

UNDER DURESS
JOURNALISM IN AUTHORITARIAN CONTEXTS

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Acknowledgement

This report would not have been possible without the willingness of the participants to share their experiences and candid impressions of working in often difficult conditions. Many participants took considerable personal risks to take part and we hope that the community and conversation that developed during the time together has justified this courage. To Tasneem Vania and Refilwe Ngakpele, an enormous thank you for managing the coordination of such a sensitive conversation.

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Introduction

Journalism in Africa – as in many other parts of the world – is coming under growing pressure as governments become increasingly authoritarian and unwilling to tolerate the profession acting as a robust watchdog over state power. In some cases, this takes the form of physical risk and the deliberate targeting of journalists trying to report on violence and conflict. In others, reporters find themselves subject to subtler pressures in the form of greater economic precarity, the treatment of journalism as a matter of national security, declining donor support and pressure to engage in softer, more ‘developmental’ forms of journalism.

Despite regional and country differences, there are often common underlying structures in the challenges faced by journalists across the continent. As a consequence, much can be learned from colleagues who have found different ways to continue holding power to account despite often intense pressure.

This summary report is the outcome of a multi-day roundtable discussion attended by 42 journalists, scholars and civil society representatives, including 17 practising investigative reporters from seven African countries facing severe levels of media intimidation. The contexts in which the journalist participants worked ranged from situations of war and open conflict to subtler forms of relatively peaceful democratic backsliding, and their experiences ranged from field reporting to senior editorial roles in major African newsrooms. Some worked inside the countries they reported on, while others reported from exile or moved between these roles. The roundtable discussions in which attendees participated centred on four major themes: the nature of intimidation and other pressures faced by the profession; how these pressures manifested across different roles in newsrooms; the emotional and psychological effects of working under ongoing pressure; and the strategies adopted by journalists in response to these.

Participants were selected in consultation with researchers, African investigative reporters and civil society organisations working on media freedom issues. This was aimed at ensuring that they were well placed to speak to the realities of working in authoritarian contexts and that participants could be trusted to maintain the confidentiality of the proceedings. To ensure the safety of the journalist participants, many of whom work in situations of genuine physical risk, the date and location of the event, as well as the list of participants, were deliberately kept secret. No recordings of the discussions were made, but the authors of this report took live notes during the proceedings, in accordance with the Chatham House Rule, under which what was said could be reported but no identifying information about the speakers would be revealed. The release of this report has also been timed to take place considerably later than the roundtable event, as a further precaution against the identification of any participants. While these precautions may seem paranoid, some of the difficulties encountered by participants in attending the

roundtable made it clear that, in at least some cases, these precautions were necessary to ensure a space where they could speak candidly about the challenges they faced. While some example cases described by participants are recounted in this report, they are done so in deliberately decontextualised ways to preserve the insights they provide without identifying the country contexts or, indirectly, the speakers.

This summary report provides insight into some of the issues raised by participants in the roundtable, organised around the event's overall themes. These are not intended to be taken as a generalisable set of claims about the median experience of journalists doing accountability reporting in Africa. However, we believe that they describe common experiences and challenges faced by many working on topics that bring them into tension with their governments, such as corruption, war crimes and human rights reporting. It is our hope that this report may offer useful, practical insights to press freedom advocates, media professionals working in similar contexts and policymakers seeking to strengthen independent news institutions, and that it makes clear the burden that so many African journalists continue to shoulder.

Please note, the views expressed in this report are those of the participants and not the authors.



The media exists to serve society...

The forms pressure takes

Withdrawal of resources

LACK OF JOURNALISM = INTIMIDATION



THE PRESS CODE ALSO SUPPRESSES JOURNALISTS

DISCREDITING

WEAPONISING EXPERTISE

Censoring ourselves.

POCKET POLITICS

Turning academic elite against Journalists - Ethiopia

CRACKDOWN ON CRITICAL VOICES



Journalists paid peanuts

Zimbabwe.

Brown envelope Journalism - Kenya, Tanzania.

Owner of media silent - Tanzania



Is there solidarity



Images transcend linguistic barriers

Section 1

The forms pressure takes



Participants in the roundtable opened the discussion with a conversation about the forms of pressure on their reporting that they experience. The exchange was wide-ranging and included many examples of pressure and illustrative cases that, for practical and confidentiality reasons, cannot be accommodated within the length of this report. Nevertheless, certain substantial themes occurred repeatedly, and when providing specific examples, participants would often emphasise the interrelatedness of various pressures. Rather than seeing forms of pressure arising from law, social media, precarity or public demonisation of their profession as independent, they were generally understood as a set of interacting pressures that would move together in harmful ways. This section of the report expands on some of these themes.

Legal pressures

The role of legislation, regulation and the courts featured in accounts of intimidation and coercion in a range of different ways. In the most straightforward examples, laws on national security, counter-terrorism or defamation would be weaponised by the state to prosecute journalists for their reporting. Counterterror and national security laws would be especially favoured for barring journalists from accessing parts of countries experiencing conflict, while defamation was a more widely distributed weapon that powerful elites more broadly could bring to bear against journalists whose reporting threatened their interests.

Multiple participants highlighted the problem of strategic litigation against public participation (SLAPP) actions, in which targets of media scrutiny would file ultimately unsuccessful lawsuits aimed at tying up the legal, financial and psychological/emotional resources of newsrooms and their journalists. In these instances, winning (often existentially ruinous) cases against the media is not so much the point as punishing them through the trial itself. Such tactics are typically available to both wealthy individuals/organisations and the state, although state-enacted SLAPP suits may be particularly difficult to wind up, given the much larger financial and political/coercive resources available to them.

In other cases shared by participants, legislation would serve as a weapon against the media despite disconnects between the terms of black-letter law and the charges levelled

against journalists. Participants described being charged under laws that turned out not to exist, or police officials acknowledging privately that they were charging the media worker with full knowledge that they had not contravened the laws in question. In other instances, the de facto accreditation or prosecution of journalists would proceed in ways that had no relation whatsoever to the official rules governing the media. Regimes of this latter kind could be especially difficult for external policy experts or media freedom advocates to detect, as the in-principle legal structure of media governance in some contexts may appear highly progressive and open, even as the conduct of state agents operates according to entirely different rules.

Finally, even where specific charges may be successfully defended against by journalists and their media organisations, the act of being charged itself may be used as a form of pressure. By repeatedly charging journalists or newsrooms with particular offences, abuse of the law may be made to work rhetorically. It may make journalists appear dishonest or suspect, or signal that specific individuals and organisations are politically dangerous to associate with, thereby isolating them from other networks in society that might otherwise be willing to support their work.

Economic precarity

One of the background structures pressuring journalists in their work was the overall economic climate faced by the profession. The increasing precarity of newsrooms and its knock-on effects (an exodus of senior talent, the juniorisation of staff and the troubled viability of many publications as going concerns) has been widely reflected on in the research literature. Its causes and history are longer than can be succinctly revisited in this report. That said, the precarity of the news industry serves as a background, as a structural condition that interacts with more obvious forms of intimidation and coercion and as a specific instrument for ensuring that journalists and their newsrooms do not overstep particular red lines.

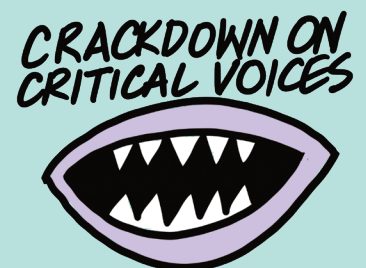
The low salaries and overall economic precarity of many newsrooms make journalists and their newsrooms especially vulnerable to various economic pressures in ways that they might otherwise not be. At the level of individual journalists, participants recounted examples of colleagues who were enticed into ‘flexible’ arrangements in their reporting, which could take various forms. In the most egregious cases, participants described ‘brown envelope’ practices in which journalists would tour hotels, picking up cash payments and press packs that they would then submit as their own work. In greyer situations, journalists might be enticed to work in a part-time capacity in public relations or consulting roles in order to top up meagre salaries – positions that often create obvious conflicts of interest with their accountability work.

For newsrooms supported by advertising, the increasing difficulty of maintaining profitable operations exposes them to financial pressure from their advertisers – especially

in contexts where the largest advertiser is the state or state-aligned companies. While the use of advertising revenue as a form of media pressure is not new, participants described the increasing directness of this approach in some country contexts. While the possibility of having advertising given or withdrawn in response to negative reporting used to be a background concern or unstated rule of newsroom–government relations in some countries, government officials have become increasingly willing to straightforwardly threaten to withdraw advertising revenue if certain stories are not spiked or journalists disciplined. This willingness by government officials to make such explicit threats points to a concerning deterioration of the norms surrounding press–government relationships.

Reliance on donor funding, however, came with different concerns. Participants highlighted how, in many country contexts, being overly dependent on funding from ‘Western’ organisations could make them vulnerable to being delegitimised as agents of ‘the West’ in social/ political contexts where such allegations may have real practical effects on the credibility of a newsroom and the safety of its journalists. One approach some newsrooms took to mitigate such risks was to be transparent from the start about their funding sources, making it harder for attacks to suggest they were concealing such funding or that they felt guilty about it. Journalists also reported cases where the government would use legislation to directly target donors or funding organisations, making it difficult, in practical terms, for them to fund news outlets or at least applying pressure on them to cease their support.

Participants also described how their personal financial situations might be sources of vulnerability. State agents could threaten – and in some cases had threatened – to confiscate journalists’ assets under terrorism statutes or through maliciously motivated taxation investigations. Participants also highlighted how having a financial cushion could offer protection in other ways, such as allowing them to travel out of the country, secure legal assistance or adopt other strategies that would not



be available to colleagues operating hand to mouth. Many participants affirmed that economic security was a basic precondition for pursuing higher-order concerns around accountability reporting and a watchdog role. To paraphrase one of the participants, 'you cannot eat press freedom'.

Digital media and internet infrastructure

The use of social media as a source of pressure on journalists was another subject that multiple respondents mentioned. In many respects, the views of participants consistently aligned with research on the topic. It has been demonstrated that the online abuse of journalists is a major issue across platforms and that experiences of online harassment are markedly different in gendered ways. Women participants said the types of abuse they received would often be structured according to the patriarchal norms of particular cultures. Unlike men – who would primarily be attacked for what they had published – they would be attacked in terms of who they were (or ought to be). Examples of this distinction included being attacked for behaving 'like men', denigrated as prostitutes or accused of deserving sexual violence in often explicit ways – none of which was a form of insult that would be aimed at male journalists.

Even more structural than social media were problems of internet access. In some country contexts, the internet had been limited in specific regions or, occasionally, countrywide, so as to limit the ability of society to communicate with itself during times of crisis or to discover details of violence or criminality in more remote regions. Infrastructural shutdowns of this sort would have a number of effects. Journalists could find it impossible to file reports in time, while the inability to communicate could exacerbate the rumour mill and increase public fear, insofar as internet shutdowns would be understood by the public as evidence of potentially existential threats elsewhere in the country.

Attacks on the normative role of journalism

In contrast to pressure directed at individual journalists or specific newsrooms, some participants described what they understood to be a more widespread delegitimisation of journalism as a field. Speaking about a country at war, they explained that – in their view – it was possible for the government to effectively weaponise the country's intelligentsia to criticise journalists as enemies of national unity in a way that set the rhetorical stage for more widespread persecution.

As they described the dynamic, intellectuals and other opinion leaders used their authority to argue that journalism as a field ought to be understood as a practical danger to a country that needed a unified narrative during a time of war, in effect redefining journalism as necessarily unpatriotic. Once this consensus was established, it became much easier for the government to mount legal and political attacks against journalists and to mobilise civil society more broadly into seeing them and their organisations as

dangerous or harmful. Participants described the effects of this as including anything from increased arrests and violence at the hands of state agents to being disowned by family, friends and other networks out of a principled disagreement with their 'unpatriotic' behaviour or because they were (correctly) understood to be politically dangerous to associate with.

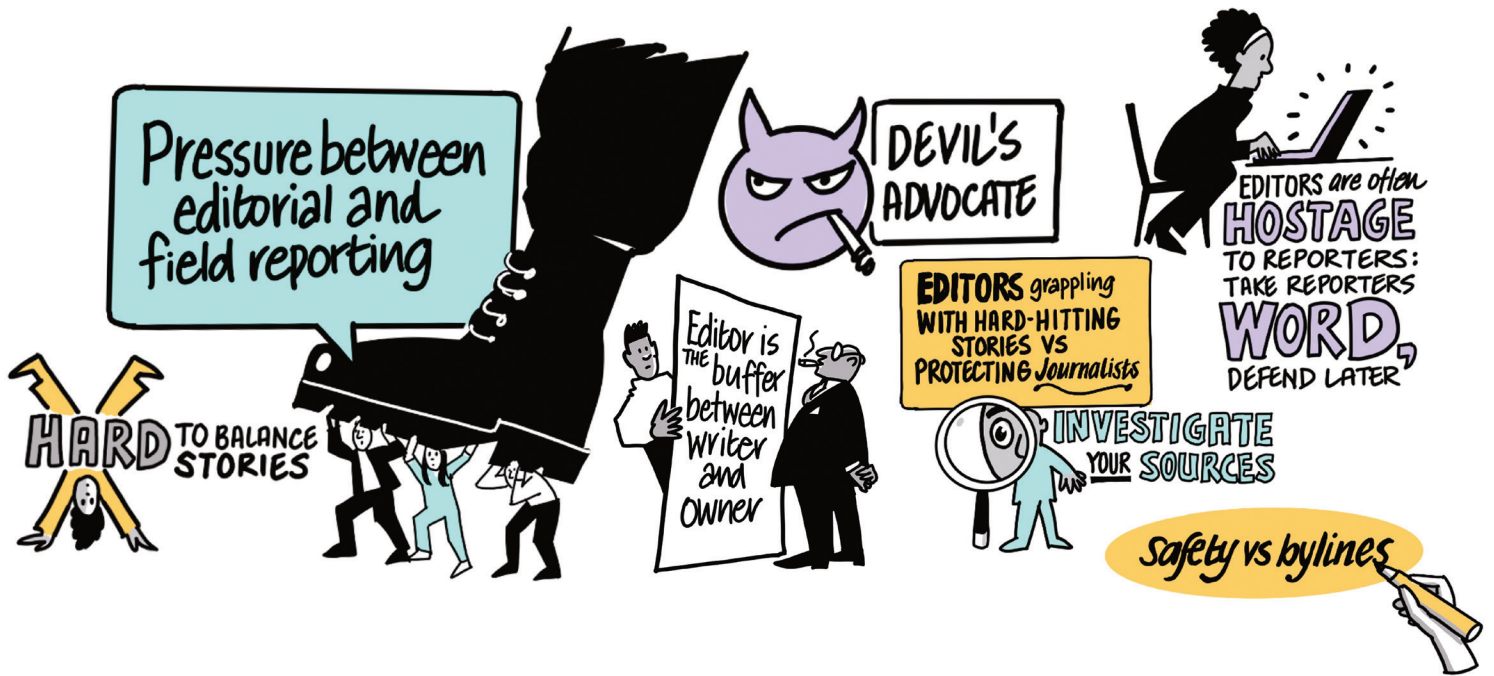
This strategy, participants argued, had a devastating effect on multiple levels. By shifting public consensus in this way, the government succeeded in shutting down most public deliberation about a war, made it harder for journalists to work unmolested and disincentivised new entries into the profession. It also meant that the government felt emboldened to pursue increasingly criminal conduct in the conflict.

Conclusion

This session of the roundtable set out a number of different perspectives on how intimidation and coercion are experienced by journalists. The session also raised an important, broader question about where protection of the media actually comes from. The report will reflect on this in the section on coping with these pressures. That said, the discussion made it plain that it would be an error to assume that *governments* and the law are what protect journalists. Rather, their protection appears to come from something closer to systems of social norms, consensus on the value of the practice and networks of mutual support that arise once this has been established. This is, in part, a matter of how the story of journalism's moral and political role has been told in the histories of different countries. It also depends (inter alia) on the (de)legitimation work of public intellectuals, the legal protection afforded by alliances with legal professionals, diplomatic pressure by democratic countries that care enough to intervene and the power of large media companies – when they choose to use it.

For those interested in media freedom, the participant discussions suggest it would be worth thinking through this question in more detail. How is the social and political fabric that protects journalism created and maintained? At the macro level, this is a question about how the belief that journalists ought not to be targeted is created and maintained as a national political norm. At the micro level, it is a question about how journalists can create and mobilise networks of support that can push back on the efforts of specific state agents (such as police, security officials and powerful non-governmental elites) in order to obtain specific outcomes, such as getting a colleague out of jail, negotiating access to spaces or raising the perceived costs of violence against individual reporters.





Section 2

Reporting and editorial perspectives

Safety vs bylines



Intimidation and coercion affected the roles of newsroom staff in different ways. Participants described how reporters and editors have distinct responsibilities, degrees of autonomy and levels of exposure to such pressures. These conditions not only shape responses to external pressure but also intensify internal frictions among colleagues during the news production process. The tensions between reporting and editorial staff under duress can be compounded by their backgrounds and the social and political contexts in which they operate. In the second session of the roundtable, participants focused on these issues.

Voices from the field

Participants highlighted that they face a range of challenges when reporting from the field that editors may not always appreciate. Journalists often need to make complex, independent decisions – how to proceed with a story in order to minimise physical danger, what information they can publish without risking detention and which sources they can use (and to what degree) without compromising the safety of those sources. Journalists in the field also often face a lack of financial and logistical support, such as transport and safety equipment, which can complicate the production of stories and meeting their editors' expectations.

Editors were occasionally criticised for not doing enough, and for 'selling journalists out'. There were also accounts of editors providing insufficient guidance to reporters to allow them to operate independently – something that was especially problematic when editors sat at overseas foreign desks, coordinating with local/national journalists on the ground. One example of where editorial guidance may fall short is failing to take into account that the way a journalist covers, for example, a protest or an election in one country will differ from that in another. Countries across Africa have varying media norms, ranging from accreditation systems and freedom of information laws to whether a direct call to a particular government branch is permitted. Editors must be, and are not always, attentive to the varying practices and safety levels for different stories and countries.

Many participants attributed these tensions to the fact that editors may come to their positions from different backgrounds and career paths, as well as to the sometimes unclear criteria for career advancement in news organisations. Editors who have never

“

I went there. It was a lot of work. But the editor said, “This is not the story.” The editor was from London and wanted me to tell what he wanted.

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“

International media have subeditors [who are] not from Africa. They don't understand the context. You need to explain every word. The “juice” part can get lost.

”

had to deal with pressure in the field may lack insight into how things look from the point of view of the journalists experiencing these challenges. These editors may also lack the skill, insight or courage required to resist pressure on behalf of their journalists. Moreover, newsroom hierarchies can be guilty of more than simply failing to support staff. Participants mentioned cases in which editors favoured their own interests or those of the news organisations in order to preserve their positions, placing those in the field at risk as a result.

Frames and positionality

Participants who had worked as field reporters also argued that it was unhelpful when editors insisted on specific framings, despite evidence from interviews and on-the-ground observations that such framings did not accurately reflect the facts or flattened the complexities of a story. This problem was exacerbated when working for international publications, which are often not interested in stories unless they can somehow be made to involve conflict or violence, or trade in stereotypes of Africa. Editors trained and based in former colonial metropolises would often have views and practices influenced by how Africa appeared from those locations. In addition, they also tended to have insufficient knowledge of the countries and issues being reported. Reporters then found themselves in conflict with their international editors, needing to both report the story and educate them.

Some journalists also expressed frustration with how Western news organisations balance respect for stringers with the need to protect them. Journalists working in high-risk environments were often left out of bylines, with editors citing concerns for their security. Although these concerns were often well-founded, the efforts of freelance correspondents were sometimes not acknowledged, not even indirectly, for example, through expressions of gratitude to local contributors. Some of these stories went on to receive prestigious awards, yet the hard work of unbylined African journalists tended to be overlooked, not to mention the unwillingness to share

potential financial rewards. These cases illustrate how the editor–journalist relationship can adapt in response to the problem of risk in ways that may prejudice the local/national journalist’s professional standing.

Management challenges

On the other side of this relationship, participants with years of experience as editors in the region shared alternative perspectives on managing challenges. They argued that the editorial role is becoming more complex. In part, this shift has involved a move from thinking along with the reporter, assisting with story planning and framing, to a more adversarial position. The increasing risk of defamation suits or other legal attacks by adversaries of a free press requires editors to scrutinise stories more intensely to ensure they are ‘tight’ and have the sourcing to be defended. They cautioned that if an editor gets carried away by the story a reporter presents, they may neglect to demand verification or fact-checking to the level required, which could make their news organisation vulnerable to prosecution.

Participants also highlighted that in some investigative or national security-related stories, journalists may be reluctant to share certain information with their editors. Reporters may ask for their editors’ trust, for example, when they cannot disclose their sources or how they gained access to a piece of evidence. The experiences shared by participants indicate that it can be challenging to determine when to trust journalists on specific stories, especially given the potential consequences of deferring to reporters who claim to have sources they do not. At some point, they argued, the editor becomes hostage to their reporter, as they are not on the ground and cannot have all the facts of the story. As a result, the editor needs to have some faith in their reporter’s judgment, committing to defend the story even while it is not fully under their control. However, the consequences of placing trust incorrectly can be dire: from costly defamation suits to reputational damages.

“

Editors must be rigorous and [act as a] devil’s advocate. If I’m not convinced, I will not allow [the story to proceed].”



A balancing act

Editor participants also explained that their role involved having to consider the well-being and interests of the news business more generally, in ways that field reporters did not. This can have dangerous effects on journalistic autonomy, to the extent that editors risk aligning editorial rules with the politics of a newsroom's owners and the business's profitability rather than with journalistic values. Editor participants described themselves as having to act as a buffer between owners and reporters, balancing normative ideals with financial realities. As funding in the sector declines across the continent and pressure from authoritarian actors increases, the economic and reputational costs of stories have necessarily become part of editorial decisions.

Editors may sometimes be able to move beyond simply making publish/do not publish decisions to consider how to tell a story in a way that addresses the pressures on a news outlet. Describing a specific example, a seasoned editor said: 'The newsroom was concerned [about whether] the story would be killed. I was working on how to make it passable.' The problem with this 'middle way' approach is that, to newsrooms, it appears to be a form of capitulation to power. In the end, a key tension in this relationship seemed unavoidable: reporters want to get the story out, while editors have other considerations, too.

Conclusion

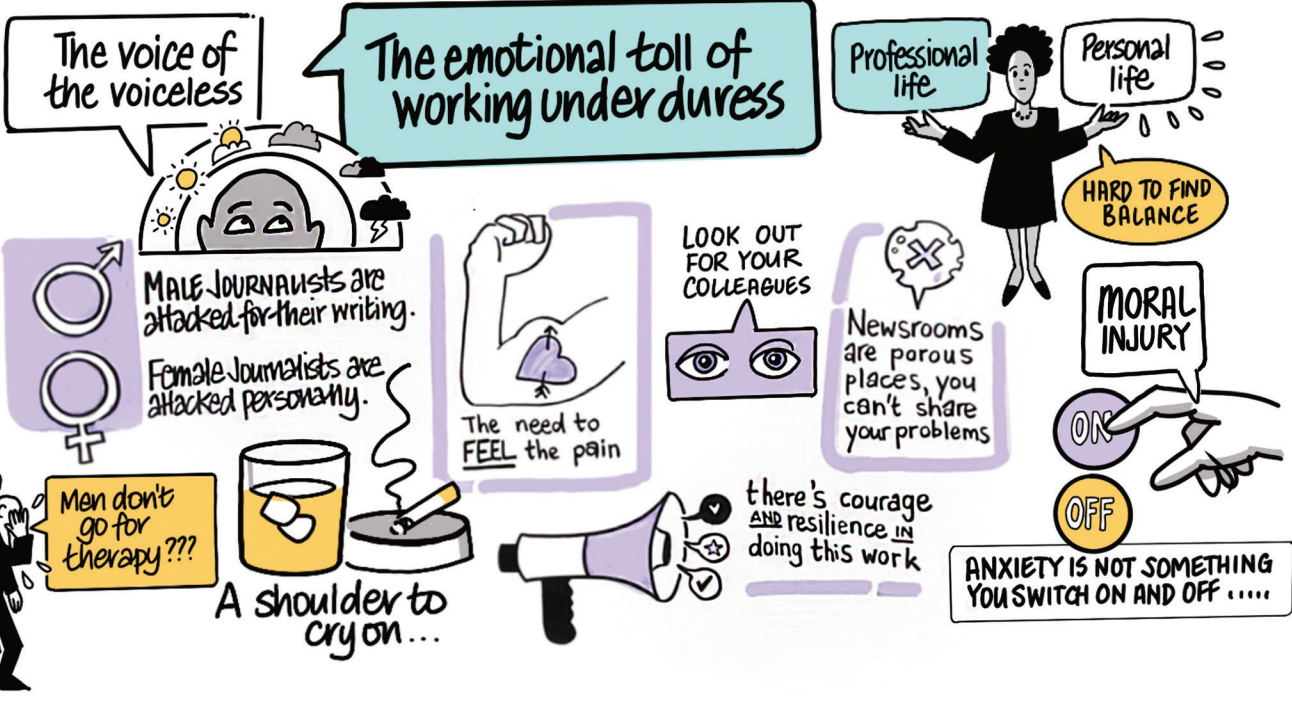
Working under duress strains the relationship between editors and reporters, and this pressure is often transmitted down the chain. There are cases where editors face extreme pressure from the subjects of their journalists' stories – a burden that exceeds what they should be expected to bear alone. In such situations, it is essential for the news organisation as a whole, rather than individual editors, to share the responsibility for publishing stories. This occasionally requires higher-level managers and even newsroom owners to be willing to stand behind the principles of their editors, which appears to be a rare, if morally admirable, occurrence.

In turn, experienced editors can push back against pressure from governments or the public to 'investigate' issues that are obviously misinformation or propaganda, or to unreasonably alter the frames of their stories. Participants argued that it was problematic when editors merely relayed government pressure and instructions to their journalists instead of serving as a protective barrier against such coercion. Issues could also arise when a strong reporter and a less experienced or distant editor collaborate on high-risk stories. Equally, however, editor participants explained that when they found themselves collaborating with junior reporters, they sometimes needed to assist those journalists in understanding what is professionally expected of them to meet reporting standards.

The middle role played by editors could mean that reporters felt that they were being suppressed, while editors could feel that reporters demanded too much trust and autonomy relative to the risks of the stories they were pursuing. Participants agreed that more and better communication could be the most important element of managing this tension. This is potentially as obvious a finding as it is difficult to achieve in practice: reporters and editors need to communicate to establish a mutual understanding of each other's roles, so that each knows how much they can depend on the other. In more hostile contexts, the starting point for the editor-reporter relationship might be that both agree that a specific story needs to be told, and then move on to a more constructive discussion of the limits within which it can be pursued.

When editors were remote or international, participants cautioned that it could become especially difficult to build the close relationships needed to encourage editors to invest more effort in protecting their reporters, especially those they may never have met in person. A consensus was that the more editors become personally familiar with their journalists and trust them, the more likely they are to go to greater lengths to protect them.





Section 3

Emotional and psychological effects

In later conversations about the emotional and psychological effects, participants engaged in an intense dialogue about how their work had impacted them personally. They also discussed how they found peace of mind and the strength to continue working, as well as the misconceptions and other obstacles to assistance they had to overcome along the way. This section of the report develops these themes in more detail, including the sources and types of distress experienced by journalists, the obstacles to seeking professional therapeutic assistance and the practical interventions that participants felt had helped them.

The effects of the work

Participants unanimously agreed that reporting under conditions of intimidation and coercion of the kind outlined earlier in this report challenged them emotionally and psychologically. In discussing the sources of this strain and how it affected their thinking and conduct, participants described experiences that closely track existing scholarship on trauma and journalism.

Some experiences, such as encounters with the police or other security agents, protests or instances of violence, left traces that resemble post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and a hypervigilance of certain kinds of people or situations. Many women participants highlighted that, in addition to having to deal with trauma outside their newsrooms, newsrooms themselves could be sources of harm. Patriarchal norms and the ubiquity of casual sexual harassment in often highly masculine-coded work environments meant that the newsroom could not automatically be treated as an emotionally safe retreat from the world outside. This gendered burden on women journalists effectively serves to harm them twice. First, their working environments are potential sources of danger in ways that are not true for their male colleagues; second, they may be denied the benefit of the newsroom as a refuge in the way that male colleagues might experience it.

Participants were split on the origins of harmful patriarchal norms in journalism generally. Some pointed to how the norms of journalism, as it arrived from the US and UK, already included highly misogynistic attitudes. Others pointed out that many of the national cultures in which African journalism developed were already highly patriarchal, and that it was unsurprising that such norms would then structure newsroom environments. While this is ultimately an empirical question for researchers and policymakers to engage with,

the accounts given by participants are entirely compatible with one another. That is, it could easily be the case that the already masculine-coded norms of Western journalism made an easy transition to patriarchal contexts in Africa. This created newsrooms with a blend of both value systems, making them hostile to many of the women who work in them.

Distinct from PTSD, journalists described other encounters and emotional burdens that more closely resemble moral injury. This is emotional harm whose source is not so much fear of potential danger as the experience of having their work burden their consciences in hard-to-manage ways. Many journalists would find themselves working with subjects who had suffered often egregious injustice or, in cases of reporting on war crimes and violence, be one of a handful of professionals burdened with the truth of what had happened to affected communities or individuals. In conversation, participants often spoke of being burdened by what they knew – that without their labour, important testimony might be lost and that if they were to step aside from their work, there would be nobody waiting to replace them. This sense of the journalist as a witness bound by conscience to the work they do was a frequent theme in discussions. Many participants referred to their work as a ‘calling’ or a ‘vocation’ as a way of explaining – often with dark humour – why they continued to do it despite the poor pay, high risks and uncertain career trajectory. In addition to these discussions, participants highlighted other aspects of the emotional harms they experienced that are not typically considered by researchers and policymakers. In a few cases, participants said that the stress they had to deal with was not simply a result of their own experiences, but that their friends, family and other colleagues could be impacted, directly or indirectly, by their work. This had knock-on effects for their mental health. They related cases of friends and family being arrested, ostracised or otherwise punished for being associated with them and the work they were doing. Many participants felt guilty about the costs of their work on those they cared about, especially when those close to them were unsupportive of their journalism or had not in some way consented to bear the costs of their profession. In other cases, the solidarity and support of family and friends could mean a great deal to journalists and appeared to alleviate some of their sense of responsibility for the unwanted harm to those they cared about.

It is also worth mentioning the effects that direct violence and intimidation by state agents had on participants. Some had experienced beatings or severe forms of intimidation at the hands of security forces, and the emotional costs of this could be severe. One participant who had been beaten by police for their work reflected that the emotional effects were intense and long-lasting. Other participants highlighted that inflicting emotional harm, such as instilling terror or having journalists break down and cry, often appeared to be an explicit goal of some security agents. Such tactics, they argued, were about trying to discredit journalists as weak and afraid in the eyes of their audiences or other spectators, both as a means of delegitimising them and as a form of humiliation. Participants speculated that these tactics appeared to have a gendered logic. Making women journalists cry could be a specific objective during intimidation, while the professional costs

of crying or revealing terror could be especially humiliating for male journalists working in masculine/patriarchal contexts.

Perceptions around mental health and therapy

Early on in the discussions about emotional burdens, participants mentioned the importance of therapeutic approaches, ranging from conversations with therapists to the value of anti-anxiety or antidepressant medication in dealing with the pressures of their work. All, however, pointed out that they had only found their way to therapeutic help after overcoming a number of unhelpful preconceptions about therapy. In one particularly humorous exchange, a male participant explained how he had initially thought of therapy as 'something women did'. The next participant opened her contribution to the discussion by replying that she had been labouring under the impression that therapy was only 'something white people did'.

The underlying thread to this exchange and others like it was that, for most participants, the professional and personal cultures in which they operated had left them with the sense that – for various reasons – seeking professional help was 'not for them'. Overcoming this idea had made a profound difference to their well-being in that it made a wide range of professional assistance potentially available to them where it had previously been effectively off-limits.

Conclusion

The emotional and psychological burdens that participants shared during the session were considerable, with many having experienced moments of acute intimidation and/or dealt with emotionally difficult elements of the work for many years. Their experiences appeared to track accounts of PTSD and moral injury as described in existing research on trauma in journalism, but there appeared to be very little in terms of workplace-level approaches to dealing with the effects of the job. Where newsrooms had made specific provisions for communal activities, debriefing staff after assignments or granting leave to recover, this was often done on an ad hoc basis by individual newsroom managers rather than as a company-wide policy.

“
One thing that works is that I scream a lot.”





Section 4

Tactics for coping



In the final session, participants discussed strategies for navigating the risks, threats and associated negative effects covered in the previous roundtable debates. Journalists focused on the practical measures they took in their everyday routines, not only to keep working but to do so in a manner that was safe and sustainable. These discussions focused on protection against direct physical risks, as well as on tackling a range of emerging digital threats to their work. In addition, journalists shared their experiences of overcoming difficulties through collaboration and collective action, as well as strategies for coping with the psychological and emotional impact of working in increasingly hostile environments.

Digital security

Participants emphasised that online spaces had substantially changed conventional ideas surrounding safety, and that digital security was a complex and continually shifting challenge. This placed additional responsibility on media houses to protect journalists in online spaces as much as in offline ones. Participants stressed that basic digital skills, such as passwords and two-factor authentication, were a first line of defence. They also highlighted the importance of adopting encrypted systems and platforms for communication and data storage during investigations. The use of VPNs can help avoid surveillance and internet restrictions.

In addition, while it may seem rudimentary, care should be taken to ensure that physical access to personal devices is carefully controlled, including being aware of one's surroundings and leaving phones and laptops out of sight in public or even professional spaces. Participants agreed that journalists are, by nature, a rich source of data and thus especially vulnerable to being targeted. Digital security requires moving beyond reactive steps to building an active culture of continually updating security, and having senior colleagues model sound digital security behaviour can help embed good practices across the rest of the newsroom.

Participants also argued that digital security is not so much an individual responsibility as a community effort. As one contributor pointed out, compromising the digital environment of one member of a newsroom can put the rest of the network at risk. In addition to matters of IT security, having access to legal advice is essential for dealing with online harassment, takedown notices and the often complex legislation governing online publishing in many countries.

In addition to traditional cybersecurity risks, journalists noted that the online environment can intensify gendered violence against women. They also reported instances in which attempts to take the gendered dimensions of journalistic risk seriously were dismissed as 'Western propaganda' as a way to silence their complaints. While female participants frequently identified social media platforms as channels used by state officials for harassment and intimidation, they also noted that these same platforms can be used for protection. Some female journalists explained how they built online communities and networks of solidarity by coordinating public demonstrations of support and sharing advice on dealing with misogynistic attacks.

A few participants also shared successful cases in which they live-streamed high-risk situations as a way of enhancing their safety. Examples of this included being approached by state agents under the pretext of checking their documentation and security forces shooting at protesters. There was a perception that streaming these situations live for as long as possible raised the potential costs of harming them in the eyes of state actors. It also alerted additional sources of support, such as their media house, colleagues and media freedom actors.

Structural risks and constraints

Some countries make it harder to be a journalist than others. Countries with higher rates of violence, rape and socio-economic strife make the practice of journalism more challenging. Investigative journalism, specifically, is seen as a red line by many in power in more authoritarian contexts, where it is viewed as a threat. In most of these countries, investigating corruption can lead to getting killed, abducted or otherwise drawing the attention of state security. Moreover, there is limited training available for those seeking to become investigative journalists, including at tertiary institutions. This often leads to an information vacuum – while people crave information, journalists are constrained in their ability to provide it.

In at least one country, participants indicated that teaching investigative journalism is de facto banned by the government, out of a dislike of the ends to which it is put. Equally, in some countries, it is impossible to organise a journalism training session without the approval of the national security apparatus. In at least one case, such a training session requires having a state security agent in attendance. This makes creating or developing investigative or watchdog journalism skills through formal training virtually impossible. Participants also shared that, in some countries, it is normal for state security agencies to have files on journalists. Attending public media events often requires submitting your name beforehand, ostensibly for 'security reasons'. This was understood by participants as an intimidation tactic, sending a message that 'we know who you are and can hold you responsible for your questions'. Accreditation systems, whether for specific events

or for press credentials in general, also serve as a form of gatekeeping. Journalists reflected on how it allows the state to keep certain people out of press events, or out of the professional field altogether.

The discussion suggested that one source of strength that helped participants to continue working under these conditions was focusing on the broader social impact of their work. Several participants argued that journalists persisted because there was a lack of vital information about the issues they covered, and that their work was the only way for citizens and the international community to be aware of important issues, such as government corruption and human rights violations. However, participants also reflected that media workers should not give in to the temptation to become activists, as this could carry further physical and reputational risks.

Physical security

In high-risk contexts, even the most basic aspects of life can be a threat, and participants reflected on the need to keep a low profile. They noted the importance of micro-habits that help ensure safety, including using public transport wherever possible, instead of driving, as using a regular, recognisable car could attract more attention. Taking different routes and avoiding predictability in day-to-day life could also minimise the risks associated with state surveillance.

Participants pointed out that cooperative investigations could reduce risks, as involving other journalists and organisations would make it more difficult for those trying to suppress a story by removing specific investigators. Journalists also reflected on the need to be aware of what topics are deemed controversial and the connections of those they were investigating, as this allowed them to more accurately assess the potential risk of a story. Participants further highlighted that journalists depend on the trust society places in them. Their discussion reflected a belief that it was important to maintain ethical standards in order to keep this trust, both as a value in and of itself and because the perceived valour of the profession was part of what kept it safe from public attacks.

“

If all of us run away, who will report the stories? We are the right people to tell the African stories. The right people.”

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Journalists are not activists.”

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Conclusion

Over the course of the discussion, participants frequently returned to examples of and approaches to safety that reiterated how much of a social, communal matter it was – as much as, or more than, something that individual journalists needed to work out for themselves. Participants highlighted the value of pan-African partnerships, better communication among African journalists and supportive relationships with media freedom, legal assistance and other organisations.

Participants noted, however, a lack of organisation among journalists at a regional and continental level. Gatherings of journalists for policy discussions are more often exchanges of pleasantries or status signalling than expressions of interest in developing substantive cooperation. That said, they highlighted the value of informal connections between journalists and the opportunity to share their challenges and experiences without the intermediation of donors or media organisations.

Some participants pointed out that colleagues in newsrooms outside particularly oppressive states can assist by breaking stories outside of countries where they cannot be reported internally. This is a valuable activity in and of itself – helping to get stories out that otherwise might not – but can also make it easier for in-country newsrooms to follow up on a story once the challenging task of breaking it has been done. There may also be cross-border strategies of other kinds, in which journalists outside of high-risk contexts assist colleagues by offering support or taking on more dangerous investigative or publishing work precisely because they are out of the reach of foreign governments. For journalists who are living in exile in neighbouring countries, there is a tangible benefit when colleagues in the host countries assist with their integration, both practically and emotionally. Ultimately, community is important for dealing with intimidation and pressure. Participants affirmed that knowing there are others who are going through similar situations, who can empathise and assist, makes a positive difference.

A few participants also shared more individual strategies to alleviate the emotional costs of working under duress. One seasoned journalist spoke about the importance of having a confidant: talking to someone you trust about what you are going through helps with processing challenges. Similarly, some participants highlighted the advantages of professional counselling, which they argued should be offered by news organisations as a matter of routine staff wellness. However, they emphasised that this approach requires the journalist to be willing to engage sincerely and to overcome the preconceptions about therapy mentioned earlier in this report.

Finally, media houses could also help journalists cope with pressure by making more use of physical spaces. One journalist described the positive effects achieved in their organisation through simple repurposing of areas and small staff events that allow journalists to unwind and decompress. Such initiatives would also add to community-building efforts that improve both emotional support and security.



WE ARE THE RIGHT
PEOPLE TO REPORT
AFRICAN
STORIES”

Conclusion

Journalism in the 21st century faces both persistent and emerging challenges. By bringing together journalists from across the continent, the roundtable discussions underscored not only the importance of the profession for holding power to account and facilitating informed public deliberation but also the structural constraints, material risks and psychological pressures under which journalists operate. Built on the extensive and candid accounts shared by journalists and editors, this report offers insights and implications for journalists, media managers, policymakers and civil society. Ultimately, journalists remain central to the production and circulation of independent, fact-based reporting in an environment increasingly shaped by disinformation, financial instability and political pressure.

The discussions highlighted the distinct challenges faced by journalists working under restrictive regimes. These are often intensified by hostile social contexts, precarious working conditions, declining funding and limited resources. As a result, journalists are required to work far beyond conventional professional expectations, often at significant personal risk, including the threat of imprisonment, exile or violence. In the wider context of democratic backsliding and ongoing conflict across parts of the continent, such pressures are better understood as systemic rather than isolated.

Participants' accounts further demonstrated the ambivalent role of the law, which can function both as a source of protection and as an instrument of coercion. Legal frameworks and courts may serve as a first line of defence when grounded in constitutional principles, but at the same time, lawsuits and other forms of judicial harassment are increasingly being used to intimidate journalists and news organisations, damage their reputations and impose serious financial strain.

The discussions also pointed to a significant policymaking gap, reflected in limited institutional accountability and restricted civic access. Addressing these shortcomings requires both greater legal protections for journalists and broader institutional strengthening to make sure that the news media is independent, effective and accountable. Within newsrooms, there is likewise a clear need for reform, to improve how editors and reporters work together, provide journalists with mental health support, implement more robust safety protocols and encourage/facilitate transnational communication and collaboration. When international editors and organisations are involved, these relationships and protocols require greater efforts from all parties to address colonial dynamics, knowledge gaps and persistent misconceptions.

The discussions also made it clear that the consequences of digital transformation for journalism are still unfolding. Participants described digitalisation and the pronounced role of social media platforms in content production and distribution as creating new opportunities and new vulnerabilities. Social media and online tools can expand the

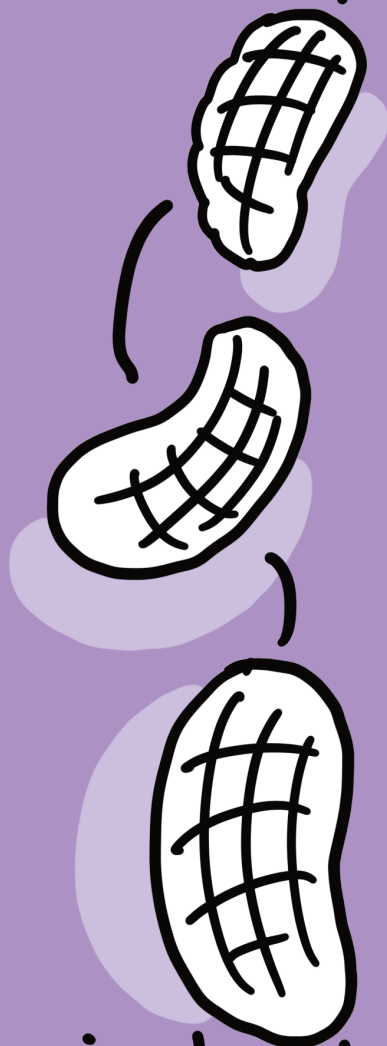
reach of reporting, facilitate cross-border collaboration and, in some cases, offer practical security for journalists, but they can also intensify surveillance, harassment and precarity. These pressures sit alongside a wider information environment increasingly shaped by disinformation, which further complicates the work of journalists operating under already difficult conditions. Against this backdrop, the widespread use of artificial intelligence is likely to deepen existing challenges, particularly by worsening job losses in the media industry and accelerating the production and spread of more elaborate, misleading or false content.

Despite the many strengths of the roundtable approach in successfully bringing together a wide range of journalists from mixed career stages, country contexts and beats, there were unavoidable limitations to the conversations on which this report is based. The invited journalists all worked in anglophone media, which, as a consequence, left the perspectives of those working in other contexts – most notably, francophone Africa – out of these reflections. In addition, journalists from some of the continent's most repressive contexts were often unable to attend, with the result that the reflections do not include insights into some of the most acute insecurity and media suppression in African journalism.

The roundtable provided a platform for voicing key concerns and experiences. It highlighted the importance of social trust in sustaining journalism, as well as the dangers of its erosion, whether through failures in journalistic ethics, ineffective or hostile governments, institutional weakness or insufficient support from the international community and civic society actors in protecting journalists and journalism as a public good. The challenges confronting many African states, including corruption, conflict and socio-economic instability, cannot be addressed effectively in the absence of accessible, credible information. In this regard, the role of the journalist remains not only relevant but essential. As one participant summarised: 'We can all agree that journalism is an essential service, but an undermined industry.'



Journalists
paid
peanuts



Zimbabwe

