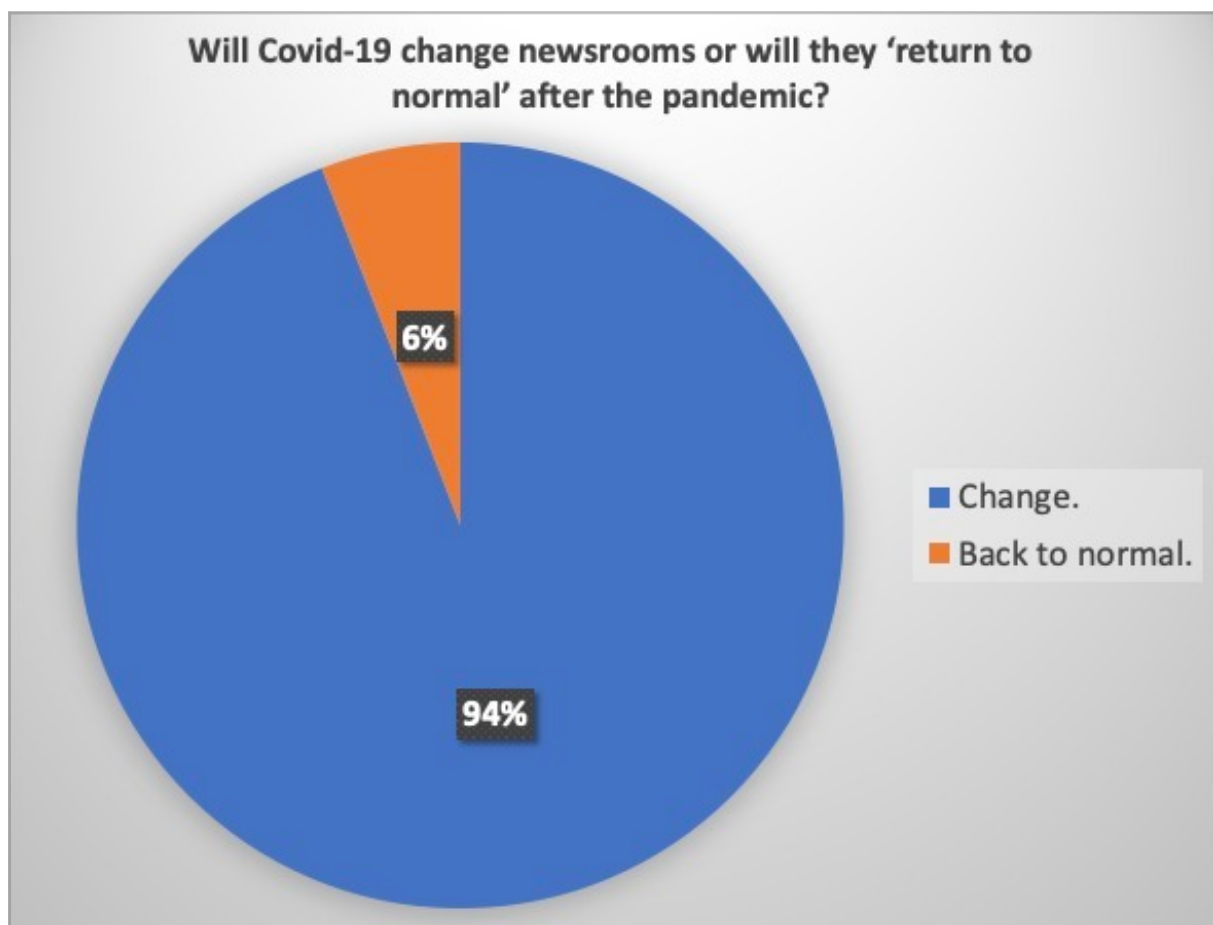


Fig 2: The percentage of survey respondents reporting an expectation of change in the way the newsroom functions.

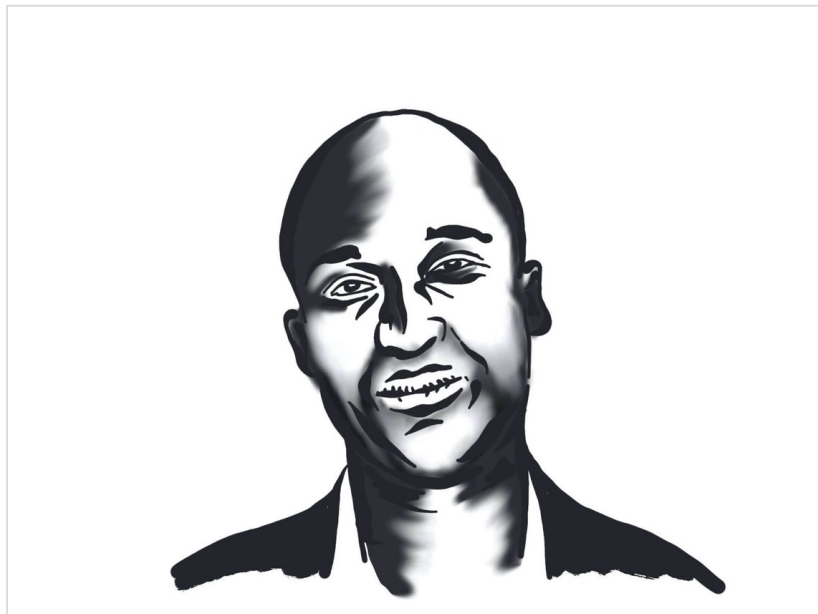
“The stress isn’t just the news, it’s mid-career stress and strain of balancing family and work. But it does feel like journalism is a pretty unique thing. You go outside of the business and people just don’t understand what journalists do.”

Asked how they would like their news organisation to change, another journalist responded in my survey: "More focus [is needed] on staff well-being. It shouldn't take a pandemic to acknowledge the intense pressure we are under and always have been, topped up with uncertainty of shifts and work in the long term."

The survey also prompted some darkly humorous observations about the 'new abnormal'. "More WFH, better communication. I've not missed our editor's childish outbursts!" opined one respondent. Another declared: "Less bullshit, less time wasting, more cooperation, less presenteeism."

Would newsroom managers be more interested if it could be shown that mental health has an impact on the bottom line? There is no research I know of which investigates how much time journalists take off because of mental strain. But at a basic human level, newsroom management should be taking an interest in their staff's wellbeing. Journalism is always ready to preach to others on a raft of subjects, including mental health. We should hold ourselves to a higher standard.

Many journalists did also say they had enjoyed rising to the challenge.



CASE STUDY - ALEXIS AKWAGYIRAM

Alexis Akwagyiram is Reuters Nigeria bureau chief, responsible for a team of 20 journalists covering Africa's most populous nation and largest economy. A strict lockdown was lifted in May but land borders were currently closed when we spoke in the summer. There have been no international flights into the country since March at the time of writing.

"My stress levels have gone up massively," Akwagyiram says. "I have ended up working all the time. There was a saying I saw on the web during lockdown which resonated with me: *'It is not so much that we are working from home, it is that we are living at work.'*"

Working for a wire was already "full-on," particularly one that aims to be competitive on all fronts. "That's fair enough, it's a fantastic beat," Akwagyiram adds.

"It's already intense because you're competing with AFP and on the business side with Bloomberg. There's also the WSJ and FT. You're chasing the fast end and then on deeply reported stories with newspapers.

"This is set against the backdrop of declining resources across the entire industry. Things like that affect you - and then you throw in the working hours..."

Pre-Covid, giving his team direction was something that could have been done in "seconds" across a newsroom office. A few months on, it's far more of an onerous task.

"Multiple things that could be done simultaneously now involve a call or a series of conference calls. That is time-consuming and doing it all the time can get you down."

One unintended consequence of lockdown has been the glut of government and business-led video audiences. "These are press conferences that I previously would never have looked at," Akwagyiram says.

"Say if the finance minister is doing a round table discussion along with the oil minister, I had better be on it because you can bet your bottom dollar that they [other news orgs] will be listening in.

"A webinar could go on for two hours. Near the end of those two hours, there could be something that might move an oil market.

"[If I missed it] that would be on me. Before, there would be a physical press conference and back then one reporter would go and cover it.

"Because it's so easy to set up a Zoom call, there are more opportunities where someone at a high level is saying something. It just makes sense to listen. And because of the times we are living in, there are so many significant things that can be mentioned."

The more enjoyable aspect of being a foreign correspondent is meeting your sources in a relaxed setting. Covid has put that on the back-burner. Maintaining relationships with pre-existing contacts is a far more tricky proposition, particularly when a cosy chat is replaced by “messaging back and forth” on WhatsApp.

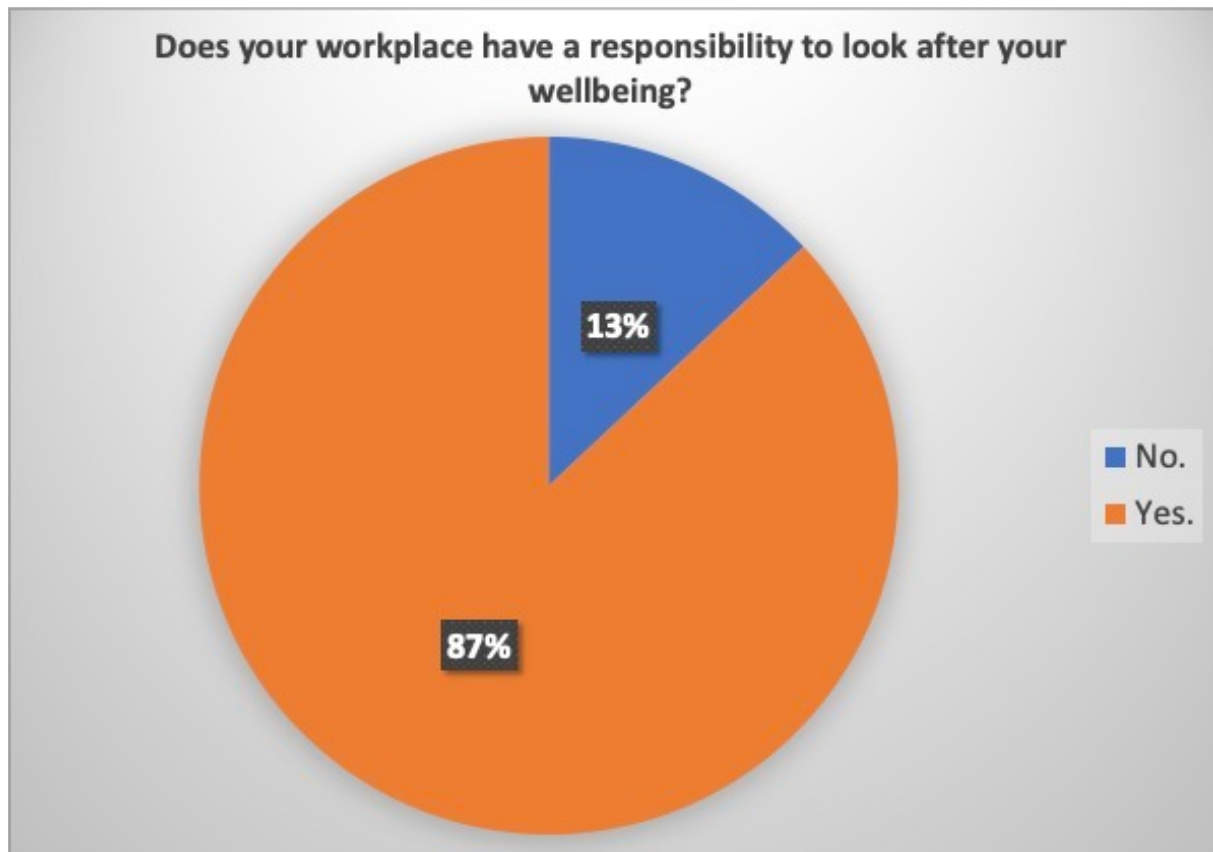


Fig 3: The percentage of survey that expressed the view that their employer must have responsibility for their wellbeing.

“They simply might not want to volunteer something newsworthy in writing,” says Akwagyiram, remarking on the new rules of engagement. “You also don’t have the opportunity of a quick follow-up question in person to get that news line out of them.”

Akwagyiram has three young children with him at home, which is currently doubling up as his office.

“My youngest was born late January. We obviously didn’t factor in a pandemic... My wife is also trying to homeschool a five- and three-year-old and then there’s the sleep deprivation of having a young baby. Add in trying to keep them safe and me being up all hours...

“You try to get on the front foot by getting out there earlier. You’ve got to deal with the

logistics. Check on your team, do the team meetings, attend these news conferences, then try to come up with new ideas and be a father and a husband."

His daily routine starts at six. "I've got my two eldest young girls not to come in until 7," he laughs. He reads through Feedly, Nuzzle and Tweetdeck to see what is being said on Twitter and on his RSS feeds as well as getting up to speed with emails from his boss one hour ahead in Johannesburg.

"Unless I am on late duty, at around five I have got to help with prep for the kids with dinner, bath time, story and bed. I want to be present for that because why am I doing this otherwise?

"On certain days, those moments with the children might be truncated because of the pressures of work. Once that is all over at seven I have emails and messages to pick up or just admin running the bureau - checking spreadsheets and running costs.

"And then I am on the phone and I am not done until nine at night.

"You do have to call it a day at some point and carve out some space for yourself, read a book, talk to my wife or watch the latest thing about Michael Jordan on Netflix!"

Speaking this Summer, Akwagyiram says covering Africa is generally seen through an Anglocentric prism. "You are dealing with preconceived ideas about negative tropes and a general lack of interest. News is inherently eye-popping and awful and thankfully there hasn't been much of that with Covid from Africa.

"It just happens that Africa is further back in the Covid arc. Something might happen but it might not be interesting to an outside audience.

"The dominant story is that infection and death rates have been lower. But that's largely been down to lack of testing."

What would he like to happen to his working day? "Going forward it would be nice to have more time working from home when it isn't this insane. It has been nice to be at home and appreciate that I don't have to be in the newsroom."

What digital tools has he used? "I have discovered some nifty tools and little tricks. It's good to be challenged on something out of my comfort zone.

"I'd used Zoom once or twice before. It has been a revelation. I do use Otter [an autonomous speech-to-text transcription app] but I still prefer my shorthand.

"We also all use [Microsoft] Teams so that we can stay in touch and communicate."

Akwagyiram says he loves the "fast-paced, fun" aspect of covering a dynamic African country.



"Having to juggle three distinct strands - public health, the economic crisis and the political fallout - can be tiring but also invigorating when you're on top of things."

Reuters have also been on the front foot in helping its global staff deal with the pandemic. "There is a training editor - a lovely man - and he has set up this programme on Teams. It's a safe space where you can talk about what you're going through.

"Everyone understands that we are all in this together. What goes in on the chat stays there. There is no judgement. There might be people in Warsaw or Rio, saying 'I get that happening to me too'.

"It makes you feel so much stronger that you're not alone.

"They had a wellness coach on the call who provided suggestions. They asked about coping mechanisms. They suggested meditation.

"It doesn't have to be formal, there might be other activities like going for a run or painting where you lose yourself. We were encouraged to just create a space for that."

2. DISTRIBUTED NEWS

Newsrooms are an essential but romanticised part of our industry fabric. They are quieter than in the days of clattering typewriters, hot metal and so-called 'copy boys'. But journalists still thrive on physical interaction and robust discussion on which story, headline or picture to use.

One colleague I spoke to questioned whether newsrooms were "1970s constructs" which were out of kilter with today. "The idea that you need to sit round a news hub is different to back then. Digital technology has changed how you disseminate information."

Not all newsroom staff have that luxury. Many respondents thought the pandemic would usher in leaner office workspaces. "They... will be comprised mainly of a few editors and specialist writers - the rest will be contracted out," was one typical survey response.

Others were pragmatic: "I'd like to see us working remotely to save money on office rental to secure our jobs. Reporters are still able to get out and about. I'd combat this with a monthly team meeting in person and team-bonding exercises."

How to integrate journalists back to work figured prominently in people's thoughts. Respondents whom I spoke to in April and May also raised questions about how newsroom floor plans might be changed to accommodate social distancing.

Many believed newsrooms were still needed, but this was not a resounding majority. One said: “I think we’ve proved that you don’t have to have a building to work in journalism.”

Clearly, the journalistic wheels hadn’t come off after going to distributed (remote) working. One said: “Some of the key benefits of Covid-19 that I would like to see remain are less meetings – and the ones that are held should be kept result-focused. We are seeing collaboration between departments and bureaus that didn’t happen before. Less vertical management nonsense. Also, less bullshit stories with more focus on news.”

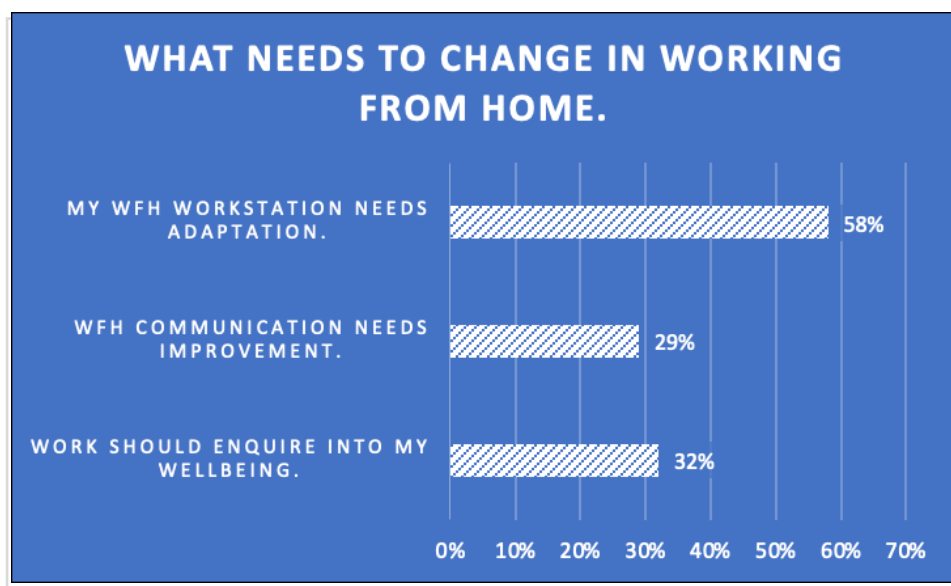


Fig 4: Those who support improvement in specific areas of work-from-home culture, as a percentage of survey respondents.

Others said however that they yearned for one-to-one contact with interviewees – which they felt yielded better journalistic copy: “I miss meeting sources in person. I miss events where I can meet new sources instead of cold-calling them when I need to write it,” said one reporter in lockdown.

Another overriding desire was the need for more flexi-working: “More flexible hours and additional support in my position would be great. We are a rural paper with, at most, 12 journalists,” said one member of a local news outlet.

Like many other creative industries, we can also learn that every minute of our working day **does not need to be optimised**; we can afford colleagues the room to be creative rather than monitored obsessively; and that **newsroom leaders can effectively lead in remote environments**.

Fathm, a news lab and consultancy, produced the [Distributed Newsroom Playbook to help newsrooms return to full functionality](#). They looked at technology and tools, audience engagement, newsroom training and managing distributed teams (*disclosure: I contributed to the report*).

The playbook reminded newsroom leaders: *“Covering Covid-19 all day, every day, is incredibly stressful. Studies have pointed out that dealing with distressing subject matter – from graphic pictures to user-generated content – has led to vicarious trauma.*

Newsroom culture can be macho. Putting your hand up to say you’re struggling doesn’t come easily. ‘Deep listening’ will pay dividends. Are they being unusually quiet? Trust your instincts and don’t be afraid to ask if a staff member is ok.

Remember to be kind to yourself too. If you work for a larger news organisation it might be difficult to speak to all of your team, but make sure staff do not cover Covid-19 every day.”

One further respondent to this survey declared: “[I want] more inclusion and diversity in journalism. More remote working which brings the work closer to communities and therefore brings more inclusive reporting.”

CASE STUDY - SANNE BREIMER

Sanne Breimer is a journalist from the Netherlands now based in Bali, Indonesia.

After working for 13 years, nine of them as a newsroom manager and editor-in-chief in her home country, she left to take what she called “a much-needed sabbatical”. That career change has evolved – post-Covid – into a remote-working position as a media adviser and journalist working with clients across South-East Asia.

Breimer’s formative years were spent at FunX, a Dutch radio station charged with speaking to a young audience. Starting as a reporter, Breimer was promoted through the ranks up to editor-in-chief across a decade-long period.

“Through the years that I worked there I learned about my prejudices and biases. And that has shaped me as a journalist.”

Breimer has also worked as a program manager in the innovation lab of public broadcaster NPO and as head of digital at television company, Human.



"Inclusion and diversity is a topic at the core of my career," she says. "When I worked at NPO and Human they were very white environments. If you're white yourself and live and work in a white environment, it's like The Truman Show."

"You aren't conscious of the fact that there is a whole other world out there. That's the comparison I use a lot.

"The perception of my world completely changed once I experienced society through the eyes of different communities. It made me feel uncomfortable at times and I believe it's necessary in growing personally and professionally as a journalist to go through that process.

"You need to make a conscious effort to understand all parts of society. Just like what you would do when researching an important topic."

Breimer recounts getting requests from "white-dominated public broadcasters who wanted to collaborate with FunX because they didn't have that knowledge".

She grimaces as she remembers how "they would ask us to go to 'certain neighbourhoods'."

Asked to describe the structural challenges now facing journalism, Breimer says "long-term thinking on inclusion, diversity and innovation is something that journalists just don't do a lot".

She asks: "Why not have a plan in 10 years that you intend to reach?"

"The mainstream media focuses mostly on what's happening today. The digital competition is bigger and that makes the focus on wanting to be first on the scene the most important thing.

"It has a lot to do with the fact that if you aren't conscious of what is out there it's very hard to understand where we need to go.

"This discussion around systemic racism is now globally happening because of Black Lives Matter. Newsrooms struggle with this around the world. We focus on diversity in the newsroom, but we should focus on inclusion and equity. Doing 'Diversity training' isn't just going to solve the problem."

Now is an opportunity for journalism to reinvent itself. Breimer says her "biggest realisation of the last few years is that white people in the media now need to do the work" to change the makeup of newsrooms.

News organisations, according to Breimer, should look at the root causes of the problems and first reassess what constitutes a 'good journalist'.

"It has a lot to do about educating yourself about your own history and systemic racism. But [preconceived perceptions] are also obviously linked to class, gender and social-economic background as well."

Covid-19 has made distributed working "become far more easy".

"A lot of people in the fields of journalism are using the digital tools available to do their work. That can be an opportunity to make it easier to work closer to communities which you report on.

"One of the success factors of FunX is that the media organisation has four different newsrooms in all cities they broadcast. In my time, we also went out on the streets every single day to ask our audience about different topics: politics, finance, but also their love lives and the relationship with their parents.

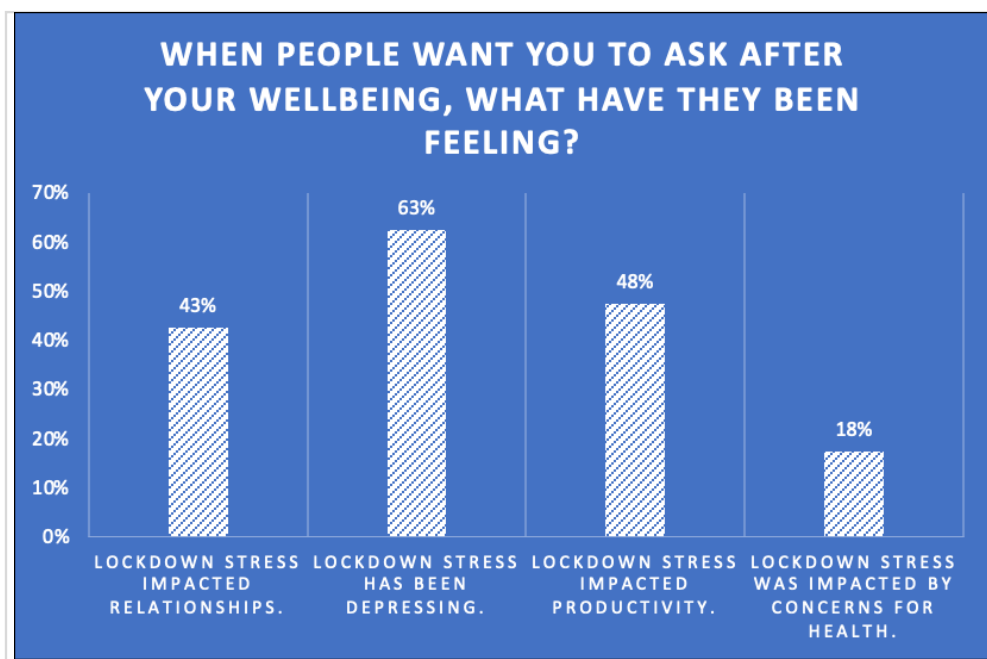


Fig 5: Those who describe specific areas of impact from stress, as a percentage of those survey respondents that would like their employer to enquire after their wellbeing.

"We engaged with our audience in good and bad times, that's essential for building a trustworthy relationship. White newsrooms often only report on minorities when shit hits the fan."

There is a lot to learn from what is happening in Asia in this respect.

She cites a seminar from Singapore-based media lab **Splice** which **featured** an Indian startup called Khabar Lahariya, an all-women-led company based in a rural part of the country.

"They were saying how digitalisation was one aspect of how they built a diverse newsroom.

"Khabar Lahariya have reporters situated in different places in North India and they can do their work as a team. They use WhatsApp and Google docs – it's a good example of how you can report on marginalised communities."

The women who lead Khabar Lahariya underline why it's crucial for journalists to rethink how we tell our stories, Breimer says.

"Some of the challenges for journalism in this part of the world, compared to the West where I'm from, are different. The power of tech companies that influence young democracies, the position of women journalists and the lack of protection for journalists coping with mental health issues are a few examples of that.

"I spoke to an Indonesian journalist who is also a spokesperson for Sindikasi, a labour union for artists and journalists in Indonesia. They now do projects on mental well-being. If journalists say in their jobs that they are not feeling well, they get fired.

"Through Covid a lot of journalists work from home. What I heard from journalists in Pakistan, India and Malaysia is that women journalists also expected to do domestic tasks.

"One of the stories I heard was from a newsroom manager in Malaysia who had a high position. During Covid lockdown she needed to take a step back from work because she had to cook and clean at her house. Women in these situations have been put back into their traditional roles."

Since arriving in Asia, Sanne has produced a **course for journalists about storytelling through Instagram**. "Some 40 journalists connected to the Asian Pacific Broadcasting Union just finished the course."

She also focuses on the topic of mental wellbeing for journalists in Asia and Europe.

Studying yoga, meditation and holistic life-style coaching as a hobby, this has broadened out into **Inclusive Journalism**, an initiative that connects journalists around the world to exchange experiences and knowledge about resilience and mental well-being.

This is helping journalists even more as lockdown has placed more demands on journalists' time. Breimer adds: "The increasing focus on mental wellbeing in our industry can't be separated from the issues of systemic racism and inequality we need to tackle.

"The focus should be on decolonising the newsroom, that will be an uncomfortable process but very rewarding at the same time.

"Covid-19 and the Black Lives Matter protests give us an opportunity to discuss the roots of our profession and improve our reporting towards inclusive journalism."

3. FREELANCERS

Being a freelance journalist was already fraught before Covid-19. Through necessity rather than choice, freelancers have the distinction of being one of journalism's few growth sectors. The new entrants set foot into a crowded arena looking for advice on pitching, job opportunities and, that old perennial, chasing money owed.

The sector's rates in the UK have barely increased in line with inflation and, in many aspects, they have been steadily declining for years. The most recent Journalists At Work survey - commissioned by the UK's National Council for the Training of Journalists in 2018 - found that the average salary had remained at £27,500 for the previous six years.

The average median salary in the same year in the UK was £29,500. As these numbers will skew to reflect journalists in staff work, those starting out in freelancing find they have an even tougher mountain to climb.

While these figures apply to the UK - the problems are universal and dominate conversations among freelancers around the world. For in-depth features and investigative projects, which demand more time and resource, freelance journalists' work often equates to below the minimum wage.

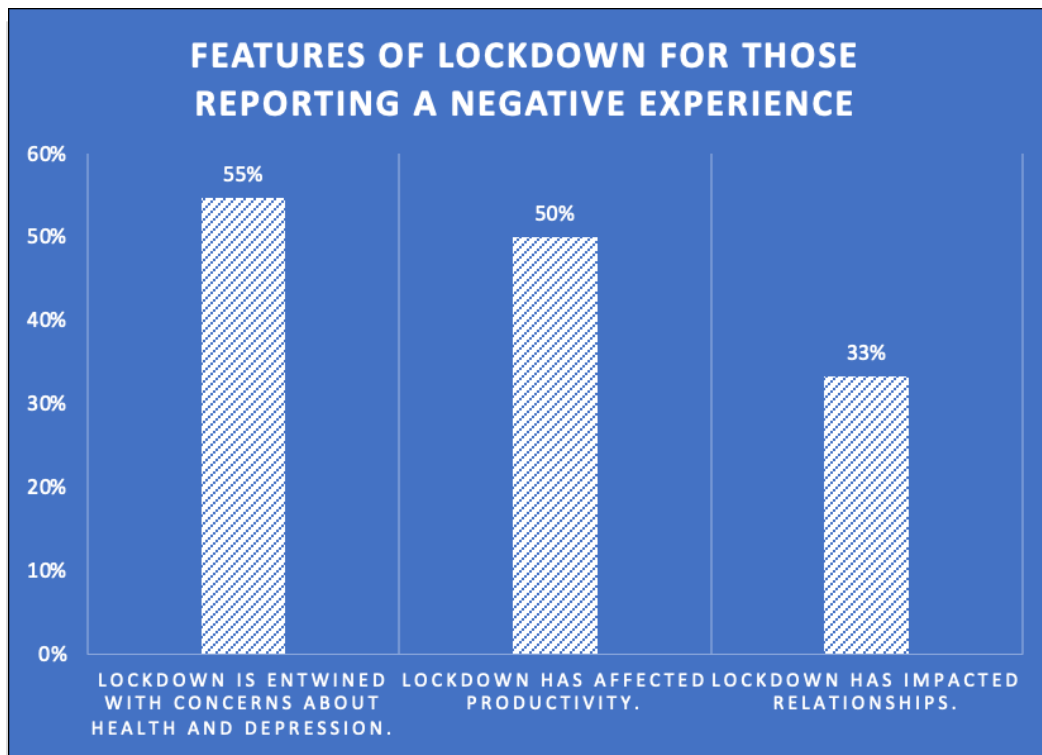


Fig 6: Those who describe specific features of stress, as a percentage of those survey respondents that reported a negative lockdown experience.

Many of them work at a local level and are doing important public work to hold people, organisations and those in power to account. In addition, they must contend with energy-sapping issues of 'pay on publication', low 'kill fees' for commissioned stories that are not used and – of course – late payments. In other words slow, low and no pay.

With the additional responsibilities of admin, tax returns, organising finances and managing an online presence, it's a wonder that many freelancers find free time to take off. Many, of course, are sole workers and work long hours.

Official figures in the UK show that freelance numbers continue to swell. According to the Office for National Statistics' Annual Population Survey, there were some 32,000 freelance journalists in the UK in 2019. The figure stood at 21,000 nearly a decade ago in 2010.

Covid-19 has brought further existing challenges to the fore. For all the mischaracterisation of journalists, the vast majority care deeply about their public-service role of keeping communities informed.

The print industry itself is in sharp decline and many titles are suspending publication due to Covid-19.

Freelancing as a result is an increasingly competitive market. Many former staff journalists have turned to it after being furloughed or made redundant in recent months. Those pitching are now receiving out of office messages: "I no longer commission freelance journalists."

In the UK, the [Self-Employment Income Support Scheme](#) (SEISS) for the self-employed has failed to capture up to a third of journalists because of stringent rules. Some don't have tax returns, whilst others' take-home salary from self-employment is less than 50% of their total income.

The '#forgottenfreelance' campaign goes beyond journalists to those who are self-employed and are demanding greater recognition.

For so long the poor woman/man of the journalism profession, this cohort is now beginning to mobilise and get vocal. Support groups, reader-funded newsletters and podcasts have sprung up to adjust to the 'new abnormal' – with more established support networks seeing their ranks swell with followers.

The [Society of Freelance Journalists \(SFJ\)](#), a group offering work opportunities, online training and mutual support, is one such example. Founded in March of 2020, a written statement provided [by the SFJ to the House of Lords inquiry on the Future of Journalism](#) underlines many of the issues this journalism sector faces. (*Disclosure: I am an admin and founding member of SFJ*). As of November 2020, it has more than 1,100 members from across 18 time zones.

Abigail Edge has seen "huge interest" in [her courses around professional development](#) which range from getting started to pitch clinics and travel writing.

"Lockdown gave people a chance to reassess what is important to them, and for many that was a change of career, less time commuting, and more flexible working hours," Edge, a founding member of SFJ, says.

"Pitch clinics are always popular, but I'm also seeing a lot of freelancers doing what I've nicknamed the 'pandemic pivot'. Right now, the freelance market is talent heavy and light on jobs, so people want to learn how to diversify their income and build a more stable and resilient business.

"I'm a big believer in blending creativity with business skills, which I think are overlooked on a lot of freelancing courses."

Alison Culliford, from the Paris NUJ branch, gives a perspective from across the Channel: "Many freelancers are struggling because of Covid-19 and the branch has been helping members with their claims for state aid designed to keep self-employed workers afloat."

The SFJ, whose other founders include Laura Oliver and Caroline Harrap, has asked UK lawmakers to urgently consider these issues with regards to freelancers.

- Greater and more accessible legal recourse for late payment - and ways to report firms who are consistent late payers or implement payment on publication and similar hostile terms.
- Legal support for freelancers regarding contracts and payment terms.
- Review and challenge of firms that use freelancers for staff roles and enforce lay-off periods.
- Invest in/support professional development funds and schemes for freelance journalists with a focus on accessibility, representation and industry diversity.
- Invest in grant schemes for freelance journalists to support struggling industry sectors, including local media outlets and underreported communities/topics.
- Work with industry unions to better qualify the demographic make-up of this industry group.

The [European Journalism Centre](#), a non-profit institute based in the Netherlands, created the Freelance Journalism Assembly in the summer of 2020. With the support of the [Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation](#), the programme is designed to empower and connect the freelance community in Europe. The assembly has given financial support to the SFJ.



CASE STUDY - LOUISE BOLOTIN

Louise Bolotin is a UK-based freelance journalist who lost all her shift work when lockdown was imposed in March.

She says she experienced feelings of “utter despair” after “job after job” booked until June fell by the wayside.

“As lockdown struck, I was completely workless,” Bolotin recalls. “Right at that point in time I had no money in the bank.”

Most of her sub-editing work came through a local newspaper in the north of England.

At the time, Bolotin had seven shifts booked up until Easter. As per usual, she would then have been asked to work over that period as holiday cover. But then she took a call from her manager.

“I could tell she had news as she normally texts me about shifts and she was phoning me up. She said: ‘We have sent the staff home and there are just a couple of us left’.

"Because I was freelance, that was it, I was just let go."

Recounting the feelings of despair, she says. "I sat in complete shock for that minute. I thought 'how the fuck can I survive?'

Despite circumstances being clearly out of her control, Bolotin "felt like a failure even though the loss of work isn't your fault".

"That week in March, for every single bit of work booked up until the middle of June, it was the same message. 'I am so sorry but under the circumstances we can't go on...' they would say.

"You fear that admitting you are workless will result in people not hiring you which is totally irrational, I know."

Asked how she would describe how she is doing, she responds: "I've had - thankfully very brief - moments of utter despair, but I'm pretty resilient and strong.

"I think knowing I wasn't the only one hit so hard has helped a lot."

Bolotin says she has no idea if she will be asked back and has not had any communication with the paper since being let go. She has decided that she won't go back to physically work in the paper's office which is a long distance from her home.

"I don't want to sit on a train for 45 minutes each way. At my age and my husband's, we need to protect ourselves from the virus given the outcomes are worse for older people, so trains are a thing to be avoided. I don't want the stress of being on a train and being close to a disease vector."

Bolotin says she was lucky that a supportive partner and "lucrative job" for the Equality and Human Rights Commission came in during February/March. "I first invoiced at the end of February knowing that money wasn't going to come in until the end of April but it gave me a cushion for a bit.

"That plus the [SEISS grant](#) [Self-Employment Income and Support Scheme from the UK government] and a book I edited has kept me going for now."

"I'll be applying for the next SEISS grant in August too," she says.

Bolotin has mostly stayed at home since lockdown. She says that she has historically struggled with insomnia because of the particular part of the industry she worked in.

"I started out as a music journalist and I just went to bed later. For many evenings after the gig I'd interview the band and then stay in the pub. I'd be getting back at 2am.

"I have struggled my entire working life with sleeping. This [lockdown] has made it worse. I don't sleep at night because all I worry about is money. I go to bed worrying and I wake up at 4am."

Bolotin lives in the building where the Manchester bomber built his device for the terror attack on the Manchester Evening News Arena. Police raided the building in the aftermath and stayed at the site for six weeks. "I got caught up in the anti-terror raid. It was horrendous."

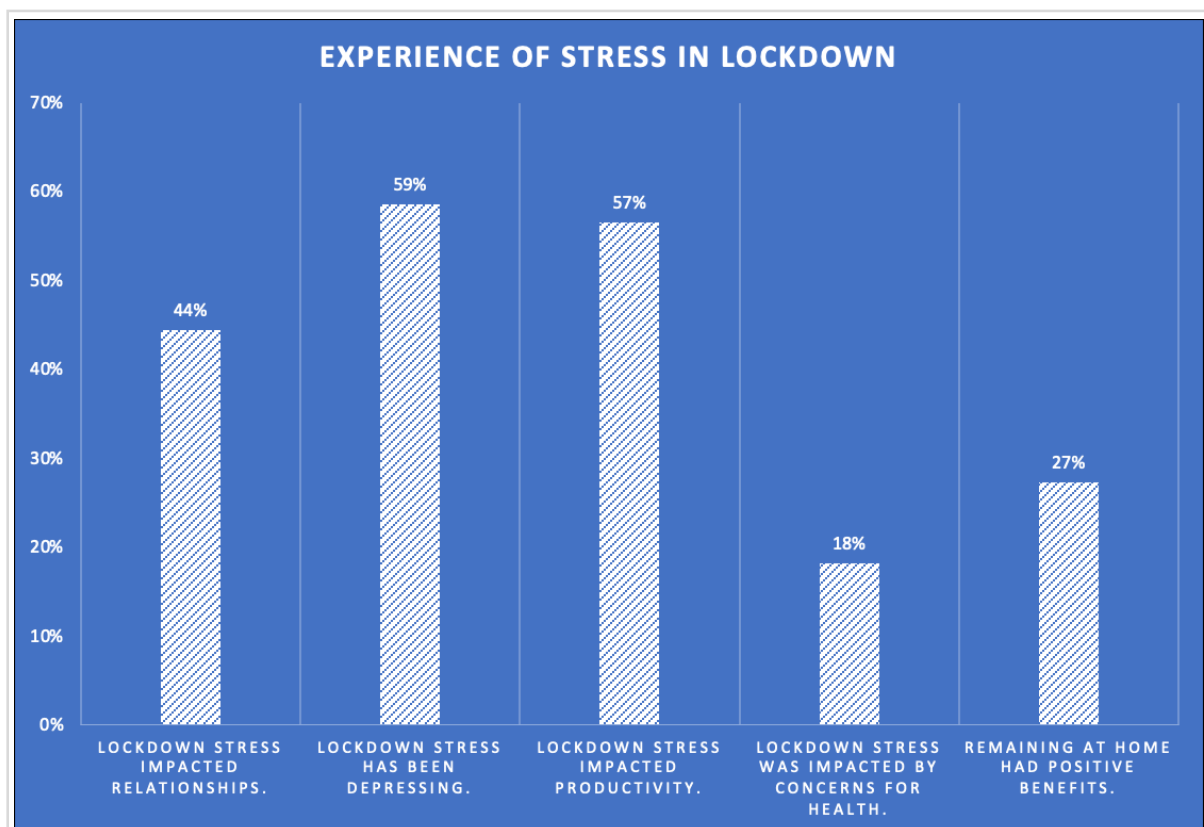


Fig 7: The prevalence of specific attitudes to stress, as a percentage of survey respondents that reported some form of negative lockdown-stress impact.

Asked what newsroom leaders should do, she replies: "They should be providing counselling services if people feel they need it.

"It could be by Zoom. Even if they can offload once a fortnight, that would be useful for their mental health.¹

"News organisations need to step up and look after the people who have worked so hard for them for so many years.

"Some are providing resources but all of them should be. Staff who are going out and about to report on the front line are putting their physical as well as their mental health at risk."

She is now doing commercial proofreading for businesses and PhD theses in addition to editing a book for a packaging agency.

"There is work starting to trickle back in, but it is slow and the stress is relentless.

"I know people in my NUJ branch who have lost all their work and have applied for universal credit and have had it refused, so they have been left financially destitute. I know people who didn't qualify for SEISS. I feel for them so much."

[Louise Bolotin offers high quality professional and editing writing services. These are tailored to your needs and ensuring the meaning and message of your writing are clear and accurate.](#)

4. RESEARCH AND RESOURCES

What do we mean by burnout? Being stressed is often seen as a badge of honour in a fast-paced industry. I have found that journalists are generally loath to admit such a so-called weakness to bosses. What research and resources have been conducted into journalists' mental well-being? Precious little in my view.

Clearly, there is a sliding scale when it comes to stress. How do we define these parameters? Loaded terms such as 'depression' and 'burnout' make it hard to start conversations around what is still a taboo subject in office culture. Failing business models, the advent of smartphones, *ad hominem* attacks on social media, job layoffs, macho news editors, vicarious trauma and being 'seen' to be across everything means most journalists are exposed to stressful conditions in one form or another.

How this manifests itself is completely different. Some may feel anxious and worried. Others have a “pit in their stomach”, suffer sleep deprivation, experience panic attacks and more. Journalists are suffering in manifold ways but the only way they can articulate it has until recently been through a silent scream. More than a third in this survey said it had impacted on relationships with people they shared their homes with.

While research is still scant there are several notable studies and initiatives which are shining a light on this area.

RESOURCES

The Self-Investigation is an online programme designed to support journalists with knowledge and evidence-based practices they can use to relate to stress and digital overload in a healthier way. They have trained more than 230 journalists across four continents.

The courses have been run in English and Spanish since July by **Kim Brice**, a personal leadership coach who teaches mindfulness-based stress reduction; **Mar Cabra**, a Pulitzer-prize winning journalist who, among many notable initiatives, is raising awareness around technology’s influence on how we interact with ourselves; and **Aldara Martitegui**, a journalist and expert in emotional intelligence and mindfulness.

Brice and Cabra also worked with the Freelance Journalism Assembly’s **well-being programme for freelancers** (**#FJAssembly**) during the autumn. Set up by the Maastricht-based, non-profit European Journalism Centre, it taught ways to manage stress and take better care of yourself.

In 2006, Cabra joined the newly-created Spanish broadcast channel La Sexta straight out of college at the age of 23. It was the first permanent contract in her career. Suffering from work-related depression, she eventually had to take off six months from work.

This involved her speaking to a psychologist and being prescribed medication “which I didn’t take...”

This was the first time she had ever experienced such issues. “It was a new team of young professionals working together.” she explains. “We were all in our twenties. We had a lot of stress and there were a lot of ups and downs. One day you were the best journalist in the newsroom and the next day, according to the managers, you were the worst.

"I felt super insecure and super anxious. I remember feeling the blood pumping in my veins out of anxiety and going to the toilet because I just couldn't cope with what I had been asked to do."

While her immediate manager was "very supportive" of her situation, Cabra said her decision to publicly take time off had an impact on colleagues in terms of "first adopter" status, particularly when high-level managers started telling her that they were hiding depression too.

"I thought it was me... I am broken, something has happened and I don't know how to cope with it. But a lot of people came to me afterwards, saying it was a cultural thing and adding: 'I am suffering in silence'.

"I was thinking the profession was really screwed up. People high up the chain were saying: 'I take anti-depressants day-to-day to cope with the pressure.'

One after another, more people came forward to say they were suffering too. Cabra says she now speaks openly about her depression because it's important to "normalise it".

"It's much more common than people think. It's taken me more than 10 years to admit in public that I had depression back then because everyone sees it as a weakness."

Cabra won a Fulbright scholarship which allowed her to go to Columbia University to study investigative journalism. From there she joined the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ) in 2011. As head of its data and technology team, she would eventually win the Pulitzer for her work on the Panama Papers.

Despite the plaudits and the Pulitzer, a further downward spiral took her into burnout. This would **lead to leaving her full-time work as a journalist** at the end of 2017.

"We were juggling so many projects and I was feeling the pressure and getting physical health problems cropping up."

Cabra was also working remotely with the ICIJ in the US while she was based six hours ahead in Spain.

"In 2014, we published a project and I went to the Philippines for an investigative conference and I ended up in hospital.

"I jumped back into work as soon as I could. I remember recovering in the capital Manila and not being able to fly but I was still working. We did a story about the HSBC files with the Guardian and the BBC. Then I had a thyroid problem. Nobody was linking that to stress then.

"After we published the Panama Papers in 2016, I was so tired at the weekend. I was not personally fulfilled. I was burned out. It took me time to realise that I had to stop. I quit my job.

"I decided 'fuck it, I am going to stop and see what I want to do. I didn't know if I wanted to stay in journalism. I felt unhappy regardless of all the awards. I felt empty. Nothing excited me in terms of work. Everything was same-old, same-old."

Cabra took time out, received therapy and moved back to Almería, Spain, where her mother came from. There, she meditates "three to four times a week" as well as doing yoga.

"I started dancing again in my gap year. I had forgotten all this. Before becoming a journalist, I studied acting and I am a physical person. With journalism I had forgotten all about that. I reconnected with joy and playfulness."

By 2019, her interest took her into researching "how hooked we are to our devices and how it is taking our attention away from ourselves".

"Technology is the topic that is interlaced in my life," she explains. I started doing experiments like not checking email all the time. Opening my computer had made me feel so bad inside. My gut would churn. At the beginning of my burnout recovery I couldn't do that much tech. I took Twitter, email and Facebook off my phone for a while."

Brice had given coaching to Cabra during 2018 and when the pandemic started unfolding, Cabra decided that she "wanted to help her colleagues in journalism".

"Now is the time when journalists need to manage stress and have a healthier relationship with technology. I thought: 'Let's do something to help journalists on a continual basis,' rather than a one-off thing'.

"We had seen lots of one-hour webinars on journalism. They give you tips and you make a note but then you come back to your reality and life pushes it away."

Both [The Self-Investigation](#) and EJC work involves multiple sessions to guide journalists through their own well-being. Get in touch with Cabra [here](#).

The Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism found that “a significant number of journalists reporting on Covid-19 show signs of anxiety and depression”. [According to the early results of a survey of 70 people](#), around 70% of respondents suffer from some levels of psychological distress.

Further responses suggested that 26% have clinically significant anxiety compatible with the diagnosis of Generalized Anxiety Disorder which includes symptoms of worry, feeling on edge, insomnia, poor concentration and fatigue.

The study is led by [Dr. Anthony Feinstein](#), Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Toronto and a neuropsychiatrist, and [Meera Selva](#), Director of the [Journalist Fellowship Programme](#) at Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, working with a team of researchers.

[A fresh study](#) published in October by the institute examines how newsrooms across the world have been wrestling with “confronting enduring forms of social inequality internally and how to better represent audiences through greater diversity in their news coverage”.

“I’ve learned the language of mental health after 20 years in journalism. Yet for a long time, I was in a dark place, hiding my pain,” [writes journalist Hannah Storm](#) in a deeply personal piece entitled ‘My mental health journey: How PTSD gave me the strength to share my story’. This [additional podcast](#) from Storm in which she argues for greater transparency from news leaders is a must-listen. At the start of November, Storm founded [Headlines](#), a network for those who “care about improving mental well-being in the media”. The initiative offers a safe space to share experiences and explore solutions.

Psychology expert Gabriella Tyson, from the University of Oxford, is currently collecting data from journalists and all those working in the media sector, to inform mental health training for the industry. The survey asks about mental health and chronic stress, as well as how the Covid-19 pandemic has affected the way journalists work and live. She has already collected over 120 responses. The survey is still open and only takes 15 minutes to complete. Find it here: www.journostress.com or bit.ly/journalistsurvey

Journalism & the Pandemic: A Global Snapshot of Impacts by Julie Posetti, Emily Bell and Pete Brown presents the initial findings from the first large-scale global survey of journalists since the Covid-19 crisis began. The survey was conducted by the Journalism and the Pandemic Project - a collaborative research initiative from the International Center for Journalists (ICFJ) and the Tow Center for Digital Journalism at Columbia University.

Based on an analysis of 1,406 vetted survey completions during the pandemic's first wave, it concludes that many journalists covering this devastating human story, at great personal risk, were clearly struggling to cope. Seventy percent of the survey's respondents rated the psychological and emotional impacts of dealing with the Covid-19 crisis as the most difficult aspect of their work.

Pamposh Raina writes on policy, politics, gender, and child rights. She has been a staff reporter with The New York Times and Special Correspondent, South Asia, for AFP. Her recent work has focussed on analysing misinformation and disinformation on social media and closed messaging apps in India. She has been trained on trauma literacy by Dart Centre Asia Pacific. She has also attended seminars on resiliency and trauma at UC Berkeley's Human Rights Center. She is interested in training fact-checkers, newsrooms, and journalism students on trauma literacy.

First Draft, a non-profit which provides knowledge and tools to challenge false and misleading information, set up a **coronavirus resource hub** during the spring of 2020. Here is a handy guide they have published on how **journalists can take care of themselves**. Further reading:

- The @CarterFellows have been reporting on the **mental health impact of COVID 19 for journalists**.
- The Society of Freelance Journalists' **written submission** to the House of Lords' Communications and Digital Committee on its inquiry into the Future of Journalism.
- Four in ten Press Gazette readers believe their mental health suffered for work-related reasons during the coronavirus lockdown, **according to a poll published in April**.
- How news publishers are combating burnout with extra days off and mental health support, **writes Kayleigh Barber in Digiday**.

This is not an exhaustive list. Please get in touch if you think a study, project or piece of content should be included in this list.



CASE STUDY - AMANTHA PERERA

Amantha Perera has worked for Time Magazine, The Washington Post, The Guardian and Reuters. He was born in Sri Lanka and is now based in Melbourne, Australia.

In 2009, one of his colleagues, Lasantha Wickrematunge, the editor of The Sunday Leader, **was assassinated in the Sri Lankan capital Colombo**. "That really affected me," Perera says. "Lasantha was a very close friend of mine and a mentor."

His murder came just four months before a bitter, internecine civil war ended. "I first approached it as a story," Perera explains, "but because it was such a high-profile case and due to my own personal feelings, I kept on reporting on it year after year - particularly on the anniversary of his death."

Perera found himself increasingly "becoming very angry at the story and with my colleagues."

"This made me examine what was happening to me. I was directed towards the **Dart Centre for Journalism and Trauma** [which studies and teaches ethical reporting on violence and conflict] to deal with my own trauma and the work that journalists do."

By 2011 he began to look at his own coverage of the conflict, the devastating tsunami of seven years before and ongoing community disturbances across Sri Lanka. This, he says, is where his interest in "trauma literate journalism" began to develop. In 2015, he started working as a trainer with the Dart Centre in its Asia-Pacific branch, working out of Colombo.

"I continued to work as a journalist but the more I trained journalists the more I realised that there was more work that needed to be done in this area [around trauma]. We needed to look into that impact from the perspective of working journalists."

"There was a lot of academic knowledge that was developing but they had little knowledge of the environment that journalists were working in and the pressures they were experiencing real time. That is why I decided to pursue graduate research and I relocated to Melbourne."

Up until January of this year, Perera was working on a project focusing on online trauma in the Philippines. "Then Covid happened. I found myself suddenly talking about online trauma threats more often. Journalists were stuck at home 24/7 and working on an unprecedented story and my work appeared to resonate more with them."

Perera wants to speak to journalists who are working and dealing with a family environment while working from home.

"I am trying to **refocus my research** to look at the impact of Covid-19 on journalists who were reporting on it - and it's not going to be limited to a geographical location."

Mental vulnerability is a theme which Perera is starting to see more and more. Particularly across the Asia-Pacific region, "you still feel the presence of the macho culture in newsrooms," he explains, "people don't want to admit that things can affect you".

His work is also investigating the fallout from journalists using social media 24/7 and the blurring of lines.

"There are countless occasions where the personal and the professional now merge seamlessly into another.

"One minute you're working and then you're interacting with a friend and then you go back to work. How do you differentiate? How do you create that space where you feel very clearly 'this is my work'?"

Covid-related stress is now manifesting itself in lots of different ways. Perera says he was messaging with a journalist colleague in a South Asian country whose work involved dealing with migrant workers stuck in the Gulf.

"A lot of these workers were out of jobs, because of Covid, and stuck in the region.

"My colleague was communicating with them for work reasons but also to keep in touch. The colleague got a call during the middle of the night and the worker on the other side of the phone then asked for help.

"My colleague was not in a position to help and got an overwhelming sense of helplessness and couldn't sleep afterwards. They were trying to figure out what was happening and hadn't differentiated their workspace and private space."

Building structures into your working day where "there is time and space to put down your screen and disengage" is crucial. "You need to acquire that discipline and it doesn't come naturally, particularly for journalists."

But he argues that cases such as these reflect an increased awareness in the personal, mental well-being of journalists.

"What Covid has done has moved online dangers, not necessarily trauma, right into focus with journalists."

Disinformation, abuse, trolling and doxxing of journalists are now on the increase. "It was interesting because if I had done a survey that I did a year back, the main online trauma would be graphic imagery."

The survey of 100 journalists, mostly based in Asia and the Pacific, was conducted in mid-April. Some 48% said that the most potent online threat that they faced was fake news, while 28% said it was disturbing content.

In another important insight, exactly two-thirds said they were spending five hours or more daily online since lockdown, while 37% were spending over six hours. Before lockdown around 35% spent five hours or more online, with only 17% more than six hours.

"This time I mostly found the content of the news they reported as the most dangerous," says Perera. "The most dangerous for those surveyed was fake news."

*Perera's research is supported by a CQUniversity International Excellence Research Scholarship, through the Creative Arts Research Training Academy (CARTA). He is still compiling his report and you can reach out to him [here](#).

5. SURVEY CONCLUSION AND A VISION

FOR THE FUTURE

No news organisation, however venerable and illustrious, has the divine right to exist.

One dominant theme of the survey responses was the need to 'future-gaze' about how their news org could adapt.

One respondent summed up many positive feelings about this moment being an opportunity: "I'd personally like my newsroom to embrace more innovation that will help our publication retain its long-term viability. We need to embrace a membership, people-focused mindset, be willing to think more digital and embrace a more fluid mindset to journalism."

Mediacities, a member-funded French local news site, asked its audience how it should report on the pandemic and [attracted 20% more paying readers in the process](#). It launched a Covid-19 landing page to inform readers about the virus, answer their questions and bring in expert advice. It also initiated an investigative solutions-oriented journalism project to understand how local authorities in France were responding to the virus.

Success stories are set against a growing distrust of the news media in general. On March 16, the Edelman Trust Barometer [published a report](#) on the veracity of information into Covid-19. One survey question stood out: "Please indicate how much you trust each of the following sources to tell you the truth about the virus and its progression?"



Some 10,000 respondents from 10 countries – including the US, UK, Brazil, Italy and South Africa – ranked scientists (83%), their GP [family doctor] (82%) and World Health Organisation officials (72%) highest in percentage terms.

A “person like yourself” (63%), “my employer CEO” (54%) and fellow co-workers (53%) were in the middle of the pack. At the bottom were journalists (43%) and the collective mass known as the “news media” (50%). Both fared worse in people’s estimations than “my country’s leader” (51%).

Journalists would do well to recognise how they currently sit in the public consciousness, particularly as they face the biggest news story of their lives so far, and are faced with the challenges of carrying out their work remotely at a time of great economic uncertainty.

Tom Phillips, an editor of Full Fact, spoke to me in March about what the UK’s leading fact-checking charity was doing to tackle disinformation. His insights around burnout were illuminating.

“There are several challenges in tackling misinformation about the novel coronavirus. Firstly, there’s the sheer uncertainty: it’s a new virus, the evidence is developing all the time but there’s a lot that’s still not known for sure, which makes it hard to be definitive on many topics. It’s a fast moving situation, so things you’ve written are out of date almost as soon as you publish.

"Experts are in high demand, so it can take time to get answers to specific questions back. And as always, you can't always be sure how much of the misinformation that's spreading widely you're actually seeing.

"And of course, like everybody else, we're having to do this while managing the shift to remote working and dealing with a stressful situation, so ensuring the wellbeing of our colleagues is a top priority.

"As an organisation, we have wellbeing at our core - and never more so than right now. We have been providing links to those best placed to give professional support, and managers are in daily dialogue with their teams. Virtual 'All Hands' meetings are now a weekly fixture.

"These are difficult times, people are facing a lot of challenges. We will continue to provide the support we can, and try to be open to what needs to be done to help people through it."

Alastair Reid, then digital editor of First Draft and now digital editor at The Big Issue, said at the same time: "I think there are some strong connections between burnout and working from home, so it's really important to separate the two. Having a routine which signifies 'going to work', a separate work space to personal space and taking regular breaks are all crucial.

"Even if you live in a small apartment, like I do, you can separate out a corner of one room to work and take breaks for stretches and exercise.

"That part is actually easier than when you work in an office, thankfully. And there's a role for editors and managers here too, simply in supporting staff who may be less experienced in dealing with the huge and sudden change in circumstances.

"Having regular check-ins where everyone shares their tips or how they're doing and arranging Friday drinks in a video call can all help. A healthy team is a happy team, after all."



CASE STUDY - CHIARA CARTER

Chiara Carter joined the Daily Dispatch – a South African newspaper serving the Eastern Cape – in 2018 as deputy editor. She became the title's editor in 2019.

The paper covers the East London metropolis and easternmost sections of the Eastern Cape province. It became known around the world under Donald Woods who, when editor, **campaigns for an investigation into the assassination of anti-apartheid campaigner Steven Biko**. Their friendship was dramatised in the Oscar-winning film *Cry Freedom*.

The Daily Dispatch has a staff of 50, with around 20 journalists, and is owned by Arena Holdings. Hiring has been frozen during the pandemic.

When the lockdown was imposed across South Africa in late March, a number of editorial staff continued to work from the paper's offices.

"Some of the reporters hadn't been able to work remotely because of financial issues," Carter says. "Data costs are high in South Africa and although reporters do get paid a

mobile-phone and data allowance they would rather use the office internet system.

"Similarly, they would rather use office phones than pay an additional amount for phone calls. They also rely on company cars for transport on stories. Public transport is poor and not an option for doing stories and the taxi company we use was locked down and not operating for several months."

Getting a newspaper out and running a website is demanding enough, but Carter has also been brokering discussions between staff and head office, as well as generally maintaining order.

"The first month [April] they didn't cut salaries but the wages were cut by a third for May, June and July. Salaries were restored in full in August and the situation was ameliorated in July when permanent staff received two government unemployment insurance payouts.

"Sadly this did not help contract contributors as they were not paying into the unemployment insurance fund. The junior reporters and the contract workers have really felt the pain."

Being a newsroom leader of course goes beyond editing content but the lockdown has meant Carter has to "deal with mental health and finance issues from staff".

One aspect of being a manager who does the checking in on staff is that they are not regularly asked how they are doing themselves.

"I am tired of lockdown," Carter declares. "I am not a fan of the theory of working round the clock in the newsroom but I like journalists to go out and report. I would like to be back in my newsroom and see people.

"For those who want to work from home more, I would have been amenable anyway. I worked with small kids while I covered parliament and I know the pressures. In my previous job editing the Weekend Argus in Cape Town I hardly ever saw some of my best reporters. As long as people deliver, and you can contact them and communicate, I don't have an issue.

"One of the things that has been good for the paper is that various members of editorial management have had to step up and take initiative and work on their own a bit more. That bodes well for the succession at the paper. People have taken more responsibility and we've had to work more tightly."

Using digital tools has also been a useful by-product of lockdown.

"We are using Zoom and Microsoft Teams which we've never used before. Our head office guys realise they can conference-call all of us which is more time efficient than flying to us. I have got a lot more work done [during lockdown]. And there has been less distraction.

"I think it's useful to touch base and to exchange ideas. But I also find video conferences quite limited in exchanging ideas."

During March and April the paper's website – which runs a membership model – attracted 12 million unique visitors a week. That has fallen back to around around 800,000 which is still double what the site does normally.

"I think it's been an opportunity for us in terms of digital – in terms of the number of younger people who came in. Our challenge is to translate that into paying readers."

Asked what the future holds, Carter says: "The Dispatch is almost 150 years old. The title will survive. Who knows what's going to happen with print? It's very difficult to predict. I look back 10 years ago, I wouldn't have seen a lot of what has happened.

"I've had my career. I am more or less at the end although I intend to continue for a while! I am happy with my experience. But what I would say to my son would be this: 'Do not be a journalist if you can't handle the insecurity of income and your future prospects.'

"But I am glad for my career. You do journalism to make a difference. You get to meet interesting people and do interesting things. I've more than done that."

** After our interview in June, Chiara Carter sent this additional text:*

The news editor and deputy went into isolation after they came in contact with a manager who was suspected of having Covid-19. Arena Holdings head office also temporarily closed after a staff member tested positive.

Carter added in an email. "The issue is that SA is coming out of lockdown for the sake of the economy at a point where the peak in infection is yet to come. Very difficult."

((Update: In late July, I was appointed Editor in Chief for Arena in the E Cape (Dispatch, the Herald and several community papers) and my deputy, Cheri-Ann James, became editor of

the Dispatch. Shortly thereafter she contracted Covid-19 and I edited in her place until she was fully recovered. SA is now further out of lockdown with a decline in infections and hospitalisation but experts are concerned about the possibility of a spike as a result of the relaxation. I am about to venture on a plane to fly to Port Elizabeth to meet the staff at The Herald and Weekend Post. Many of our EC staff continue to work from home but most Dispatch reporters are in the office. The company is looking at having some people working from home even beyond Covid-19. The EC newspapers have played a leading role in exposing corruption linked to government procurement of Covid-19 related equipment. Several journalists have been targeted on social media by trolls opposed to their exposure of corruption.)