

Towards the individuated journalistic worker in pandemic times: Reflections from Greece and Cyprus

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Abstract

Drawing on a comparative qualitative analysis using semi-structured interviews, this study examines the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on journalists' working conditions and practices in Greece and Cyprus. The findings provide empirical evidence that the crisis had a significant impact on journalistic work: changing patterns in labour conditions, advancing the role of the individuated worker; cumulating levels of professional risks and stress; increasing insecurity and pressures in the sector – aspects that undermine journalism capacity to offer useful information needed for an informed and engaged citizenry. Still, these changes in both countries are not solely driven by the pandemic situation. Rather the recent crisis seems to have deepened structural pathologies of journalism in both Greece and Cyprus, including sustainability issues intensified by the recent economic crisis, the lack of a strong professional culture that makes journalism vulnerable to political pressures, as well as dependences and deficiencies in interacting with new technologies.

Keywords

COVID-19 crisis, Cyprus, Greece, journalism, journalistic labour, precarity

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Introduction

Changes in the structural arrangements of journalistic labour have been on the centre of journalism studies the last decades, mainly due to rapidly changing technologies and the nature of journalistic work itself, which seem to present profound implications for the future of journalism practice. Örnebring (2010), drawing on a historical analysis of journalism as labour, evaluated specific themes for its analysis, reflecting on the separation of conception and execution of labour, the increased differentiation of the labour process, the use of technology to increase productivity, and the deskilling of labour. In recent years, the pandemic has set further challenges on the media industry and journalistic profession in this regard, asking for the (re-)evaluation of the relevant aspects, processes and practices. Quandt and Wahl-Jorgensen (2021) address COVID-19 crisis as a ‘critical incident’ for journalism due to its severe and global nature, which ‘may serve as a change in direction of ongoing developments, or as a full reversal of strategies based on a reconsideration in light of the altered situation’ (p. 1201). In any case, the historical context, local contingencies and particular aspects of national journalistic cultures (Weaver, 1998) are critical issues for understanding these developments, affecting them in different ways.

Several studies focus, among others, on the effects of the crisis on journalism, emphasizing challenges to press freedom (Papadopoulou and Maniou, 2021), the ways in which legacy and/or social media covered the crisis (Quandt and Wahl-Jorgensen, 2021) and news consumption practices (Spyridou and Danezis, 2022). The present work goes one step further and aims to examine the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on journalists’ working conditions and practices. To research these issues, it draws on a comparative qualitative analysis between two countries of the European South, Greece and Cyprus. Using semi-structured interviews, the analysis elaborates into journalists’ lived experiences (Adams 2015) with the COVID-19 crisis, gaining in-depth insights and information in reference to the reconfiguration of labour conditions and their impact on journalistic performance in Greece and Cyprus.

Journalistic labour and performance

A series of studies have sketched the conceptual framework for assessing the context of journalistic labour. The issues of the changing nature of the cultural/creative work and employment are at the centre of this discussion. Deuze (2007) points out the flexibilization of labour and the subsequent shift towards the precarious model of freelancing and the individual newsworker as characteristic of media work. From this perspective, Deuze (2009) argues that journalism studies need to engage with these trends and developments that along with the contribution of technology reshape journalists’ ways of working – the ‘evolving workstyles of journalists’.

From a Marxist political economy perspective, Cohen (2012) draws on the conditions of cultural work and evaluates the exploitation in labour-capital relationships as the key dynamic of transforming media industry and journalists’ experiences, and thus a prominent site of struggle. Probing into the ways labour conditions in (online) journalism

are changing, Paulussen points out, among others, the ‘growth of atypical, non-standard employment within the profession of journalism’, the ‘growing demand for functional flexibility and multiskilling’, and ‘an ever-increasing workload, which requires more temporal flexibility from the workforce’ (2012: 195). Accordingly, Spyridou and Veglis, reflecting on convergence strategies, argue that relevant changes have led to multiskilling, towards a ‘super journalist paradigm’, where journalists are expected to possess multiple kinds of expertise and knowledge, work hard and perform well. Expectations that have to be met within a wider disorganization of news labour market, characterized by ‘non-standard employment, reduced economic rewards, functional flexibility and desk-journalism’ (2016: 111).

The rapid changes in the news industry and labour conditions clearly point to the increased precarity in journalism. Örnebring (2018), using a cross-national sample, shows that journalists are ‘primed for precarity’, accepting it as a natural part of journalism practice, as seems to be in line with professional norms like entrepreneurship and meritocracy. At the same time, the digitalization of journalistic labour shifts the boundaries of news work, raising a number of issues – journalists have to produce more over longer hours, participating in additional, unpaid digital labour – while it ‘further tilte [s] the balance of power in favour of news organizations’ (Hayes, 2021: 51). In this context, the way journalists experience these processes, in a climate of insecurity, and their effects on professional identity and journalism practice is a matter of discussion. Although there have been alternative perspectives arguing that the culture of job insecurity in news industry has a limiting effect in journalism (Ekdale et al., 2015) most studies point otherwise. Gollmitzer (2014) assesses the accumulative role of contingent labour in news industry, researching the working conditions of journalists in non-standard employment situations, and shows that journalists quickly internalize job insecurity and see no option to improve their situation. In addition, studies on the impact of job loss on journalists indicate that professional identity is more closely linked to journalism work context and the loss of institutional legitimacy has further consequences for journalism practice (Sherwood and O’Donnell, 2016).

Researching what is like to work on the media, Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011) point out, among other conditions and experiences of workers, the affective labour. A growing number of scholars have studied the notion of affective labour in journalism, as encompassing emotional, material and immaterial attributes while employing a range of skills (Siapera, 2019). In their study on freelance journalists who create and maintain social networks of readers through social media platforms, Siapera and Iliadi shed light on three elements of affective labour – ‘the investment of one’s “authentic” self, the investment of personal time, and the investment of care’ (2015: 86), setting further challenges for the journalistic work in relation to the separation of the self/journalist from its labour. Adding to all these, the economic crisis of 2008 seems to have generated a sense of burden for many media professionals around the world, who report feelings of disconnection, dissatisfaction, anxiety and insecurity (Papadopoulou and Maniou, 2020), due to the changing conditions of their occupation. At the same time, the coverage of specific news beats – i.e., related to the effects of the economic crisis – seems to have

caused trauma to media professionals (Papadopoulou et al., 2022) often similar to PTSD syndrome when covering war and/or terrorist attacks.

A public health crisis of the magnitude and uncertainty of COVID-19 demands reliable and accurate information. People depend on the media to understand the disease, be aware of measures and organize their everyday lives. Understandably, media reporting ‘plays a key role in the perception, management, and even creation of the crisis’ (Pajnik and Hrženjak, 2022: 1). In this context, normative positions that journalism must provide accurate and trustworthy information, monitor the state and other powerful interests in society, explain and analyse what is happening and why, provide a forum for debate and deliberation (Schudson, 2008), do have a place in the discussion as they provide a solid basis for critique to assess the performance of journalism (Kreiss and Brennen, 2016). Amidst diminishing accountability levels all over the world (Freedom House, 2020) and a massive ‘infodemic’ surrounding COVID-19, journalism’s efforts and ability to search for the truth and communicate it to the public, not only positions professional journalism strongly within society but also cuts to the very core of journalism to hold power to account and serve the public interest (Luengo and García-Marín, 2020).

Journalism, media markets and the pandemic challenges

By and large, the global pandemic is seen as a “supercharger” of the above-mentioned emerging trends and developments in journalistic work. From the outset, the COVID-19 crisis resulted in radical restructuring of the work processes in media organizations, due to lockdowns and work restrictions, which have significantly altered labour conditions in the industry.

Recent studies in the field show that the economic side-effects of the crisis have decisively re-shaped the news media environment (Posetti et al., 2020), adding to an already disrupted market severely affected by the demise of the traditional advertising model and the wider challenges posed by digitalisation and new media technologies (Miranda et al., 2021; Hanusch, 2022). Although not all national media markets were affected at the same level due to their pre-existing socio-economic status (Nielsen et al., 2020; Bleyer-Simon and Nenadic, 2021), the widespread use of public support programs all over the EU at first place mitigated the impact of the economic turndown on unemployment, though with a reduction in salaries or in working hours; still, it felt short of covering all the journalists (freelancers and journalists with non-standard contracts) and there is need to reduce the high risk of precariousness and vulnerability for the next generation of journalists (Carlini and Bleyer-Simon, 2021: 21).

Far beyond the immediate economic impact of the COVID-19 crisis, much more challenging effects seem to be transforming journalistic labour. Many studies highlight how the pandemic context has led to the disruption of journalists’ everyday lives, the domiciliation of traditional workplaces and the dependence on tools for long-distance communication, along with the depersonalization of contact with sources and events (Miranda et al., 2021). All these conditions point to adverse effects on the democratic role of journalism (Casero-Ripollés, 2021), jeopardizing journalists’ ability to fulfil their responsibility to society (Perreault and Perreault, 2021). From structural effects on

democratic procedures (i.e., elections and voting) (Coll, 2022) to the need for more critical reporting about work and the questioning of assumptions that sustain neoliberalism (Creech and Maddox, 2022), the global pandemic sets further issues at stake regarding journalism's capacity to cater effectively for an informed citizenry.

Against this background, the present study probes into the ways the pandemic has (re) shaped labour conditions, and its ramifications on journalists' strive to achieve their civic duties. To reflect on these aspects, in a moment of significant importance that reassesses the past, present and future (Laws, 2020) of journalism, a sociocultural understanding of the specific economic, political and technological contexts is needed. Through this prism, the study draws on the Greek and Greek-Cypriot news media as case-studies, adding to comparative studies on the field (Kodellas et al., 2014; Papadopoulou et al., 2022).

Greece and Cyprus are two countries that had been severely hit before COVID-19's outbreak, by the economic crisis of 2008, and this had a great negative impact on their media markets and journalism (Papathanassopoulos et al., 2021; Skamnakis, 2018; Maniou and Photiou, 2017). The Greek media system is characterized by the 'communication paradox' of a small market where supply exceeds demand (Bakounakis and Papathanassopoulos, 2010) and commercial media traditionally dominate the field (Papathanassopoulos 1999). Besides, the interplay between media and political/economic elites (who use the media as an effective means to serve business interests and exert pressure on political actors), been reflected on a weak journalism culture lacking or under-addressing core principles of the journalistic profession, is a dominant trait of the Greek case (Papathanassopoulos, 2001). During the last decade, online and digital media have proliferated and established themselves, along with projects of 'alternative professional journalism', developing alternative economic models and/or characterized by a collaborative organization and ethos (Vatikiotis and Milioni, 2019). The Greek-Cypriot media system is a small, fragmented media market deeply affected by the country's low pace development throughout the 21st century with narrow margins for growth and technological development. It follows the same path in terms of the interrelation between media and politics. As regards the journalistic profession, it presents similar weaknesses to Greece derived mainly from the country's turbulent history (Christophorou et al., 2010; Maniou, 2017; Sahin, 2022) and severe commercial pressures and limitations (Christophorou and Spyridou, 2016).

The COVID-19 crisis added further challenges. According to the *Media Pluralism Monitor* (2022) reports, the risks for media pluralism in both countries have increased, along with the precariousness of journalistic work (Christophorou and Karides, 2022; Papadopoulou 2022). Also, state support (in the form of various subsidies) to news organizations during the lockdown in order to sustain their business (especially to newspapers) added extra pressure to the already controversial issue of the interplay between media and political power. In Greece, particularly, the allocation of 20 million euros to media outlets through the campaign "We stay at home" carrying public health messages and aiming to mitigate the considerable decline of advertising revenue, raised serious allegations for government discrimination.

Method

This study examines the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the journalistic profession; the data were collected as a part of the broader international research project on *Risk Journalism*.¹

Drawing on a comparative analysis between Greece and Cyprus, the study researches how the pandemic (re)shaped labour conditions of journalists working in the two countries (RQ), and reflects on their implications for journalistic performance and civic duty.

In order to explore the reconfiguration of labour conditions in Greece and Cyprus, a total of 30 semi-structured interviews (18 in Greece and 12 in Cyprus) with journalists working “on the frontline” during the COVID-19 crisis were obtained so as to elaborate into journalists’ experiences. We chose full-time professionals in order to assess the views and experiences of journalists who are supposedly enjoying the benefits of full-time employment and are not subjected to the usual precarity and constraints of a part-time job, and they have a better grasp of potential labour challenges and changes within their news organisations and the industry in general. This method is useful for gaining in-depth insights and subjective information that cannot be gleaned from other sources (see analysis in [MacDonald et al., 2013](#)). The use of semi-structured interviews in this study offers the opportunity for deep understanding and allows for insights into the journalists’ lived experiences ([Adams, 2015](#)) concerning the consequences of pandemic conditions on their profession. Additionally, in-depth interviews allow researchers to gather information and uncover the vocabulary of a particular cultural group (in this case of journalists) ([Hinnant et al., 2016](#)).

Interviewees were selected using personal contacts and snowball sampling, a method widely used in qualitative research which assists researchers to enrich sampling clusters, and access new participants ([Noy, 2008](#)). The participants consisted of professional journalists working for print, broadcast and online media in the two countries. Around one-third of journalists from each country worked mainly in print media, one-third in broadcast media and one-third in online (both legacy and digital-born) media ([Table 1](#)). The Greek sample included both mainstream and alternative professional news outlets (digital-born) in order for the sample to be representative of the country’s mediascape as the latter comprise a small but significant niche market (see [Kalogeropoulos, 2023](#)). The Greek-Cypriot sample consists solely of mainstream news outlets as there are no alternative ones in the respective media landscape. As it concerns the professional experience of the interviewees, one-third of the journalists from each country were early-career professionals (fewer than 5 years in the occupation), one-third were mid-career professionals (5–15 years) and one-third late-career professionals (working for more than 15 years).²

Questions covered the following aspects: the impact of the pandemic on daily work, professional challenges participants encountered working during the pandemic, the use of new technologies, reflections on the disruption of work practices, as well as journalists’ assessment of their profession in terms of salaries, security and the prospects of

Table 1. Sample of the study.

Greece (18 interviews)	Cyprus (12 interviews)
4 national newspapers	3 national newspapers
4 TV stations (3 private, 1 public)	2 TV stations (2 private, 1 public)
3 radio stations	2 radio stations
6 online news outlets (2 digital-born, alternative professional news outlets)	4 online news outlets
1 national news agency	1 national news agency

development, probing further into perceptions of their role, in both countries (Dimitrakopoulou, 2017; Milioni, 2017).

Interviewees provided their consent to participate after being informed about the aims of the project and the conditions of their participation. They were guaranteed voluntary participation and withdrawal from the project at any stage. Interviews were conducted, in the native language of the interviewees (Greek), between June and November 2021, and they lasted between 40 min and 1 hour each. Data is anonymized throughout the analysis. The interviews were analysed using an iterative qualitative process. Thematic analysis is used here to identify and analyse patterns of themes within data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Initially researchers worked separately, transcribing and translating the material; then, by reading the interviews multiple times, they identified themes emerging from the data. Then working together, the researchers reviewed, discussed and finalised the themes. From there on the researchers proceeded with a thematic analysis of issues that emerged from the interviews, presented from a comparative angle.

Findings and analysis

The main themes that emerged along the comparative analysis on Greece and Cyprus in reference to the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on journalists' employment and their performance, have been identified as: (a) levels and sources of risks and stress on journalists; (b) media labour and working conditions; (c) professional performance and pressures/dependencies. Delving into the interviewees' experiences and perceptions across these areas, the study points out challenges and limitations encountered by journalists in Greece and Cyprus during the pandemic.

Level and sources of risks and stress on journalists

The changed working patterns introduced by the pandemic led to a disruption of journalists' everyday lives, including risks and stresses they faced during the lockdown processes in specific, showing that risk became increasingly individualized. The re-configuration of the labour context due to COVID-19 crisis transformed journalists' workspace and practices in both countries, making journalists feel 'isolated', 'tired' and 'stressed' (Int.1, m-c, Greece; Int.5, l-c, Cyprus). In some cases, particularly for the

high-risk groups, absence from the workplace was traumatic, causing feelings of anxiety and disconnection.

Some of our colleagues who belonged to vulnerable groups were forced to go home for a while, and they found this to be traumatic, because they knew that thousands of things were happening and they wanted to be here, to work, to participate (Int.2, m-c, Greece).

As for the extent to what journalists were supported by their employers/media organizations during the pandemic, most of the participants indicate that media companies followed the COVID-19 hygienic protocol; still, it is argued that other than this no special support, mental and/or professional, was provided in either country. In the case of Cyprus, participants noted that issues of inadequate safety in the working environment resulted in the transferring of responsibility to the individual professional - 'it was up to each one of us to take most measures' (Int.1, m-c, Cyprus). Besides inadequate safety measures, a few journalists in Greece pointed out the discriminatory manner in which they were treated when recovering from COVID-19. 'When I got sick too, I got targeted a lot [...]. The way I was harassed in that job made me quit in the end; (Int.8, m-c, Greece). Also, the transition from the offline to the online environment proved demanding enough for the majority of interviewees, who highlight the lack of interaction as a key problem. 'You lose contact with your own colleagues, and colleagues from the rest of the industry as well, and this personal contact is the most valuable thing in journalism' (Int.6, e-c, Cyprus). Isolation reduced cooperation and teamwork (fewer opportunities for exchange of views and peer-to-peer accountability), bringing to the fore a condition that works against the collective and social character of media work.

When it comes to the implications of these processes for the journalistic profession, interviewees in both countries argue for significant repercussions on journalistic practices, that ultimately pose risks on the duty of serving the public interest.

Many times, we could not cover an issue in person so we couldn't ask questions. Press conferences were held in the absence of the reporters, the questions were collected by someone, who then asked them on behalf of the reporter, basically canceling the role of the journalist [...] everything was done from a distance and that definitely wasn't for the benefit of journalism, for the benefit of informing the citizen (Int.9, l-c, Cyprus).

Moreover, the increased workload requiring journalists to do more things in less time, in non-collaborative terms, has negative implications on the quality of the news product provided to the public. 'You are forced to keep doing more for the same job at an ever-accelerating pace [...] without being in control of what you are reporting' (Int. 15, l-c, Greece).

Overall, interviewees in Greece and Cyprus, from the less to the more experienced ones, found themselves in an awkward position lacking the means and resources to do their job.

Media labour and working conditions

First and foremost, journalists in both countries put great emphasis on the significant impact of the COVID-19 crisis on their employment status, professional security, salary and prospects of professional development (including skills).

Interviewees note that the crisis intensified pre-existing problems and challenges that the journalistic profession has encountered during the last two decades due to the economic crisis that hit Greece and Cyprus. ‘The pandemic found us already in a vulnerable state’ (Int.13, l-c, Greece); ‘going through a tough period already’ (Int.11, e-c, Cyprus). The economic crisis caused severe sustainability issues for media organisations as advertising revenue dropped significantly. And the pandemic intensified the sharp reduction of advertising resources and the deterioration of journalists’ working conditions - ‘the conditions in the market changed completely’ (Int.9, l-c, Greece).

There was a drop in revenue, staff reductions and salary cuts that we were forced to accept [...] it was as if a new infrastructure was developed when it came to the operation and set up of the newspaper [...] these limitations bring pressure since the editorial teams are smaller, but they have to do the same job [...] which is something that shouldn’t be happening (Int 8, m-c, Cyprus).

State support during the lockdown proved valuable for the economic survival of media organisations, essentially - ‘subsidizing wages’ (Int.10, m-c, Cyprus) and counterbalancing the dramatic effects on journalists’ jobs – ‘if it weren’t for the money from the COVID-19 campaigns we would have all closed down’ (Int.14, m-c, Greece).

Still, interviewees highlight the widespread job insecurity infused to journalists, when the state subsidized employees’ salaries in various sectors, including those in press industry, with EUR 800, to stay at home in Greece - ‘media industries used the state’s indemnification so they can put their workers on paid leave’ (Int.17, e-c, Greece); as well as in terms of the preference of media organizations for younger and cheaper workforce in the case of Cyprus - ‘I’ll give him €800, to do as I say, run from one thing to the next, be my bitch ...’ (Int. 6, e-c, Cyprus). Moreover, both Greek and Greek-Cypriot journalists draw attention to the adverse effects of COVID-19 crisis to their career prospects - ‘there is no possibility of professional growth [...] we suddenly can’t see further ahead’ (Int.4, m-c, Greece); ‘Most often there is a promotion in words and workload but no salary upgrade’ (Int.4, m-c, Cyprus). Even interviewees who stated that their jobs and salaries were not affected during the pandemic do put emphasis on the pressure and anxiety these developments pose for the future - ‘It’s the fear. The fear of being the next one’ (Cyprus, e-c, Int.6); ‘but I don’t know about the day after tomorrow [...] what my job will be like and where it will be’ (Int.3, l-c, Greece).

Besides the changes the pandemic provoked in the work routines and practices of the journalistic profession, it set a context where journalists became increasingly exposed to the flexibilization of labour and the intensification of work. In specific, teleworking has reinforced atypical and complex forms of employment – ‘we have not returned to the point of working normally, all together [...] I believe that this hybrid model will be

maintained, at least as far as our own newspaper is concerned' (Int.3, l-c, Greece). It has added extra financial cost to journalists themselves – 'there is definitely a cost affecting your monthly expenses, working from home. You have to pay for the Internet, the air conditioning. They are financial burdens that you need to bear' (Int.7, m-c, Cyprus). At the same time, journalists have to deal with an ever-increasing workload that requires more flexibility and multitasking in terms of lower wages and worse working conditions:

[We] work longer hours for less money [...] At first it was six hours, then it became eight hours and now it can be extended to ten and twelve hours without any extra pay for that. Yes, there is also exploitation, few people with too many duties (Int.11, m-c, Greece);

Online jobs are increasing, but this does not mean that salaries are also increasing! [...] Wages are low, you work long hours, multi-task, now a newspaper journalist should also write on the website, must be able [...] to appear on television if he works for a media group for example. This didn't happen before! (Int.5, l-c, Cyprus).

Additionally, these processes have had considerable negative effects on news coverage and reporting – 'there is a disruption [...] which of course affects how you do your job ... This puts pressure on the quality, but also on the extent of news coverage' (Int. 8, m-c, Cyprus); at a time when impartial and analytical reporting has been more necessary than ever.

It was no coincidence that during this entire period of the pandemic in Greece, we had no reports at all, like the hospitals where people died, like outside the ICUs, reports on the medical care people received, on tracing, etc. (Int.14, m-c, Greece).

Accordingly, it is argued that journalism and its capacity to serve the public was severely hit – 'there are things that get out of hand every day and this has an impact on the information the citizens get, and of course on the quality of democracy and all that' (Int. 8, m-c, Cyprus).

In general, interviewees in both countries point out that the pandemic eroded core practices and tasks of journalism with a direct effect on how journalism is exercised and how it caters for the public interest.

Professional performance and pressures/dependencies

Notwithstanding the constraints described so far, the respondents in both countries note political, economic and technological pressures related to particular aspects of the national media contexts and journalistic cultures that hinder further the tasks of journalism professionals.

The very value of journalistic information as a key mechanism for conveying the meaning and evolution of the pandemic has not been "capitalized" in favour of professionalism. An important deterrent factor has been the political pressures exercised in the coverage of COVID-19, which are reflected on the editorial line – 'If there are political

pressures on journalists, they exist at the highest level' (Int.11, m-c, Greece); 'the pressures are on the owners and the owners transfer it to the journalists' (Int.10, m-c, Cyprus). These pressures have been galvanised by the dependency of media organizations on the state subsidy and state advertising in response to COVID-19 emergency situation, as experienced, late-career journalists in Cyprus and Greece, point out.

The revenue of the mass media decreased and at the same time the state subsidy, the state aid increased. This was bad, because it created a relationship of dependence of the mass media on the state, and whatever this implies [...] When a news organization relies on the state's financial support there is an impact on the way it covers, the way it monitors the state (Int.9, l-c, Cyprus).

Political dependencies are pronounced even more emphatically in the case of Greece, in response to the controversies raised about the allocation to media outlets of 20 million euros via a public health awareness campaign "We stay at home".

It is a piggy bank they use to only pay those they want to pay; they don't want a transparent system. Common sense dictates that in a western democracy [...] the Ministry's webpage would state how much money an organization received for a certain period of time for a specific campaign. There's no doing that, because they play games. What kind of games? Games that ensure the media's dependency on governmental power (Int.15, l-c, Greece).

In this context, the very duty of journalism to serve the public, and be a watchdog for the public interest, is at stake – 'there was a general obscurantism around the matter of COVID-19' (Int.3, e-c, Cyprus);

Certainly, there has been organised misinformation, state misinformation [...] I would very much like to say that we, as journalists handled the matter as we should have, that the COVID-19 crisis had a positive effect on journalism. I am sorry but I cannot say this. Basically, we witnessed what we always witness in every crisis, the majority of the media offer guided information, and this is sad, at times infuriating (Int.2, m-c, Greece).

Findings here suggest a difference between Greece and Cyprus. In the case of Greece, journalism has been faced with serious problems pre-existing the pandemic and declining trust levels, which is confirmed by the 2023 *Digital News Report* (Kalogeropoulos, 2023). In the case of Cyprus, the pandemic had a negative impact which disrupted the operation of journalism.

Last but not least, the pronounced need for accelerating the digital transformation of media in pandemic era has shed light to more dependencies and burdens for professional journalists in both countries. In the case of Cyprus, journalists evaluate limitations on exerting increased technological control in reference to the 'difficult and demanding environment' for a such a 'small media market' (Int. 8, m-c, Cyprus). While in the case of Greece, journalists point out the lack of ingenuine interest of media industries in the digital transformation - 'what we do is mostly fireworks [...] [media] use a very small

percentage of the capabilities that digital technology offers them' (Int.13, l-c, Greece), as well as the shortage of training in using online tools, software and the lack of digital skills - 'the available data are posted on the Internet, but you also need someone to explain to you what you are reading, where it is accessible or to check that what is explained is real, that what's written and relayed is reliable' (Int.15, l-c, Greece), perpetuating the usually very slow response of Greek media to the incorporation of new technologies in journalism (Panagiotarea and Dimitrakopolou, 2006).

Discussion and conclusions

The findings indicate the significant impact of COVID-19 crisis on journalistic labour in Greece and Cyprus, providing empirical evidence to reflect on the ongoing discussion in the respective literature about the role of pandemic in introducing changes or being an accelerator of ongoing developments in the field of journalism (Quandt and Wahl-Jorgensen, 2021; Hanusch, 2022).

On the one hand, the state of emergency generated by the COVID-19 crisis set the context in both Greece and Cyprus for working patterns and activities that promote the idea of the individuated worker (Deuze, 2007) over collective work routines and practices. Being distanced from the professional community and "cut off" from peer support, while journalists are accustomed to participating and interacting in a space like the newsroom environment, we find that journalists in both countries experienced feelings of isolation (Miranda et al., 2021). Moreover, the cumulative individualized risk (Creech and Maddox, 2022) for journalists in COVID-19 crisis is reflected on psychological and emotional stress and pressures, while their alienation from the collective work poses questions over the socialization process and the subsequent norms and concerns raised among professionals in the daily work routine (Cotter, 2010). Furthermore, the radical shift toward atypical labour conditions during the pandemic challenges the traditional employer-employee relationship (Deuze, 2014) at the latter's expense. The intensification of precarious working arrangements (Deuze, 2019) reported by journalists in Greece and Cyprus goes hand in hand with increased levels of job insecurity (Spyridou et al., forthcoming) in tandem with their great discontent about extra workload, low salaries, lack of promotion possibilities and development prospects (Paulussen, 2012), generating feelings of growing professional disenchantment (Nölleke et al., 2022). At the same time, the amplification of the new technological dynamics (Deuze and Witschge, 2018) towards online working and mobile reporting due to pandemic added further pressure on the direction of digital transformation of journalism (Saridou et al., 2017).

Still, the changes and challenges brought by the COVID-19 crisis in Greece and Cyprus do not occur in a vacuum. They take place against a backdrop of specific economic, political and technological developments affecting the two countries. 'The pandemic gave another blow to journalism [...] instead of getting better, it got worse. Its dependencies have been revealed and there is no suggestion on how to change this' (Int.15, l-c, Greece).

First, the pandemic exacerbated the already fragile financial situation of news organizations in Greece (Papathanassopoulos, 2020) and Cyprus (Spyridou and Danezis, 2022),

adding to the precedent economic crisis that has left its fingerprint on the media industries of both countries. This condition exerted powerful pressures on the media markets and deteriorated further the labour relations in respective deregulated environments (Karadimitriou, 2020; Maniou, 2017). Consequently, the pandemic disruption of journalists' working conditions – including flexible forms of employment, increase of insecurity, recurring wage cuts, underpaid journalists pushed to do more, lack of prospective professional development – accentuates a sense of disappointment or cynicism to the continuing decline in the working landscapes of journalism in Greece and Cyprus.

Secondly, the COVID-19 crisis evaluated and deepened structural pathogenies and problems of journalism in both countries. A broader recurring narrative identified in the study is the lack of a strong professional culture, which traditionally makes journalism in the two countries vulnerable to political pressures, addressing in the case of Greece critical issues beyond the state of emergency, in relation to the level of trust on journalism and news. In addition, Greek-Cypriot and Greek journalists stress media deficiencies (small market in Cyprus) and/or inadequacies (lack of resources and expertise in Greece) in dealing with the digital prospects of the pandemic era, which condition their own engagement with new technologies and the digital prospects (Vatikiotis, 2022).

Lastly, although the COVID-19 crisis found Greece and Cyprus at different stages regarding professional autonomy, its fingerprint on labour conditions has been strong. Not only did COVID-19 crisis reinforced atypical and precarious work conditions, but it also promoted the advent of the individuated worker. Overall, the pandemic has been another significant moment in the ongoing crisis of journalism in Greece and Cyprus in terms of amplifying shortcomings and weaknesses of the field. The very challenge of the 'atypical way of working and of being at work' (Deuze and Witschge, 2018: 165) is determined here by economic, political and technological pressures exercised in the respective contexts, which lead towards "sterilized" individuated journalistic workers that are in a more vulnerable position. The casualization and flexibilization of journalistic labour cuts to the very bone of journalism practice (Gollmitzer, 2014). The production of news, at least of news that questions and doubts the official narrative, of news that is thought-provoking and pluralistic, of news that can make a difference, requires professionals who do not work under the condition that they might be the next casualty.

This study does not come without limitations. The subjective nature of qualitative methods allows little space for generalisations. Moreover, the lack of alternative professional media in the Greek-Cypriot media landscape did not permit a comparison between these initiatives and mainstream media considering that the former comprises a growing source of information. Future research should engage in a longitudinal study to explore how the identified trends have persisted and how journalists are dealing with them.

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Ethical statement

Ethical approval

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Notes

1. [Global Risk Journalism Hub \(globalriskjournalismhub.com\)](http://globalriskjournalismhub.com).
2. The professional status of the interviewees is indicated in the analysis as: “e-c” for early-career (fewer than 5 years in the occupation) professionals; “m-c” for mid-career (5–15 years) professionals; and “l-c” for late-career (working for more than 15 years) professionals.

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