

mediální studia

media studies

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To cite this article:

Ferreira, G., & Santos-Silva, D. (2026). Journalism and Well-Being: A Systematic Review of Mental Health Research in News Work (2000–2024). *Mediální studia* 20(S11), 36–59. <https://doi.org/10.65502/sil-2026.03>

ISSN 2464-4846

Journal website: <https://www.medialnistudia.fsv.cuni.cz/>

JOURNAL FOR CRITICAL MEDIA INQUIRY

2026
Special
Issue

JOURNALISM AND WELL-BEING: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF MENTAL HEALTH RESEARCH IN NEWS WORK (2000–2024)

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ABSTRACT

Journalists operate in increasingly connected and digitally saturated workplaces, where reporting often involves navigating significant emotional challenges (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019; Šimunjak, 2022). However, the psychological toll of journalism work has historically been overshadowed by objectivity as a strategic ritual (Tuchman, 1972). Recent scholarly attention has begun to address these tensions and their impact on journalists' well-being (Hopper & Huxford, 2015). This article presents a systematic literature review of academic studies examining the intersections between journalism, mental health, and well-being. Using PRISMA guidelines, we analysed 60 peer-reviewed English-language articles (2000-2024), retrieved from Scopus and Web of Science. We address two research questions: (RQ1) How have academic studies defined and conceptualized “well-being,” “mental health,” and “mental illness” within journalism? (RQ2) What dominant debates, emerging trends and persistent gaps characterize this literature? Findings indicate a post-pandemic shift in research priorities from trauma-centered frameworks to broader concerns with occupational health, emotional regulation and support mechanisms.

KEYWORDS

Journalism • Well-being • Mental Health • Mental Illness • Systematic Literature Review

1. INTRODUCTION

Journalists have long been stereotyped in popular culture, frequently portrayed as resilient, hard-nosed truth-seekers or cynical opportunists, representations that have shaped public imaginaries about journalism and journalists' roles (Ehrlich, 2006; Saltzman, 2003; McNair, 2010). These recurring portrayals, from Hollywood films to news-centric television dramas, have cemented the notion that journalists must persist in their mission despite chaos, deadlines, or personal cost. However, these representations rarely acknowledge the psychological toll of the profession. Research increasingly shows that emotional exhaustion, anxiety, and burnout remain hidden behind normative ideals of objectivity and professional stoicism (Pantti & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2021; Deuze, 2023, 2025). Journalism, often compared to care work, requires deep emotional investment while simultaneously normalizing precarious labor conditions: long hours, low pay, job insecurity, and constant connectivity (Deuze, 2023).

This emotional management aligns with what Arlie Hochschild defined as "emotional labor" in the book "Imagined Heart - Commercialization of Human Feeling", first published in 1983: "this labour requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produce the proper state of mind in others" (1983/2003, p. 7). For this American sociologist, employees perform emotional labour when they manage them (including silencing) to meet work requirements. Later, Pantti & Wahl-Worgensen (2021) use the term "emotional work" (for Hochschild it meant dealing with other people's emotions) to encompass a range of emotion related-practices "which have largely been invisible in both practice and scholarship about journalism" (p. 1567).

The complexity of this issue is reflected in at least three interconnected dynamics that shape journalists' daily experiences: first, journalists face a high emotional burden in their daily routines, often covering traumatic events while meeting tight deadlines and managing unpredictable sources (Deuze, 2021; Pantti & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2021; Beckett, 2015; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019); second, the nature of emotional labor is intensified by journalism's normative commitment to objectivity (Tuchman, 1972), which encourages emotional detachment even in the face of human tragedy, leaving professionals to process these emotions alone, often without institutional support (Šimunjak, 2022; Hopper & Huxford, 2015); third, the structural precariousness of the media industry, exacerbated by technological innovation and austerity, has restructured newsrooms into leaner, multi-tasking environments marked by instability and constant adaptation (Ornebring, 2010; Cohen, 2017; Fenton, 2010; Hindman, 2018; Deuze, 2017). Besides these three dimensions, Covid-19 was another extraordinary event

that had an impact on the psychological well-being of journalists (Backholm & Idås, 2022; Banerjee, & Kumar, 2024).

This review seeks to provide a systematic synthesis of how the fields of journalism, mental health, and well-being intersect through the XXI century.

Guided by this aim, the article explores two main research questions:

- *RQ1: How have academic studies approached the concepts of “well-being,” “mental health,” and “mental illness” in journalism?*
- *RQ2: What are the dominant debates, emerging trends and persistent gaps across this literature?*

To answer these questions, we conducted a systematic literature review using PRISMA guidelines, focusing on 60 peer-reviewed English-language articles published between 2000 and 2024 in Scopus and Web of Science. Articles were selected based on the presence of the terms “journalis*,” “well-being,” “mental health,” or “mental illness” in titles or abstracts.

Our analysis reveals a clear shift in focus: early studies often centred on trauma and post-traumatic stress (Feinstein et al., 2002; Greenberg et al., 2009), while more recent research examines broader dimensions of working conditions, emotional labour, and institutional responsibility (Deuze, 2023; Šimunjak & Menke, 2022; Pantti & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2021).

Scholars have increasingly explored how mental health challenges intersect with job precarity, digital acceleration, and weak support systems. Notably, some studies document journalists’ emerging coping strategies, such as disconnecting from news during off-hours or blocking social media comments (Bélair-Gagnon et al., 2023).

Still, conceptual clarity remains limited. Only one article in the corpus defines “well-being” explicitly — underscoring the need for clearer theoretical frameworks. Moreover, although mental health is now acknowledged as central to journalistic practice, few studies offer concrete proposals for structural or institutional change.

This review contributes by consolidating existing knowledge and proposing directions for future inquiry, with the aim of reframing journalists’ well-being not as a private burden, but as a shared, systemic, and professional responsibility.

2. KEY CONCEPTS

Well-being, mental health and mental illness: definitions and agenda

This systematic literature review examines three core concepts central to understanding the emotional and psychological dimensions of journalistic

work: well-being, mental health, and mental illness. Although these terms are often used interchangeably in both academic literature and media discourse, they carry distinct meanings with significant implications for research.

Since the constitution of the World Health Organization (WHO) in 1948 that the term “well-being” is a premise of health: “Health is defined, not negatively or narrowly, but positively and broadly as ‘a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being’ (International Health Conference, 1948, p.16). More recently, in the Health Promotion Glossary of Terms 2021, WHO defines well-being as “a positive state experienced by individuals and societies. Similar to health, it is a resource for daily life and is determined by social, economic and environmental conditions (p. 10). Adapting the extended definition provided by WHO applied to the society to the journalistic class, we may say that journalists’ well-being “can be observed by the extent to which they are resilient, build capacity for action, and are prepared to transcend challenges” (p.19).

Similarly, mental health, as defined by WHO, is “a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn and work well, and contribute to their communities” (2022, p.8). This framing emphasizes mental health as a positive capacity to function, connect, and adapt, rather than merely the absence of mental disorder.

In contrast, mental illnesses are “health conditions involving changes in emotion, thinking or behaviour (or a combination of these” (American Psychiatric Association, n/d). WHO use the term “mental disorders” (as defined by the International Classification of Diseases 11th Revision) as a “a syndrome characterized by clinically significant disturbance in an individual’s cognition, emotional regulation, or behaviour that reflects a dysfunction in the psychological, biological, or developmental processes that underlie mental and behavioural functioning” (2022, p.8).

A brief look at reports and programs shows how these topics entered the agenda of media and academic organizations, signalling a growing concern with mental health and well-being related to journalism, either focusing on the practices of reporting mental health topics or on specific dimensions of journalists’ mental health and well-being. For instance, The International Women’s Media Foundation (IWMF) has developed pioneering initiatives addressing the impact of online harassment and abuse on women journalists, advocating for safer digital practices and institutional accountability such as in the guide “A mental health guide for journalists facing online violence” (Pérez & Pérez, 2022). “The Journalism Resource Guide on Mental Health Reporting” (2024), created by The Carter Center, not only provides ethical guidance for reporting on mental health but also acknowledges the

emotional toll such coverage may have on reporters. On the other hand, the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma at Columbia University launched in 2021 the Journalist Trauma Support Network, designed to equip trauma clinicians with a deep understanding of emotional demands of journalists.

Emotions and emotional labour: how are they linked to journalists' mental health and well-being?

Understanding this emotional dimension is crucial for any analysis of mental health and well-being in the field of journalism. As defined by the American Psychological Association, emotion is “a complex reaction pattern, involving experiential, behavioural, and physiological elements, by which an individual attempts to deal with a personally significant matter or event” (2018, para. 1). Emotions lie at the heart of journalism, not only in the stories being told, but in the psychological toll exacted on those who tell them. As Pantti & Wahl-Jorgensen (2021) argue in the introduction to the special issue of Journalism Studies entitled “Journalism and emotional work”, “it is important to understand journalism as a profession and practice which is profoundly shaped by multifaceted emotional work” (p. 1568).

The objectivity as a strategic ritual, as stated by Tuchman (1972), meaning strategies that journalists use to protect themselves of the risks of their trade, has long served as a cornerstone of journalistic professionalism, reinforcing the idea that personal emotions must be suppressed in the name of neutrality. However, with an “emotional turn” in media studies (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019), this dichotomy between objectivity and emotionality is being re-evaluated. Scholars now argue that emotions are not inherently antithetical to journalistic integrity; rather, they are embedded in the way stories are produced and interpreted, particularly in digital environments where emotional engagement is often seen as a tool to build trust with audiences (Santos-Silva, 2022).

In the journalism field, the social, political and economic dimensions are crucial to explore the role of emotions. Besides Wahl-Jorgensen work, Pajnik (2023), for instance, finds that journalists do not perceive emotions as contradictory to rationality, but as complementary to decision-making in professional practice. Conversely, Lukan and Zajc (2023) trace how emotional attachments to journalism (such as love for the profession) can evolve into disillusionment or burnout, as they developed cynicism, leading to career shifts and emotional detachment. These studies illustrate that emotionality in journalism is not merely personal; it is shaped by broader social, political, economic, and organizational forces, as emphasized by Kotisova (2019) and has impact on journalist's mental health and well-being.

3. RESEARCH DESIGN

This systematic literature review aims to critically map and analyse how academic research has addressed the emotional and psychological dimensions of journalistic work, particularly through the concepts of mental health, well-being, and mental illness.

It is guided by two research questions:

- *RQ1: How have academic studies approached the concepts of “well-being,” “mental health,” and “mental illness” in journalism?*
- *RQ2: What are the dominant debates, emerging trends and persistent gaps across this literature?*

To ensure transparency, replicability, and methodological rigor, the review follows the **PRISMA** framework (*Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses*), which is widely adopted for conducting structured literature reviews in interdisciplinary fields.

PRISMA provides a structured and replicable method for conducting literature reviews, particularly useful in synthesizing complex and multidisciplinary fields such as journalism and mental health. The process unfolds across four key stages: (1) Identification, in which initial records are gathered through comprehensive database searches; (2) Screening, where duplicates and irrelevant titles are removed; (3) Eligibility, involving a more detailed review of abstracts and full texts to assess inclusion criteria; and (4) Inclusion, the final selection of studies that meet all parameters for analysis.

The objective was to understand how peer-reviewed academic literature has addressed mental health and well-being among journalists between 2000 and 2024. The literature search was conducted in January 2025, using the Scopus and Web of Science databases—both recognized for their reliability and comprehensive indexing of international scholarly output.

Search strategy and term selection

A preliminary exploratory search in Scopus and Web of Science databases helped refine the key terms, as it showed that the most common words involving well-being issues in newsrooms were: “well-being”; “mental health”, and “mental illness”. Also, words that would encompass the journalism concept were also added to the search due to proximity to the theme, like “journalistic” and “media”. After some preliminary research, we decided to exclude the term “media”, as it was very often linked to “social media”, which took us away from focusing on journalism. Also, a term that could be

related to the topic was “wellness”, but as we just found the term linked to other subject areas, it was also excluded.

The final search query included combinations of the following terms in titles or abstracts:

- (“well-being” AND “journalis*”)
- (“mental health” AND “journalis*”)
- (“mental illness” AND “journalis*”)

Only journal articles written in English, published between 2000 and 2024, were considered.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

The eligibility of articles was assessed using a clearly defined protocol, presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Study’s inclusion and exclusion criteria

Inclusion criteria	Databases: Scopus and Web of Science In keywords or abstracts: (“Well-being” and “journalism”); (“mental health” and “journalism”); (“wellness” and “journalism”); (“mental illness and journalism”); (“Well-being” and “journalistic”); (“mental health” and “journalistic”); (“wellness” and “journalistic”); (“mental illness” and “journalistic”) Language: English Type: Articles Period: between 2000 and 2024 All fields of research Related to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Journalists’ perceptions of their well-being and mental health • How work affects journalists’ well-being and mental health
Exclusion criteria	Book chapters; other languages than English; duplicated. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Related to well-being and mental health of audiences. • Not directly on mental illness among journalists. • Not related to journalists. • Related to social media.

Selection and Screening Process

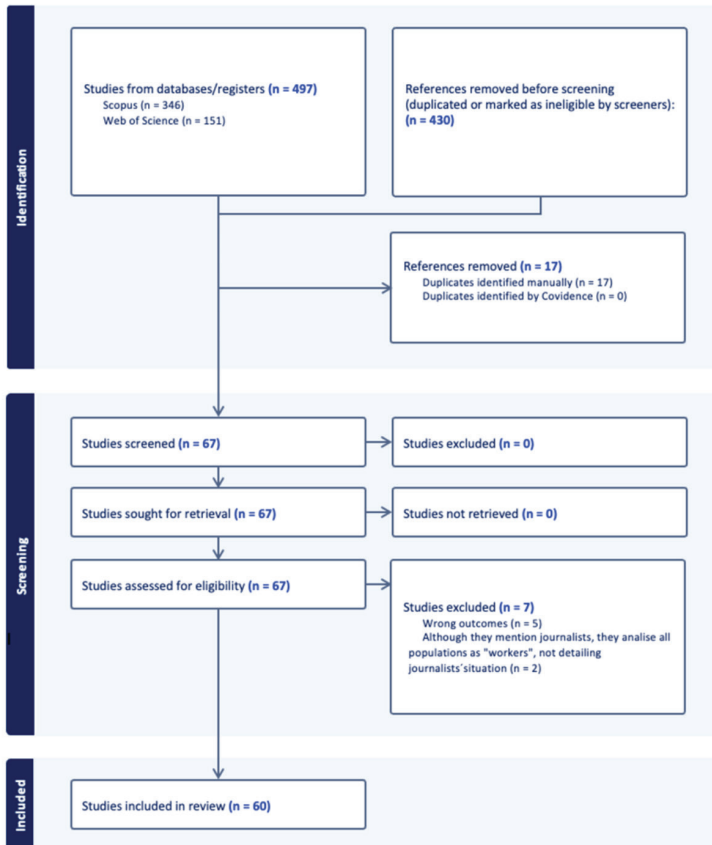
An initial search yielded 497 articles: 346 from Scopus, 151 from Web of Science. The first reviewer screened all records, removing duplicates and titles clearly unrelated to the research topic. The second reviewer independently reviewed the remaining abstracts according to the inclusion and exclusion criteria. No disagreements emerged between reviewers. Articles that merely examined news content or audience reactions were excluded unless they explicitly addressed journalists’ own experiences of mental health or well-being.

A total of 67 articles were deemed potentially eligible and were read in full by both reviewers. The Covidence software was used to facilitate full-text screening and data extraction. After full review, seven articles were excluded: five for focusing on irrelevant outcomes (e.g., coverage of mental illness, not journalists themselves); two for targeting the wrong population (e.g., articles where journalism was mentioned but not central).

The final sample included 60 peer-reviewed articles, published in English between 2000 and 2024. A customized data extraction template was developed to capture key variables for analysis, aligned with the research questions.

Figure 1 (PRISMA flow diagram) provides a visual summary of the review process.

Figure 1: Prisma flow diagram



4. FINDINGS

This section presents the main findings of the systematic literature review, based on a final corpus of 60 peer-reviewed English-language articles published between 2000 and 2024. While the selection process followed PRISMA guidelines to ensure transparency and replicability, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of the dataset. The review focused on articles explicitly referencing the terms “journalism” and either “well-being,” “mental health,” or “mental illness” in their titles, abstracts, or keywords, which may have excluded studies approaching these issues through different conceptual frameworks or terminologies. Furthermore, by relying exclusively on Scopus and Web of Science, the analysis privileges scholarship indexed in major international databases, with an inherent bias toward Global North academic production and publications in English. As such, this review does not claim to provide an exhaustive account of all existing research on journalists’ mental health and well-being. Instead, it offers a thematically organized synthesis of a representative but partial body of literature—one that allows for the identification of recurring patterns, key debates, and persistent blind spots in how these issues have been studied over the past two decades.

4.1. Mapping the Corpus: temporal and geographical profiles

Findings reveal a clear evolution in the academic engagement with the concepts of “well-being,” “mental health,” and “mental illness” in journalism between 2000 and 2024, marked by three distinct phases. The early years (2000–2015) were characterized by sparse output, with only 1 to 2 publications per year and no studies identified in 2000 or 2001. The first relevant contribution (Feinstein et al., 2002) examined the psychological impact of war reporting, demonstrating that war correspondents exhibited higher levels of PTSD and other psychopathologies compared to their peers.

A moderate increase occurred between 2016 and 2020, with a growing number of publications (2–3 per year) reflecting the gradual recognition of mental health as a relevant issue within journalism studies. However, a dramatic shift is observed in the pandemic and post-pandemic period (2020–2024): while only 12 publications were identified before 2020, that number grew to 48 articles between 2020 and 2024: six in 2020, six in 2021, nine in 2022, 14 in 2023 and 13 in 2024. This surge cannot be attributed solely to the pandemic but rather suggests that COVID-19 acted as a catalyst for a lasting expansion of interest in journalists’ mental health and well-being. Notably, many articles published after 2020, even if not directly addressing COVID-19, reflect a heightened awareness of mental health in the profession.

The geographical distribution of researchers (considering the affiliations of first authors and not their nationalities) shows the Anglo-American sphere's clear dominance, with the United States leading (15 contributions), followed by the United Kingdom (7 contributions), Canada (6 contributions), and Australia (5 contributions). However, the research landscape is not monolithic, as contributions also emerge from other geographical locations: Austria, Finland, Netherlands, Norway and Malta (2 contributions each) and Germany, Greece, Portugal, Belgium, Estonia, Lithuania, Macedonia and Sweden (1 each) in Europe; Ecuador, Colombia and Mexico (1 each) in South-America; India and Pakistan (2 each), Malaysia and Philippines (1 each) in South-Pacific. The author with the most articles published is Anthony Feinstein, professor of psychiatry at the University of Toronto and a neuropsychiatrist, with work published in 2002 (the first article of this corpus), 2012 and 2013.

In terms of publication venues, UK-based journals dominate the field, accounting for 39 of the 60 publications analysed, followed by journals based in the United States (7), Australia (3), Portugal (2), and Switzerland (2). This distribution reflects not only academic leadership from the UK but also a structural bias toward English-language publishing, which limits visibility for scholarship produced in other languages.

4.2. Overall use of well-being, mental health and mental illness as key concepts

Overall use of concepts

Findings show that the concept of well-being is mentioned in only five of the 60 articles. It is generally treated as an umbrella term that encompasses multiple life dimensions, including both personal and professional spheres, in line with the definition from the World Health Organization. Instead of being explicitly defined, the term is often operationalized indirectly through its association with related variables, such as job satisfaction, resilience, and emotional distress, within the research. Among the five definitions found, the first appears in the study by Simunjak & Menke (2022), where the authors adopt the notion of “workplace well-being.” Drawing from prior literature, they define it as encompassing “physical, psychological and social elements, referring to physical and mental health combined with satisfaction with social networks, processes and practices in the workplace” (p. 2477).

From a psychological perspective, Idås & Backholm (2023) introduce a distinction between “hedonic” and “eudaimonic” well-being: the former relates to pleasure, comfort, and enjoyment in life, while the latter refers to

self-realization, autonomy, and personal growth. This dual framework reflects a broader trend in well-being studies, distinguishing between short-term positive affect and long-term fulfilment. A similar conceptualization appears in Lees (2024), who, in her study on cooperativism in journalism, describes workers' well-being as a state of being "healthy and self-fulfilled, with time and resources to enjoy a private life"—again grounding her approach in prior research.

Deuze (2023) is the only author to define either well-being and mental health and also bring the term mental illness to discussion. Explaining they are quite different concepts, he argues: "Whereas a mental health problem is quite specific and involves affect, frustration and anxiety as much as physiological indicators such as blood pressure, heart condition and general physical health, well-being is an all-encompassing concept including non-work elements, life satisfaction, the feeling that what you do is worthwhile, happiness and (social) safety" (p.18). Deuze also elaborates it, indicating that the absence of mental illness does not mean good mental health or well-being and arguing the opposite: a person diagnosed with a mental health problem can still have a feeling of well-being. In other words, the author argues that having a reduced sense of well-being typically paves the way for stress and various adverse consequences.

The concept of mental health appears in 49 of the 60 studies, increasingly being framed as an essential component of overall health, with coverage evolving from purely clinical or medical perspectives to more nuanced discussions incorporating social, cultural, and environmental factors. This shift reflects a growing understanding of mental health as something that affects everyone, not just those diagnosed with specific conditions, the starting point to change a taboo that is still present in some cultures. Shah et al. (2020) described this constraint in her article about trauma exposure among regional Pakistan journalists: "Mental health is not considered a serious health issue" (p.402). According to the authors, the professionals might not even know they experience PTSD problems and refuse to express it to avoid shaming in their communities.

The concept of mental illness appears in nine articles and is defined in Pearson (2011) using as source the Queensland's law (Australia). It is used in these articles within broader social and structural contexts. Other terms related to these are also used in the papers, like "psychological well-being", "mental well-being", "occupational well-being" in many studies. The expressions are increasingly being discussed in a broader conversation about psychological and social welfare. As we can conclude from the temporal analysis, earlier studies in the dataset tend to treat them as separate domains. At the same time, more recent research shows a trend toward more

integrated understanding, though the geographical aspect also matters in how the concepts are discussed, as we mentioned before.

4.3. *Dominant themes and thematic gaps*

Although the first article relating to journalism and well-being or mental health identified in this review dates to 2011 (Pearson, 2011), it does not directly address journalists' psychological conditions. Instead, the focus lies on developing resources for investigative journalists to understand regulatory frameworks and mental health policies—thus highlighting how the concern with journalists' own well-being remained peripheral until the late 2010s. The first article to explicitly address mental health in journalism within a communication studies framework only appeared in 2019 (McCaffrey, 2019), signalling how recently this topic entered the media research agenda.

Between 2000 and 2018, the dominant framing of mental health was largely clinical, drawing from medical or psychological perspectives. Studies from this period often focused on pathologies or diagnostic risks, including the mental health of war correspondents (Feinstein et al., 2002), the risk of post-traumatic stress disorder (Greenberg et al., 2009), and the impact of covering traumatic beats such as drug-related stories (Feinstein, 2012, 2013). Even when located in communication journals, these works tended to borrow heavily from health sciences, emphasizing exposure to trauma over structural or occupational factors.

Starting in 2019, a clearer research agenda begins to emerge within journalism and communication studies. Our analysis reveals three dominant thematic clusters.

- Trauma reporting and its psychological impact: Several studies focus on the consequences of covering traumatic events or crises, often drawing from psychological frameworks. These include both long-term exposure (such as war or conflict reporting) and acute incidents (mass shootings, natural disasters, etc.), with emphasis on PTSD symptoms, emotional exhaustion, or moral injury (Seely, 2019; Petersen & Soundarajan, 2020; Martin & Murrell, 2020).
- Occupational insecurity and digital disruption: A second cluster addresses how media industry transformations—particularly job losses, precarious employment, and the erosion of editorial autonomy—negatively affect journalists' well-being. Studies in this category also explore the pressures of adapting to digital environments, including multitasking, metrics-driven performance, and diminished social support within shrinking newsrooms (Ricketson, 2020; Malcorps et al., 2022). These structural conditions are increasing-

ly understood as key drivers of emotional fatigue and professional burnout.

- COVID-19 as an accelerant and turning point: The pandemic functions as a watershed moment in the literature. Not only did it intensify pre-existing pressures (remote work, job instability, online harassment), but it also expanded the scope of inquiry. Studies published after 2020 explore how journalists adapted emotionally and professionally to the crisis, shedding light on coping mechanisms, institutional responses, and emerging discourses of care (Bernadas, 2020; Hoak, 2021; Espinel-Rubio, 2021; Miller & Kocan, 2022; Backholm & Idås, 2022; Reyna, 2023). The pandemic thus marks a shift toward more holistic, workplace-centred approaches to mental health and well-being in journalism.

This thematic evolution suggests a maturing research field, moving from clinically oriented case studies toward broader, interdisciplinary analyses that link emotional experiences to structural and cultural contexts. Yet, as further discussed below, significant gaps remain in addressing institutional responses, systemic change, and the development of practical tools for newsroom support.

Table 2: Research goals and fields (main trends) N= 60

Research Approach	Research field 1: Medical (Psychiatry, Public Health)	Research field 2: Business, Economics and Career Development)	Research field 3: Media and Journalism (and Social Sciences)	Periods			Total of articles
				2000-2010	2011-2019	2020-2024	
Nature of journalist's work and ethos and impact on their mental health and well-being	8	2	12	3	7	12	22
Media crisis, digital evolution or organizational culture and its impact on journalists' mental health and well-being	1	1	13		1	14	15
Impact of Covid-19	1	0	10	0	0	11	11
Strategies to safeguard journalists' well-being and other issues*	0	0	12	0	1	11	12

Alongside these core clusters, several studies have explored adjacent but underexamined themes. These include journalism students' preparedness for hostile environments and harassment (Mesmer, 2023), journalists' trauma literacy and emotional readiness (Shilpa et al., 2023), and the availability of resources to support journalists covering mental health issues (Pearson, 2011). Such topics suggest an emerging concern with how emotional challenges are taught, anticipated, and mediated across the professional lifecycle.

Despite this growing awareness, studies offering concrete strategies to foster mental resilience or well-being among journalists remain rare. Only five articles in the corpus propose or evaluate interventions. Pearson (2021) examines how mindfulness-based practices can support resilience and emotional regulation. Ivask et al. (2023) analyse coping strategies in hostile reporting environments, while Martin & Murrell (2020) assess journalists' attitudes toward resilience training. Shah & Shah (2024) offer a set of recommendations for well-being safeguards, and Šimunjak & Menke (2022) evaluate organizational support systems in newsrooms. Although these contributions mark an important shift from diagnosis to response, they remain isolated efforts within a still-fragmented field.

Taken together, the dominant themes in this body of literature reflect a gradual reorientation—from trauma-centred analysis to broader investigations of institutional, pedagogical, and emotional dimensions of journalistic work. However, as discussed next, significant conceptual and structural gaps persist.

Corpus dimensions and profile

Academic research has focused so far in a variety of population, but it is possible to identify certain patterns: journalists from specific territories, such as Scandinavian (Burke & Fiksenbaum, 2008; Backholm & Idås, 2022; Englund et al., 2023), Indian (Banerjee & Kumar, 2024), Latin-American (Espinell-Rubio, 2021; Feinstein, 2012) and American (Holton et al., 2023; Mesmer, 2023; Perreault, 2024); a focus on journalists covering trauma-related events, like war journalists (Feinstein et al., 2002; Feinstein, 2013) or media professionals who covered Covid-19. Some studies address women journalists specifically in the context of work-life balance (Hamid et al., 2024). Cross-countries corpus are residual.

Methods

The most used methods are the interviews (23 in 60) and the surveys or self-reported questionnaires (22 in 60) or a combination of the two, consistent with the most frequent research goals.

4.4. Conceptual, geographical, and structural gaps

Despite a visible expansion in research on journalism and mental health since 2020, our systematic review highlights several persistent and significant gaps that limit the consolidation of the field.

First, conceptual ambiguity continues to hinder theoretical coherence. As shown in Section 4.2, only a small fraction of the studies offers explicit definitions of “well-being,” “mental health,” or “mental illness.” Most employ these terms implicitly, without clarifying their scope, dimensions, or interrelations. This lack of conceptual clarity weakens comparative analysis and hampers the development of shared frameworks across studies.

Second, the geographical scope of the literature remains highly skewed. Anglo-American countries—particularly the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia—dominate both authorship and publication venues. While there are encouraging signs of diversification, such as emerging studies from Latin America and Southeast Asia, systematic regional perspectives remain rare. Little is known about how structural conditions, cultural taboos, or labour regimes shape journalists’ well-being in non-Western contexts.

Third, structural and organizational dimensions are under-theorized. Most research remains focused on individual symptoms, experiences, or coping strategies, often drawing on psychological or trauma frameworks. Far fewer studies explore institutional interventions, newsroom policies, or professional cultures that might reduce emotional distress or prevent mental health problems. Issues such as union advocacy, editorial leadership, and human resources practices are notably absent from the conversation.

Fourth, the field lacks longitudinal and comparative designs. Most studies offer snapshot analyses or isolated case studies. There is a need for cross-national comparisons, sectoral differences (e.g., freelancers vs. salaried journalists), and longitudinal research that tracks mental health outcomes over time and in relation to workplace change or global crises such as COVID-19.

Finally, there is limited engagement with solutions-oriented approaches. As seen in Section 4.3, only a handful of studies propose or evaluate interventions, and few assess their impact. This leaves a gap between diagnosis and action—a gap that must be addressed if research is to inform policies that meaningfully support journalists’ well-being.

Taken together, these gaps suggest a field in urgent need of greater conceptual precision, geographic diversification, structural analysis, and practical application. The next section discusses how future research might address these shortcomings and contribute to a more sustainable and inclusive journalism culture.

5. KEY FINDINGS AND CONTRIBUTIONS

This systematic literature review sought to map and critically assess how the academic field has approached the relationship between journalism, mental health, and well-being over the past two decades, in response to two guiding questions: (RQ1) How have academic studies defined and explored the concepts of “well-being,” “mental health,” and “mental illness” in journalism? (RQ2) What are the dominant themes, findings, and persistent gaps in this body of research?

The findings confirm a strong correlation between the specific nature of journalistic routines and elevated risks of mental health issues. For instance, Aoki et al. (2013) demonstrate that journalists exhibit a higher prevalence of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) compared to the general population, especially those frequently exposed to traumatic reporting (Seely, 2019). During the pandemic, negative emotional states such as anxiety, burnout, and loneliness were widely reported among journalists (Backholm & Idås, 2022), reinforcing the view that journalism places unique and compounding psychological pressures on its practitioners.

A major contribution of this review is the identification of a post-pandemic discursive shift. While early studies (2000–2015) primarily adopted a clinical or trauma-oriented lens, focusing on war correspondents or crisis reporters (e.g., Feinstein, 2002; Greenberg, 2009), more recent scholarship has taken a broader and more holistic perspective on occupational health, incorporating structural and organizational dimensions. Research now increasingly acknowledges that mental health risks are not limited to high-stress events but are embedded in everyday working conditions, such as 24/7 news cycles, job precarity, digital pressures, and online harassment (Šimunjak & Menke, 2022; Osmann et al., 2021). This evolution in focus reflects a wider cultural and academic awareness that journalists’ well-being is a systemic and ethical concern.

Another key finding relates to the lack of structural responses from media organizations, a topic consistently under-addressed in the literature. Studies show that journalists often lack institutional mechanisms for emotional support, especially in smaller newsrooms or freelance contexts. For example, De Jong & Kotišová (2024) document that investigative journalists frequently operate under unsafe and unsupported conditions, leading to burnout and sleep disorders. Similarly, Holton et al. (2021) report that organizational interventions to prevent or address harassment are rare, while Shah et al. (2024) emphasize how economic fragility in small-market media exacerbates emotional distress.

Despite the growing visibility of the topic, few articles propose actionable interventions. Only a handful of studies explore resilience-building strategies or workplace innovations, such as mindfulness practices (Pearson, 2021), coping mechanisms for harassment (Ivask et al., 2023), or leadership support models (Simunjak & Menke, 2022). This reinforces the finding that the field remains largely diagnostic rather than solution-oriented, with limited attention to preventive frameworks or long-term policy change.

The review also clarifies the conceptual terrain, revealing how “well-being” is often used as an umbrella term without precise definitions. Only a few authors (e.g., Deuze, 2023; Lees, 2024) explicitly distinguish well-being from mental health or mental illness, and even fewer consider eudaimonic dimensions such as purpose, autonomy, and professional fulfillment. Similarly, the term “mental illness” is often implied rather than defined, leaving critical gaps in understanding how stigma or clinical realities are addressed within journalistic contexts.

In sum, this review contributes to the field by systematizing a fragmented research agenda, highlighting both the conceptual ambiguities and empirical blind spots that hinder a comprehensive understanding of journalists' mental health. It affirms that emotions and emotional labor are not marginal, but central to understanding professional sustainability in journalism, especially when viewed through the lens of well-being.

6. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH PATHWAYS

This systematic literature review examined how academic research has approached the relationship between journalism, well-being, mental health, and mental illness between 2000 and 2024. Guided by two research questions, concerning the conceptual framing and thematic priorities of this scholarship, the analysis revealed that, although the field has grown significantly in recent years, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic, it remains marked by conceptual fragmentation and a limited focus on structural change.

The findings show a notable shift from early studies centred on trauma—such as post-traumatic stress among war correspondents—to broader concerns with burnout, emotional labour, job insecurity, and the chronic strain of digital acceleration. Despite this progress, the concepts of “well-being,” “mental health,” and “mental illness” are still rarely defined explicitly, and often treated as interchangeable. Furthermore, only a small portion of the literature offers actionable strategies or institutional responses to support journalists' mental health, revealing a significant gap in solution-oriented research.

This review contributes to the field by providing a structured synthesis of 60 peer-reviewed articles, mapping dominant research clusters, surfacing conceptual tensions, and highlighting key omissions. It identifies four major thematic axes—trauma and stress, media crises and job precarity, COVID-19 impact, and organizational support—while pointing to the underrepresentation of studies that take a preventive, interdisciplinary, or systems-based approach.

Several limitations must be acknowledged. The review was restricted to English-language articles, potentially excluding valuable perspectives from other linguistic and cultural contexts.

Looking ahead, future research should move beyond problem identification toward intervention and innovation. There is a pressing need for empirical studies that assess the effectiveness of support mechanisms—such as peer networks, training programs, and organizational safeguards—in promoting resilience and well-being. Comparative, cross-national research could further illuminate how cultural, economic, and institutional differences shape journalists' mental health. Finally, integrating perspectives from psychology, sociology, media studies, and labor studies may foster a more holistic and transformative research agenda.

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Funding

This work is funded by national funds through the FCT – Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia, I.P., in the scope of the projects UID/5021/2025 and 2022.10162.BD.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the reviewers and editors for the constructive feedback. The authors gratefully acknowledge the financial support of FCT – Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia, I.P., in the scope of the projects UID/5021/2025 and 2022.10162.BD.

Conflict of interest statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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