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Journalistic role performance in Southern European media systems: Resilience in times of disruption

Abstract:

This work is grounded and inspired by studies on journalism's vulnerabilities in times of crisis, role performance, support systems and calls for collective resilience in the face of emerging/new threats to journalism practice. The study adopts a comparative approach and goes beyond what has already been examined by critically assessing resilience strategies that journalists/media organisations develop to cope with professional threats that have emerged with the onset of the coronavirus pandemic in 2020. The study focusses on journalism practice in Bulgaria, Greece, Cyprus and Malta. Its findings indicate that in the face of this crisis journalists showed remarkable resilience despite the lack of professional support systems as they turned to their profession's highest values to draw strength and support. The hardships they faced, both personally and professionally, did not deter them from fulfilling their roles, but essentially fuelled them with persistence and rekindled their faith in journalism as a vocation.

Key words:

Journalistic role performance, European South, resilience, media systems, pandemic crisis

Introduction

Several studies have examined threats and dangers to journalism globally throughout the pandemic, ranging from the effects of economic adversity and

significant loss of advertising revenue (e.g. Hess and Waller, 2021) to restrictions on press freedom aiming to silence critical journalism (e.g. Papadopoulou and Maniou, 2021), as well as the impact on the health and wellbeing of journalists worldwide (e.g. Jukes et al., 2022; Backholm and Idås, 2022). Dealing effectively with these risks is of utmost importance for journalists to continue providing citizens with accurate information and to hold those in power to account. While a handful of comparative studies exist (e.g. Chibuwe et al., 2022; Matsilele et al., 2022), the majority tend to examine pandemic and post-pandemic challenges to journalism by focusing on individual media systems and countries (Hallin et al., 2023). The consensus in nation-centred and comparative research is that the pandemic has put additional burdens on media workers but at the same time journalists and media organisations have demonstrated remarkable resilience in the face of adversity (Wahl-Jorgensen and Quandt, 2022). The crisis has shown that “news professionals have an extraordinary capacity to adapt their roles and practice to changing circumstances” (Mellado, 2021: 140). As Mellado also notes, it is important for researchers to gain a deeper understanding of the intersections of different roles when journalists cover events such as COVID-19 that transcend national boundaries.

Considering Hanitzsch and Vos’s (2017) important distinction between what journalists say about their roles and what they do in practice, this study is concerned with journalists’ narrated role performances in times of global crisis in four understudied Southern European countries – Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece and Malta. Despite the fact that these countries have traditionally been classified as part of two distinct media models, the post-Communist and the Mediterranean polarized/pluralist (Hallin and Mancini, 2004), several studies have argued that their media systems share common characteristics (e.g. Dobek-Ostrowska, 2015; Splendore, 2017). This

became evident in the early months of the pandemic through both the challenges journalism faced in these countries (e.g., similar press freedom restrictions) and their media's approach to the crisis (e.g., layoffs and cutbacks, new labour models) (e.g., Trifonova- Price et al., 2024; Maarek, 2022).

This study addresses a gap in comparative research by focusing on the understudied link between role performances and resilience strategies that journalists develop to adapt and cope with professional threats that have emerged or have been exacerbated by the pandemic. We examine journalistic role performances in times of crisis by focusing on a) the relationship between journalists and those in power (e.g. interventionist/watchdog and advocacy/loyal facilitator roles), and b) the relationship between the journalist and the audience (e.g. civic oriented/public service roles) (Mellado, 2015). The article contributes to the ongoing debate on journalistic role performance (e.g. Mellado et al., 2016; Mellado et al., 2017a; 2017b) and the constraints that influence journalism as a professional practice in different media systems of the broader South European region. It addresses the following research questions:

RQ1. How do journalists understand, perceive and narrate their role performances during the COVID-19 crisis and its aftermath?

RQ2. How did journalists respond and adapt to the risks and challenges presented by the pandemic and how does resilience manifest itself in role perceptions?

RQ3. What is the role of professional support systems in newsrooms in relation to journalism role performance in different contexts?

Our work is grounded in theory on journalists' role perceptions (e.g. Mellado, 2015; Slavtcheva-Petkova, 2018) and resilience in the face of emerging threats to media

freedom, and journalism practice across the world (Relly and Waisbord, 2022; Hallin et al., 2023).

Journalistic role performance in Southern European Media Systems

Scholars differentiate between two different levels in the articulation of journalistic roles: role orientations (normative and cognitive roles) and role performance (practiced and narrated roles) (Hanitzsch and Vos, 2017). While the former refers to the “institutional values, attitudes, and beliefs, and to the communicative ideals journalists are embracing in their work” (p.123), the latter encompass the behavioural dimension of journalists’ roles, namely those played in practice or described by journalists themselves. This distinction is important because there is often an inconsistency between what journalists think and say about their role and what they actually do in practice, and there is a noted gap in our understanding of the links between real and ideal (e.g. Mellado, 2015, Slavtcheva-Petkova, 2018).

The literature acknowledges differences of role perceptions between national journalistic cultures. In countries from South-East Europe, journalists often view their practice as adhering to western values rooted in the concepts of “freedom”, “objectivity” and “autonomy”, yet also as having a broader institutional role in society. In a distinctly challenging media environment, journalists strive to be sceptical of politicians, support national development, promote change and educate the public (Andersen et al., 2017). For example, the most important role Bulgarian journalists believe they should be playing is to “tell things as they are”, followed by “educate the audience, be a detached observer, let people express their views, provide analysis of current affairs, promote tolerance and cultural diversity and support national development” (Slavtcheva-Perkova, 2018: 1985).

Given the additional challenges the pandemic brought to journalism practice, emerging evidence indicates that new journalistic role perceptions, skills, routines and monitoring mechanisms have emerged in many countries to combat the spread of conflicting accounts, rumours, false information and conspiracy theories, and to ensure that all content is accurate (e.g. Messaoud, 2021; López-García, Costa-Sánchez and Vizoso, 2021; Muresan and Salcudean, 2023). The traditional watchdog role was severely tested throughout the pandemic with many news outlets facing obstacles to press freedom, in the form of legislation and practical restrictions limiting access of journalists to sources and information impacting significantly everyday journalism practice (e.g. Perreault, Perreault and Maares, 2022; Saptorini, Zhao and Jackson, 2022; Trifonova-Price et al., 2024). This resulted in adapting practices and balancing between the roles of watchdog and disseminator (e.g. Vobič, 2021). As Raemy (2021: 844) argues “journalistic roles establish what action is appropriate or acceptable in a given context” and, arguably, in particular circumstances such as crises. In difficult work environments journalists develop coping and reinvention strategies that are closely linked to professional identities and institutional values (Cancela and Dubied, 2022). At the same time, challenging conditions expose the difference between normative ideals and practice that warrants further investigation. Based on previous work by Clark and Horsley (2020) who identified resilience as a key factor in journalists’ perseverance and determination to serve the public interest in the face of forces meant to prohibit or hinder them from carrying out their work, we argue that resilience within the framework of well-being (Ragsdale and Newman, 2023) underpins the ability of journalists to perform their ideal roles in challenging circumstances.

Resilience and support systems in times of disruption

Journalism is a stressful occupation, fraught with challenges including threats, intimidation and interference that has been linked to high levels of anxiety, emotional exhaustion, work-related trauma and psychological distress (e.g. Bélair-Gagnon et al., 2023). Yet, many journalists remain motivated, even joyful, and persevere in their roles (Perrault, 2023; Stupart, 2023). Ragsdale and Newman (2023) define well-being in journalism as an umbrella term that includes a number of concepts that embody positive emotional states, attitudes about many aspects of life, including professional roles and experiencing fulfilment. What is particularly relevant to us is eudemonic well-being, which is characterised-as fulfilling one's potential in their pursuit of goals, consistent with one's values and identity (Ragsdale and Newman, 2023: 34). This includes a sense of purpose, autonomy and growth, which is important given the nature of journalistic work.

It is only recently that the topic of resilience has been applied to journalism studies (Newman and Drevo, 2015). The bulk of the research on journalism and resilience focuses on the coverage of extreme events such as war. COVID-19 may also be considered one such event as numerous journalists experienced the crisis first hand and reported human distress and suffering on a regular basis (Tyson and Wild, 2021; Backholm and Idas, 2022). This demanded a full enactment of their skills and resources, bringing to the fore their resilience and adaptability.

However, there is a dearth of evidence of how journalists reconciled their normative roles with the increased difficulties they faced in their daily practice and how they think they adapted to the disruptive influence of COVID-19. Resiliency theory provides a helpful theoretical framework to critically examine journalists'

perceptions of their ability to adjust and overcome adversity throughout this challenging period and beyond.

Resilience may be broadly described as “a pathway to well-being” (Ragsdale and Newman, 2023: 37) or the ability to bounce back from adversity, implying successful negotiation of risk. One who successfully adjusts to challenging and stressful situations is said to be resilient (Masten and Coatsworth, 1998). According to Kalisch et al. (2017) the concept of resilience can explain how people maintain good mental health and adaptive functioning in spite of exposure to physical or psychological stressors, both common in the journalistic profession during COVID-19. Linked with the construct of resilience is that of post-traumatic growth (Tedeschi and Kalhoun, 1996). Challenging life experiences need not always result in negative consequences. Rather, they may be successfully navigated and result in positive outcomes (Tedeschi and Calhoun, 2004) and further commitment to one’s goals (Ramos and Suizo, 2024).

In their analysis of resilience in the context of journalism, Clark and Horsley (2020: 105) found that one recurring pattern was the resilience they exhibited in the face of forces meant to prohibit or hinder them from carrying out their work. Factors, such as the personality trait of “hardiness” as well as a strong feeling of “meaning and purpose” were commonalities shared by resilient journalists. Journalists who act with strong purpose reframe current problems as being closely related to their long-term objectives. Financial security was another factor that assisted the journalists to persevere despite experiencing multiple pressures. Slavtcheva-Petkova (2018) found that Bulgarian journalists often disassociate themselves from perceived negative or unethical practices in their profession by adopting “self-othering” as a resilience strategy. In other words, they identify problems and issues but tend not to assume any

responsibility for them. This and other studies indicate that it is not the profession that makes journalists unhappy and dissatisfied, but the conditions under which they work (Rick, 2023); it is possible to experience positive feelings from their work (Ragsdale and Newman, 2023) even in difficult and hostile environments.

While resilience may be viewed as a personal quality, it is facilitated through strong support mechanisms that may buffer against the challenges identified above. Support systems in newsrooms include, but are not limited to, psychological/mental health support, physical and digital safety measures, institutional support protocols, legal support and financial support. However, the emotional labour involved in journalism practice (Šimunjak and Menke, 2023) is generally only reluctantly recognised (McCaffrey, 2019), “inhibiting journalists’ ability to spot and manage its effects, and impeding the development of organisational support systems that would support journalists’ well-being.” (Šimunjak and Menke, 2023: 2475). Research shows that in the early stages of the pandemic increased perceived organisational support correlated with reduced stress levels and heightened work commitment (Hoak, 2021).

However, many will not have access to psychological interventions to address mental health issues related to their job (Gligorijevic et al., 2023). Journalists may even believe that stressors are simply part of their job (Clark and Grech, 2017). Effective institutional support, as well as physical and digital safety allow journalists to effectively engage in their roles (Hamada, 2022). Coping with stress, especially in times of crisis is essential, “ideally resulting in resilience and resistance, and manifested in journalists’ continued role performance with autonomy” (Slavtcheva et al., 2023: 1211). Continuous threats and compromised safety can drive journalists to leave the profession altogether when the risk of harm outweighs their commitment to

reporting, leading to a loss of experienced professionals from the field (Davidson and Meyers, 2016).

Evidence from the literature suggests that formal and informal support systems play a critical role in maintaining journalists' physical and emotional well-being at the best of times. They are key to ensuring safety, promoting high-quality journalism and are indispensable in fostering resilience in times of disruption in order to allow journalists to reconcile their perceived role in informing the public and holding power accountable. In essence, the concept of resilience underpins the ability of journalists to perform their roles in challenging circumstances such as a pandemic.

Method

This work is based on data derived from interviews with journalists working in four Southern European countries, namely Bulgaria, Greece, Cyprus and Malta, where media and journalists have long experienced significant challenges to journalism practice and press freedom (RSF, 2022).

The findings presented in this paper are based on semi-structured qualitative interviews conducted in 2022, as part of a larger cross-national comparative study. The aim of this paper is to critically assess how journalists have fulfilled their roles amidst the distinctive challenges posed by the pandemic, and to delve into journalistic resilience and the supportive frameworks that exist. The interview guide addressed a number of issues. A first set of questions were aimed at addressing the broad challenges related to context both during Covid and post-Covid. These questions included an examination of perceptions of how the wider political and economic environment changed since the pandemic and how this may have impacted their

ability to practice journalism. The interview guide also probed about any pandemic related interference in the participants' work. A number of questions narrowed the focus on practice examining how day-to-day practice was impacted as a result of restrictions and changes during and post-Covid. The last set of questions zeroed in on resilience and more specifically survival mechanisms, and strategies used to navigate risks associated with the crisis. Participants were also asked about how they dealt with threats and obstacles in their media organisation and the support available within and outside the organisation.

The impact of the gender dimension was also investigated.

Our purposive sample includes 32 elite interviews with reporters, editors, and presenters from the main national, independent and public service media outlets in each country, including newspapers/online media outlets and broadcasters who were on the frontline during the height of the crisis and have continued to play a key role. Data is fully anonymised throughout the study to protect the identities of the interviewees due to the sensitive topics discussed. The participants are identified as follows: Bulgaria BG1 to BG8; Cyprus CY1 to CY8; Greece GR1 to GR8 Malta MT1 to MT8¹.

Data analysis adopted a combined inductive and abductive approach given that the study of both journalistic role performance and resilience are not novel. While the initial inductive approach allowed patterns to emerge from the data on an unprecedented phenomenon – COVID-19, abductive reasoning allowed for the best possible thematic explanation for the emergent findings considering the already established corpus of theory on journalistic role performance as well as on resilience.

¹ The study does not identify the media organizations of interviewees on purpose in order to fully protect their identities, as the media markets in two out of the four countries examined, namely Malta and Cyprus, are very small and it might be possible to identify participants.

This blended approach allowed for novel understanding and theorising on journalistic role performance and resilience by interpreting the findings emergent from a Southern European context. While inductive reasoning involves an iterative process of coding, categorising, and theme development, it is data driven and therefore has the potential of uncovering new insights. Well established theory on journalistic role performance (e.g. Mellado, 2015; Mellado et al., 2016; Mellado et al., 2017a; 2017b) and well-being and resilience (e.g. Ragsdale and Newman, 2023; Šimunjak and Menke, 2023; Hoak, 2021) were utilised in an abductive manner allowing the researchers to propose plausible explanations that best fit the observed data. The use of abductive reasoning allowed the researchers to develop new interpretations on the already extensively researched phenomenon of journalistic role performance during a novel and challenging situation requiring resilient responses, based on evidence collected from the interviews. The combined use of these two approaches allowed for the grounding of the findings in empirical evidence and their refinement through reference back to established theoretical perspectives, resulting in a comprehensive and nuanced analysis.

The analysis followed the method of thematic analysis suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). This entailed a six-stage process for engaging with the qualitative data. In the initial phase the researchers familiarized themselves with the data through a careful reading of the transcripts. Phase two saw the creation of data codes. Phase three and phase four involved the search for themes and the development and review of the emergent themes. The last two phases involved naming the themes and the development of the data analytic table (Appendix 1) which forms the basis for the analysis section below.

Findings and Analysis

Role performance during the pandemic

The findings indicate a more interventionist perception by the interviewees of their journalistic roles during the pandemic (e.g. combating mis and disinformation) and a heightened commitment to journalistic professional standards and ideals. We observed numerous instances in the data of journalists describing doing work that benefits society and the common good, as seen through the prism of the normative ideals of the journalistic community. For example, a significant point of concern for most interviewees in all countries was the rise of misinformation and false content throughout the pandemic and beyond, which meant that substantial time and resources had to be invested in verification and fact checking. Thus, traditional journalistic roles such as accuracy, timeliness and truth-telling became even more pronounced despite the physical and other restrictions that journalists faced in their reporting of the pandemic. In Cyprus, journalists noted increasingly working with scientific sources and basing their work on international trends, instead of solely relying on national news/sources. In Bulgaria, reporters also closely examined trends and guidelines, including the uncertainties among the scientific community so the public can have reliable information, including initiatives, such as “dedicating several series of talks with experts to vaccines, and their benefits” (BG6). In Greece, journalists also strived to provide accurate and reliable information as they felt that the public wasn’t getting all the information via the official authorities. In Malta, interviewees believed that their role was to be on the frontline, to combat mis- and disinformation, and trolls. This required a learning curve and the development of new skills that allow

journalists to effectively perform their roles despite the challenges. This requires good reflective abilities, a sense of self efficacy, as well as cognitive skills including critical thinking and problem solving, all highlighted as contributing to resilience in the literature (Garmezy et al., 1984; Garmezy, 1991; Scherbaum et al., 2006). The data indicates that at the start of the pandemic, the interviewed journalists perceived their role as adopting a collaborative position with the health authorities, aiming to encourage the public to act in accordance with official guidelines and the best available scientific knowledge which they took it on themselves to provide.

This work was described as “our duty” (BG1), which included debunking conspiracies and false information, and guiding citizens to make informed decisions related to their safety. In Greece, a country with a highly polarised media landscape, most media entities refrained from criticizing the government’s measures to deal with the pandemic at the time (Papadopoulou, 2022). Nevertheless, many reporters, even those who felt restricted in their ability to scrutinize the government objectively, strived to provide their audience with accurate and comprehensive information about the pandemic as they felt a wider sense that “we [journalists] are all working for the common good” (GR7). The Maltese journalists described their role as “to question and to inform” (MT6) on the pandemic but this brought its own unexpected challenges as this interviewee notes:

“Obviously, there was backlash, especially from these right wingers. Some of these are your own readers. I think as a news organisation you need to take certain stands and the last thing I want to do is tie in with people’s narrative because this is what they want to hear.” (MT2)

Many interviewees in all countries highlighted their efforts in strengthening their audience's media literacy skills to cope with the torrent of information. These examples highlight an overall feeling of satisfaction or fulfilment of doing "good" work that can be emotionally rewarding (Stupart, 2023) and aligns closely with the civic oriented /public service role of journalism (Mellado, 2015; Nip, 2008). Nip (2008:180) argued that "giving ordinary people a voice, covering stories in a way that facilitates public understanding and stimulates citizen deliberation of the problems behind the stories [...] engaging the community in problem solving, and maximizing the impact of the coverage in the community are among the key components of public journalism". These elements of public service journalism are common in the narrated role perceptions of our interviewees in helping to tackle the unprecedented health crisis, such as protecting vulnerable people, covering stories that would otherwise go unnoticed, persevering with requests for information and doubling verification efforts, all in the face of many restrictions from often hostile governments and, on some occasions, publics. Our findings demonstrate that the interviewees viewed their public service roles very seriously. Firstly, all interviewees highlight the demanding nature of pandemic coverage and a new type of crisis reporting they had not encountered in the past. In the first instance this included re-evaluation of their existing roles to identify gaps and find strategies to address them. For example, many interviewees did not want to rely on official daily statistics on cases and deaths and expressed as a strong desire, and "a deep need to capture what was happening in the public health system, an issue that was not given the proper attention or space in other media" (GR4). Other journalists describe this as going beyond translating, paraphrasing and curating international news sites and "to start going to events" (BG1) as soon as it was safe to do so. The second strategy journalists applied was to be open to learning new

skills. For example, many mentioned having to adopt “new technology in their work” (CY2) which participants believe made them better in fulfilling their roles. Learning also included coming to terms with unfamiliar pandemic and health related topics that used to be the domain for specialist reporters. For example, most had to educate themselves about “what the virus is, how it is spread, what vaccines are, who are these companies making the vaccines, what it involves to import the vaccine...And the situation evolved and statistics were published and we started to get used to how to approach the pandemic from a journalistic point of view.” (MT5)

Interviewees considered their watchdog role of significant importance but they also admit where they and their media organisations at times fell short in fulfilling their roles. This was explained by several factors, including that this role was severely restricted by extremely difficult access to appropriate sources, delayed or missing responses to requests for information from the authorities, physical restrictions, fear, burnout and other psychological challenges experienced, the threats of potential SLAPPs and online abuse that encourages a culture of self-censorship (see Trifonova-Price et al., 2024). The restrictions brought about by the pandemic made the regular day to day functioning of the newsroom a Herculean task for editors. In fact, our editors struggled in finding ways to keep up staff morale during the height of the pandemic and to get reporters to come back to the office as this quote illustrates well:

“It was a tough task to keep everyone motivated during the pandemic. In terms of operations, the biggest thing was opening ourselves to being away from each other. A newsroom can be a very codependent and crowded coexistent relationship, so being far away was something we had to get used to.” (CY5)

Some editors used other strategies to encourage a return to the physical newsroom such as an editor in chief going to work on their own until others started doing the same. While there was no obligation, the introduction of vaccines “changed attitudes drastically and most people returned except for one or two who did not get vaccinated.” (BG1)

With regards to post-pandemic developments, our interviewees were honest in describing their difficulties of returning to some kind of normality and daily routine practices. For example, some journalists in Malta expressed a hesitation to go back and continue doing what they did before the pandemic as if “nothing has happened” (MT2). This was noted by other participants across the four countries who felt the return to pre-pandemic roles/duties to be challenging. Interestingly, what helped journalists adjust to going back to their newsrooms was a renewed focus on reporting of issues that may have been sidestepped, ignored or “buried” by the authorities during the crisis. In the year our interviews were conducted, our participants were in the midst of reporting another unprecedented event – the Russian invasion of Ukraine. It seemed that the roles journalists practiced in relation to combating mis- and disinformation during the health crisis, became prominent again in the reporting of the war. This part of findings highlights that there is a strong link between role perceptions and resilience strategies that journalists applied, perhaps intuitively, in order to achieve their goals in reporting on the pandemic. We address this next.

Risk and resilience in times of crisis

A significant finding relates to the resilience strategies journalists applied during the pandemic and beyond, and how these facilitate perceived and actual

journalistic role performance. According to Raemy (2021: 856) “resilience is important in the formation and adoption of journalists’ professional identity.” As noted, resilience is the ability to successfully negotiate risks and bounce back from adversity. In the context of the interviews, the data indicates that this involves the ability of individuals, organisations and systems to turn challenges posed by the pandemic into opportunities to better perform their perceived role obligations. This is obviously impacted by the presence of both risk and protective factors. In challenging work environments, journalists often employ coping strategies that are intricately connected to their professional identities and institutional values. These strategies help them navigate the complexities of their roles while upholding the principles and standards of journalism.

When it comes to demonstrating resilience in the face of crisis, most interviewees acknowledged, in accordance with their perceived civic oriented/ public service role, that it was their belief that they were educating the public, doing their job in keeping people safe, and returning to forgotten topics that made it all worthwhile. Being skilled with technology was viewed as a protective feature that assisted in navigating the barriers of having a good online presence to effectively achieve this role:

“...making that transition to digital was something we really embraced. ...Part of the job is to be well versed already in digital landscape and stuff like that.”

(MT3)

According to Bonanno et al. (2011) and Kalisch et al. (2017), many individuals who are subjected to stressful events recover fast or do not significantly worsen.

Research has indicated that possessing certain personality traits is a protective factor that fosters resilience (Cloninger and Zohar, 2011; Connor and Davidson, 2003; Oshio et al, 2003). Personality depicts an individual's distinctive thoughts, feelings, and behaviours (Wagner et al., 2019). Being persistent in one's goals despite pressures to change course emerged in the data as an important trait that facilitated the navigation of the challenge of reporting during COVID-19 and maintaining the watchdog role. In the Maltese context, COVID came at a time when the country was being plagued by corruption and murder scandals that risked being forgotten as a result of the focus on the crisis:

“I just kept on going with the issues that I felt were important; to be fair the editors gave me that space as well. Obviously, it couldn't be just corruption and everything, the world had changed with the pandemic, but I managed to keep it going and I had the support of my organisation to do that.” (MT4)

A series of risk factors emerged as added challenges to journalists in the countries under study. For example, being female and an early career journalist at the time of COVID was identified as a risk factor that made it more difficult to exercise the profession in this time. Reinardy (2009) found that women journalists are more likely to experience work burnout and to consider leaving the profession than their male counterparts. Women's mental health has been shown to have been more adversely impacted during the pandemic (Yehudai et al., 2023):

“[As a female journalist], you are never good enough, you are never shiny enough. During the pandemic, we all gained weight and we all had to lose it.

For my male colleagues, gaining or losing weight was never an issue, but for female journalists there were a lot of comments and criticism. During the lockdowns the hairdressers were closed and there were a lot of comment on social media about the female journalists' hair....The management of the tv station took care of that and brought us a hairdresser.” [GR1]

The closure of physical newsrooms, which had previously been the primary location for young journalists to learn and ‘pick the brains’ of seasoned journalists, was one of the biggest changes the pandemic brought for early career journalists interrupting the socialisation process into the professional culture and community of practice (Wenger 1998). In this process, the novice journalist acquires not only a set of practice-related skills, but also a complex set of values ultimately assimilating a professional role and associated identity as a journalist (Cotter, 2010). Situated learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991) was difficult, albeit not impossible through new digital tools.

Overall, the data indicates a number of strategies utilised by journalists to effectively navigate the challenges experienced during COVID-19. Hoak (2021) makes a convincing argument that, in times of disruption, journalists have consistently demonstrated their ability to convey crucial information. On the one hand, with the challenges to role performance presented by COVID-19 and the radical departure from the typical work routine, journalism practices were seriously disrupted. On the other hand, the situation demanded a swift response, putting immense pressure on personnel resources. Journalists were subjected to the same restrictions as the public but were still expected to report on the crisis. While prolonged stress is a common experience for journalists and is often considered an

anticipated outcome of the profession, an emergent theme in the data was that the pandemic related upheaval of news gathering practices required specific stress management strategies especially in the early stages of the pandemic when the participants were still learning to adjust. Arcalas et al. (2024) note a scarcity of studies examining the connection between routine work-related stresses and creativity within the journalism field. Only a limited number of researchers, such as Fulton (2022) have made efforts to comprehend this phenomenon. Most investigations into occupational stress in journalism predominantly address trauma and violence, with very little emphasis on the daily work-related stresses and coping strategies. The data in this study indicates that coping effectively with stress contributes to resilience and allows journalists to function adequately in their roles. For example, to deal with spending long hours on a computer and the blurring of work/private time, some journalists went for walks alone late at night; others set themselves limits on time spent on social media, checking emails and news agencies feeds, switching off from COVID-19 news, “reading poetry” even having “detox days” away from social media, news avoidance, not working in the evening to help with well-being and coping with the unprecedented intensity.

“Staying at home creates such pressure mentally on people that I, for example, quickly developed a habit of stopping at a certain point. So you have to create a strong internal discipline of when you start and when you finish, because the work never ends...Absolutely categorically [...] even if nobody tells you, you intuitively understand at some point that you will go crazy, you will burn out mentally.” (BG3)

Several reporters from Bulgaria felt very frustrated at home during lockdown, so they volunteered in the community, buying and delivering shopping for people in need, conducting COVID tests but they turned that into an opportunity to find out first-hand what was happening and how the authorities were dealing with the pandemic. The interviewees noted that after the lockdowns and the periods of remote working were over, most people came back to the newsroom more appreciative and respectful of others' personal space, time and boundaries which made the newsrooms a better work environment.

Talking to colleagues and sharing with them their emotional distress was one of the main strategies used by Greek journalists during the pandemic and beyond, whereas some of them resorted to professional help:

“Your mental health is shaken whether you like it or not with this job.

Especially when you come into daily contact with superiors who do not respect the profession. Psychotherapy gave me a way out in critical periods like this.” (GR7)

COVID-19 was not experienced negatively by all participants. Recent studies have shown that covering traumatic stories may foster a positive change in the lives of the affected media professionals (Papadopoulou and Maniou, 2020). Our data indicates that while it posed psychological challenges for journalists, it also provided opportunities for producing better quality reporting:

“We all realised [...] that many of the things that one would expect to be discussed in the public sphere were not discussed. [...] There was a deep need to cover people and situations that were not highlighted by other media,

for example, to highlight human stories of patients or experiences of hospital workers. You didn't see all these things in mainstream media.” (GR4)

Media Support Mechanisms

Given the challenges outlined above, the issue of psychological support to assist journalists deal with and grow from the negative events that their occupation exposes them to, is highlighted in this study as an area of increasing academic concern. It is crucial to offer sufficient assistance to journalists, particularly when they confront scenarios demanding a departure from their usual methods of gathering news. Studies underscore the significance of this aid in enabling journalists to handle, adapt to, and enhance their performance in demanding situations (e.g. Reinardy, 2011; Beam and Spratt, 2009).

Apart from one interviewee in Bulgaria from foreign-owned media, who stated that there were some specific guidelines and resources for all employees on how to take care of their physical and mental wellbeing, no other specific guidelines or resources were mentioned by interviewees in all countries.

Conclusions

This work aimed to address three main research questions. First, with regards to how journalists understand and narrate their role performances during the COVID-19 crisis and its aftermath, we found that the challenges of the pandemic that journalists experienced in their practice were met with determination that seems to have strengthened journalism's perceived watchdog and public service roles. We

found that adapting and surviving entails overcoming challenges that are directly connected with the political and socio-economic contexts that shape the performance of journalistic roles. For instance, challenging and verifying official claims, finding ways to report truthfully despite restrictions by their respective governments. While doing so journalists reported experiencing a sense of emotional fulfilment of performing their roles in spite or even because of the risks and sacrifices that they made throughout the crisis, experiencing a “sense of flourishing that derives from acting in accordance with strongly held/valued moral ideas” (Stupart, 2023: 19).

The analysis of interviews across all four countries clearly shows that many journalists tend to identify with the civic oriented/public service role, particularly in relation to their claims to reporting accurate and trustworthy information and making sure audiences were not exposed to harmful content due to mis and disinformation during the pandemic. This was emphasised as a vital role goal during the pandemic, which follows the same pattern for journalists elsewhere (e.g. Messaoud, 2021; López-García et al., 2021). For instance, Muresan and Salcudean (2023) found that Romanian journalists understood their role in the context of combating misinformation, pseudoscience, conspiracies, and fake news.

In many cases journalists believed they did a better job in keeping citizens safe than their own authorities by providing timely, accurate and truthful information despite experiencing challenges, such as polarisation and backlash on vaccination campaigns. The reality for many journalists who worked during the pandemic was harsh government restrictions, orders to follow the official narrative, precarious working conditions, long hours, exposure to the virus and potential sickness, and severe mental health pressure (Trifonova-Price et al., 2024).

Journalism practice is seen as having much in common with the medical profession: stressful but with a vision that this work will make a difference in society (Perreault, 2023). These obstacles, when successfully negotiated essentially fuelled journalists' persistence and rekindled their faith in journalism's institutional mission. As Perreault (2023) argues, despite the challenges, journalists can find joy and happiness in journalism by feelings of gratitude for their experiences, opportunities to provide a range of perspectives, including their own, compassion for their audience which aligns closely with professional normative roles. We found that journalists demonstrated significant resilience in the face of adversity presented by the crisis. As previous studies have stated, journalists believe that it is important to tell things as they are and/or educate the public (e.g Slavtcheva-Petkova, 2018). We find that it was resilience and bouncing back from adversity that enabled journalists to perform their role during the crisis. Thus, in line with previous arguments, fostering resilience is key to the survival of journalism in difficult circumstances (Relly and Waisbord, 2022) and has the potential to bridge the gap between ideal and real role performance.

With regards to the second research question concerning how journalists respond and adapt to challenges and how resilience manifests itself in role perceptions, we found that journalists applied coping strategies that are closely linked to their perceived professional roles, values and identities. The data indicates that journalists adopted a number of strategies to combat work-related challenges, such as difficult access to sources and information, harassment by officials and online abuse by members of the public (e.g. Trifonova-Price et al., 2023) by finding purpose in their work as well as sustaining a strong belief in the value of their reporting to society. The analysis shows similar patterns identified by other studies assessing a number of psychological coping strategies that help to enhance resilience and allow

for a positive outlook in spite of negative emotions emanating from physical and psychological pressure, in our case brought by the pandemic. Individual resiliency is intimately related to a person's commitment to journalism's ideals and a strong sense of journalistic identity. Occupational identity, that is, how participants narrated perceiving themselves within their profession, including their sense of purpose, values, skills, and journalistic role emerged as an important resilience factor. This journalistic identity gives the journalists focus and enables them to extract meaning and value from the events they cover and particularly from the belief that they are working to keep members of the public, friends and families safe. Resilience and occupational identity are therefore proposed as interconnected facets crucial to understanding how individuals navigate and thrive within their professional roles, particularly in demanding or unpredictable circumstances (Kirk and Wall, 2010).

Regarding resilience strategies emerging in response to the harsh reality of the crisis, in addition to personality, a factor that relevant research has long pointed out as important in fostering resilience, (e.g. Wagner et al., 2019; Cloninger and Zohar, 2011), this study also highlighted the significance of the sense of duty which emerged as a key driver in role performance narratives.

Finally, with regards to the last question and the role of professional support systems, our data indicates that journalists in all countries were left mostly alone to deal with the harsh reality they were facing during the pandemic. The same can be said for journalists working in other countries, as a survey of local journalists in the US revealed that 60% of participants were not offered any mental health resources at all (Hoak, 2021). Our participants relied on their colleagues for peer support in difficult times and established new individual routines such as volunteering and taking time to switch off from COVID-19 related news. Support systems can help journalists thrive

in the face of challenges and continue to contribute meaningfully to their field. As a result, their absence emerges as a significant factor impacting negative role performance. Despite these challenges, the data reveals that a majority of this study's participants found alternative means to compensate for the lack of formal support structures. Engaging in solidarity with one another and in profound discussions with editors, they organically fashioned their own support networks, fostering mutual care and assistance, particularly towards those most adversely affected. Thus, the dearth of formal support systems was effectively mitigated by journalists' creation of their own informal support mechanisms, enabling them to navigate challenges, alleviate stress, and remain true to their journalistic mission.

Overall, there are significant similarities among participants from all four countries with regards to the challenges faced (e.g. difficulties in verifying information, managing stress burnout and remote work), the lack or limited existence of formal support systems and the resilience strategies employed. One notable similarity is their shared perception of the journalistic role in time of unprecedented crisis. They described their role as pivotal in combatting misinformation and educating the public through the dissemination of scientific knowledge. Essentially, they all articulated how the ongoing pandemic and its challenges underscored a renewed commitment to traditional journalistic roles and values. These include verifying information, enhancing their skills, providing accurate content, and striving for truth. Our results show that resilience manifests in daily routine practice that shapes journalistic roles, such as accuracy and verification, fact-checking and accessing information that required perseverance, hardiness and significant effort during the pandemic, essentially fueled by the belief in the values and principles of the journalism profession.

Differences arise on certain issues such as their attitudes towards their respective governments. While some journalists in Malta and Bulgaria attempted to question political decisions during the pandemic, Greek and Cypriot journalists admitted feeling restricted in scrutinising government measures. Another difference that came up was related to post-pandemic adaptation as Maltese and Cypriot journalists found renewed focus in reporting on neglected issues. Finally, gender-related criticism and challenges were highlighted by female journalists in Greece, while this aspect was not specifically discussed in the contexts of the rest of the countries.

Ultimately, as underscored by the findings of this study, in the face of the pandemic and the numerous challenges to their practice, journalists in all four countries showed resilience and an effort to return to ideal journalistic ethos and values. Contrary to these findings, focusing on journalists in USA, Perreault and Perreault (2021) found that they discursively placed themselves in a vulnerable position that was attributed to the pandemic but also to the environmental conditions that long preceded it. As a result, most journalists found practicing their profession and staying true to their role extremely challenging.

This is not to imply that Southern European journalists were not vulnerable or did not have to compromise at times or fall short of fulfilling their journalistic roles. Firstly, the interviews were conducted in 2022 (two years after the most difficult initial period of the pandemic) and our participants had time to reflect on their practice. Secondly, it is well documented that a number of crises (e.g. financial crash in 2008/09) have affected the media landscape in the countries we studied so journalists were to some extent used to dealing with challenges. Thirdly, despite the optimism that emerged from the data, we previously found that physical restrictions, fear of an unknown

virus, potential personal losses, along with the inherent challenges of the profession such as precarious working conditions and long hours, coupled with external factors like limited access to sources, obstacles from authorities, and remote working, have undoubtedly negatively affected journalists and their practice (Trifonova-Price et al., 2023). For example, some Greek journalists refrained from criticising the government's pandemic response, while others in Cyprus described losing morale. Nevertheless, despite encountering difficulties to their practice, participants from all four countries continued to seek strategies to overcome these obstacles and strived to adhere to and reclaim the civic-oriented/public service role of journalism. They described acting as watchdogs, holding those in power accountable and serving people's needs to the best of their abilities. At the same time, they stood by their colleagues who were suffering and tried to create a solidarity net so no one would feel left behind. These findings have implications for future crises, as they indicate that in times of disruption, journalists unite and try to adhere to their profession's highest values and standards. Further comparative research on other media systems could help expand these findings and shed light on the link between role performances and resilience in journalism in different contexts.

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