

## “The goal is to make you weaker”

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# ‘The goal is to make you weaker’:

## Mental well-being of European journalists in cross-border investigations

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### Abstract

The increased scale of cross-border journalistic investigations brings about severe challenges: online harassment, physical violence, legal threats, but also emotional challenges and mental stress that can lead to burnout. The latter has never been the focus of studies on cross-border investigative journalistic collaborations. This paper seeks to fill this gap and contribute to the understanding of how the cross-border aspects of investigative journalists’ work shape their mental well-being. Based on eighteen semi-structured interviews conducted with investigative journalists across Europe in the first half of 2023, this study addresses the following research questions: What are the specific challenges, threats, and risks encountered by investigative journalists working on cross-border collaborations? How do these challenges and risks affect investigative journalists’ mental well-being? What coping mechanisms do investigative journalists employ? Our findings show that cross-border investigative journalists experience a systemic neglect of mental well-being in the profession. Moreover, journalists face country-specific challenges, stemming from varying legal constraints and disparities in institutional support and protection across countries. The lack of safety measures that protect journalists beyond physical safety, multitasking, and the lack of concern for cross-border investigative journalists’ mental well-being can prove particularly challenging for freelancers. At the same time, the cross-border collaborations are depicted as a source of mutual assistance, protection, and a sense of community among international journalists.

### Introduction

Daphne Caruana Galizia was killed by a car bomb on 16 October 2017. Before she was assassinated, the Maltese investigative journalist faced constant threats and challenges; at the time of her death, she was facing over forty civil and five criminal libel suits, many of which were started by government officials. These lawsuits and threats were linked to the journalist’s contributions to the Panama Papers and her work exposing local corruption in Malta.

Caruana Galizia’s assassination is but one example of the multifaceted dangers faced by investigative journalists working on cross-border collaborations. Serving as a watchdog for democracy, they scrutinise those in power and can be considered a “global fourth estate” (Berglez & Gearing, 2018). While the cross-border collaborations bring support, the increased

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scale also brings about severe challenges. Investigative cross-border journalists worldwide come under attack weekly; from online harassment to physical violence, from assaults on their reputations to legal challenges, from emotional challenges and mental stress to burnout (Holton et al., 2021; McCabe et al., 2019).

While the latter is an increasingly common subject of journalism research, particularly research on journalists covering conflicts and other crises (e.g. Backholm, 2016; Buchanan & Keats, 2011; Flannery, 2022; Smith et al., 2018), mental well-being has never been the focus of studies on cross-border investigative journalistic collaborations. This paper seeks to fill in this gap and contribute to the understanding of how the cross-border aspects of investigative journalists' work shape their mental well-being.

This study, based on eighteen semi-structured interviews conducted with investigative journalists across Europe in the first half of 2023, critically assesses the practice of the "radical sharing" of both materials and risks in international collaborations, focussing on the multifaceted challenges and threats investigative journalists face when working across professional, cultural and geographical borders, and the effects these challenges have on their mental well-being. We address the following research questions: What are the specific challenges, threats, and risks encountered by investigative journalists working on cross-border collaborations? How do these challenges and risks affect investigative journalists' mental well-being? What coping mechanisms do investigative journalists employ? We illustrate how the legal, financial, physical, and digital threats and challenges faced by investigative journalists in cross-border collaborations affect their mental well-being. We discuss the persistent individualisation and stigmatisation of emotional challenges, their links to journalists' precarity and country-specific levels of support that journalists enjoy. We also show how cross-border collaborations become spaces of mutual assistance, protection, and a sense of community among international journalists. The study is exploratory and, rather than providing complex answers, points to a variety of topics that need to be further studied.

## Cross-border investigative journalism

The news media play a crucial role in ensuring transparency and accountability in government and society through their ability to investigate and report on events that impact the public. Over the past decade, the subfield of investigative journalism to which this role is central has seen an increased academic interest within the broader discipline of journalism studies (Carson, 2019). Yet, investigative journalism, characterised by unveiling complex truths, intriguingly continues to be a conundrum in academia, as scholars struggle to agree on a single definition (Larsen, 2017; Stetka & Örnebring, 2013). The field itself was shaped by trial and error, and the contours and identity were formed through mentorship and dialogues (Aucoin, 2005).

What differentiates investigative journalism from other beats is going beyond the narration of events; investigative journalists aim to report on activities that certain actors would prefer to remain hidden, unearthing unknown information and transforming it into stories (Gearing, 2016). Though other common denominators have been established, the main defining element of investigative journalism is holding those in power accountable (Houston, 2009). Stetka and Örnebring (2013, p. 415) offer a comprehensive definition, stating that investigative journalism is "sustained news coverage of moral and legal transgressions of persons in positions of power and that requires more time and resources than regular news reporting".

When journalists engage in investigative journalism, they take on the mantle of the watchdogs of society, assuming the position of a detached observer and articulating a critical attitude towards political and business elites (see Hanitzsch, 2011). Their dedication to holding those in power accountable for their actions is so vital that it has been likened to “the lifeblood of democracy itself” (Leigh, 2019) and “a bulwark of democracy” (Lanosga & Martin, 2018; see also Kieran, 2000 and Schultz, 2009). Indeed, investigative journalism is more than reporting; it is a professional social responsibility discourse (De Burgh, 2000) that highlights the crucial connection between press freedom and the responsibility to monitor and hold the government accountable. Among various forms of journalism, investigative journalism stands out as the most politically active and essential in fulfilling this responsibility (Lanosga & Houston, 2016).

While investigative journalism was traditionally known as a lone-wolf practice, it has become increasingly large-scale, global and collaborative (Konow-Lund & Høiby, 2021). Large data leaks became more commonplace during the big data revolution in the 21st century, which inevitably led to an increase in collaboration and cross-border international investigations (Aucoin, 2005). The key elements of cross-border collaborations are the involvement of journalists from different countries; cooperation on a shared theme or story; compilation, mutual cross-checking, merging, and publication of findings that need to be individually fact-checked and adjusted to national or local target audiences and journalism cultures (Alfter, 2019). Some authors have stressed the “fascination with data” (Romero-Domínguez, 2024, p. 13) – the considerable attention given to data collection, processing, and visualisation within the cross-border networks – and criticized the hegemony of big tech and platforms as structures limiting journalists’ ownership and free management of data (Candea, 2020). Importantly, journalists working on cross-border investigative projects do not compete but cooperate; at the same time, the large scale can increase the burden of responsibility.

### Challenges, threats and dangers

Contemporary journalists face risks to safety and well-being globally (Anderson, 2018), depending on the way they work and what they cover in their reporting (Høiby & Ottosen, 2019). Investigative journalists face different risks, threats and challenges than conflict reporters; they will “naturally provoke responses from its targets, including organised crime, financial criminals, despots, or simply people with power” (Konow-Lund & Høiby, 2021). Extant literature mentions diverse kinds of threats for investigative journalists working on cross-border collaborations in Europe: legal, economic or financial, and physical (such as physical attacks) versus online threats (such as digital surveillance).

A common legal threat is the misuse of defamation laws against investigative journalists (McGonagle et al., 2020). In a 2014 study on violence and intimidation of journalists in Europe, 500 reports were verified and published in six months, of which 108 incidents involved legal measures taken against journalists (Index on Censorship, 2014). At the time of writing, there are 128 journalists in detention across Europe, and 32 cases of impunity for murder (Safety of Journalists Platform, 2023). A major legal threat to journalists in Europe are strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs; Bayer et al., 2021; Vass, 2023). These lawsuits are typically filed by powerful entities such as corporations, public officials, or high-profile individuals against non-government individuals or organisations that have expressed a critical stance on matters of political interest or societal significance (Verza, 2023). The aim of a SLAPP is not necessarily to win the lawsuit but to use the legal process to intimidate or deter

critics (Rucz, 2022) and, as we also illustrate in the analysis, are deemed toxic and psychologically impactful (Siebert, Peterson, & Schramm, 1963), posing potential repercussions for journalists' mental well-being.

At the same time, newspapers in developed economies are seeing a loss in revenue, resulting in a decrease in print media – including those exposing corporate wrongdoing (Carson, 2014). Social media platforms are also increasingly undermining the viability of professional news media, with Google and Meta receiving around half of all worldwide digital advertising revenues, while newspapers' advertising income has halved between 2016 and 2021. Funding primarily relies on philanthropists and donor-driven incentives, causing editors of small non-profits to spend their time chasing money rather than investigating, not to mention working on bigger or long-term investigative projects (Leigh, 2019; Walton, 2010). While permanently employed journalists find themselves occupied with administrative tasks, freelancers face numerous risks, job security and lack of benefits, making it challenging for them to engage in full-time investigative journalism at decent pay and in a conducive environment for their well-being (Gollmitzer, 2014; Ladendorf, 2013). In a 2015 survey of freelance investigative journalists, a significant majority reported having to abandon public-interest stories due to resource constraints (Project Word, 2015; see also Lanosga & Houston, 2016).

When it comes to physical threats for journalists, the murders of three investigative journalists in Europe in recent years, namely Daphne Caruana Galizia in Malta in 2017, Ján Kuciak in Slovakia in 2018 and Peter R. de Vries in the Netherlands in 2021, signify a presence of danger (Safety of Journalists Platform, 2023). Other threats for journalists come in the form of online and offline harassment, intimidation, violence, tracking and digital surveillance, and gendered attacks on female investigative journalists. Of the 500 verified reports in the Index of Censorship study on violence and intimidation of journalists in Europe, 61 concerned violent attacks on journalists, while 31 were cases of online harassment (Index on Censorship, 2014). In the age of digital media and social platforms, online harassment is a new threat to journalists that has paralleled an increase in both on- and offline harassment of journalists (Chen et al., 2020) and has increased work-related stress (Holton et al., 2021). Journalists have reported an increase in work beyond traditional work hours, as the merging of personal and professional content on their platforms can lead to a disrupted work-life balance and a need for multitasking skills (Cohen, 2019). This has resulted in 'social media fatigue' and burnout (Bossio & Holton, 2019), and news organisations have shown a lack of systemic efforts to address it (Holton et al., 2021).

The online working environment also brings threats in terms of internet surveillance, considered one of the most pressing concerns of journalism in the digital age (Berret, 2017). Investigative reporters represent the most vulnerable category due to the inherent risks associated with probing sensitive subjects and environments (Posetti, 2018). Particularly women are under attack, as they are marginalised, criticised and threatened based on their gender (Chen et al., 2020). Furthermore, over the past decade, risks have gone global, mirroring the expansion of investigative reporting, technology, and the global media landscape (Konow-Lund & Høiby, 2023). Projects that cross borders involve journalists from different cultures and countries, where safety and protection vary significantly.

## Mental well-being

Despite the various kinds of precarity, journalists enjoy working in the field; in a 2016 study, four out of five investigative journalists reported being fairly or very satisfied in their jobs (Lanosga & Houston, 2016). However, the immense responsibility and the challenges and pressures above – the online harassment and offline threats, the experienced precarity and job insecurity, and the legal threats – can jeopardize journalists' mental well-being (e.g., Gollmitzer, 2014). While myriad research has been conducted on PTSD in journalists, particularly for war, conflict and disaster reporters (e.g. Seely, 2019; Feinstein et al., 2014; Beam & Spratt, 2009), little academic attention has been paid to the mental well-being of investigative journalists.

The interest in mental well-being among journalists is a part of the larger emotional turn in journalism studies, turning journalists' emotional labour and mental well-being into a prominent research topic (Kotissova, 2019a; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2020). While journalism studies rarely engage with definitions of mental well-being, psychology defines the concept either as subjective wellbeing, thus studying personal pleasure, happiness, affect, and life satisfaction, or as psychological wellbeing: optimal psychological functioning, self-realisation, meaning or purpose, and positive relationships (van Agteren et al., 2021). This study combines both dimensions while focusing on work-related factors of mental well-being. We also look into coping strategies, which can be defined as “a response aimed at diminishing the physical, emotional, and psychological burden that is linked to stressful events and daily hassles” (Snyder, 1999, p. 5). Coping strategies are thus “those responses that are effective in reducing an undesirable ‘load’ (i.e., the psychological burden)” (ibid.). Effective coping strategies can reduce immediate distress and produce more long-term outcomes such as psychological well-being.

Existing research suggests that journalists generally tend to resort to denial and avoidance strategies when it comes to dealing with emotion and stress, aiming to control themselves and distancing from the situation (Kotišová, 2017; Hopper & Huxford, 2015; Jukes, 2017; Seely, 2019). A study looking into the impact of the murder of Slovak investigative journalist Ján Kuciak on other investigative journalists in the country concluded that journalists tend to deal with such severe loss by working intensively and using a variety of coping strategies, ranging from seeking support to avoidance and displacement (Urbániková & Haniková, 2021). By comparison, Stupart (2022), in his research on investigative journalists in South Africa, shows how reporters embrace anger as a powerful motivating force. Likewise, Kotišová and Van der Velden (2023) illustrate how open-source investigators (e.g., Bellingcat) use their emotions as a methodological-epistemological tool, a motivational force or an indicator of on-the-ground reality. However, no study to date has dealt specifically with mental well-being challenges triggered by the manifold threats, risks, and corresponding emotional difficulties that cross-border investigative journalists potentially face. This research looks into the challenges to mental well-being specific to cross-border investigative projects and investigates involved journalists' coping mechanisms while also discussing the emotional support that the collaboration provides.

## Methods

This study took a qualitative approach to get a detailed insight into participants' views on their mental well-being, including descriptions of their experiences, feelings and emotions

(Treadwell, 2013; Creswell, 2009). This approach allowed for the interpretation by the researchers, helping them holistically understand the human experience of investigative journalists at work (Denzin & Lincoln, 2001). The study is based on semi-structured interviews with eighteen investigative journalists who have worked on collaborative cross-border investigations in Europe. They were selected through purposeful sampling based on their specific knowledge and experience with the topic of interest, i.e., we identified and selected a diversity of European journalists who had been involved in cross-border investigations, particularly those who worked on large-scale investigations initiated, conducted or overseen by organisations like ICIJ and OCCRP<sup>2</sup>, and contacted them through means of personal networks and online searches, particularly through the social media platform LinkedIn and by email.

The participants come from fifteen different countries across Europe: the Netherlands, Latvia, Luxembourg, Italy, Spain, Finland, the UK, Romania, Switzerland, Denmark, Slovenia, Malta, Czechia, Poland and Portugal. There is a gender imbalance among the participants, as eleven interviewees are male while seven interviewees are female. The majority of participants worked on large international investigations, such as the Panama Papers, the Pandora Papers, the Offshore Leaks, and the Malta Files. Most of the journalists worked, at least once, with large non-profits such as the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ), the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) and Forbidden Stories. Several participants founded their own investigative journalism organisations in their respective countries. Two of the eighteen participants worked as full-time freelancers, three founded their own organisations, and thirteen were employed by media organisations; we mention their employment status where it is relevant (e.g., where the situation of freelancers is specific/worsened).

The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format, using an interview guide that covered the main topics of the study. The IG provided a focused structure without the need to be followed strictly, allowing both the researcher and the interviewee a degree of flexibility (Poth & Creswell, 2007), while also addressing predetermined topics and questions (Gill et al., 2008).

All interviews incorporated into the research were conducted online between March and May 2023 and were one-on-one, creating a private setting where participants could share their personal experiences. Considering the sensitive and deeply personal nature of the topic, the participants were informed that the research process utilises anonymisation (Saunders et al., 2015) and provided a detailed abstract of the study beforehand. Any concerns regarding the topic or use of data were clarified and interviewees provided signed informed consent forms before the interviews were conducted, ensuring they participated voluntarily and with full awareness of what they consented to. They later renewed their consent before the submission of the manuscript of this paper. The interviews, typically lasting around an hour, varied in length from 35 to 85 minutes. All interviews except one (Dutch) were carried out in English and were recorded and subsequently transcribed. The transcriptions were analysed using thematic analysis and presented in written form, containing quotes from the interviews to substantiate the concept (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Forty-one codes were identified and organised into three themes: challenges in cross-border collaborations, mental well-being, and

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<sup>2</sup> All but one of the interviewees collaborated with dozens or hundreds of colleagues.

coping mechanisms. The interviews and their analysis were conducted by the first author and supervised by the second author. The participants are anonymised throughout the analysis and are only referred to by nationality, region (e.g., CEE) and/or, where relevant, gender. We do so in diverse modifications and combinations to make sure that the research participants are not identifiable.

Although the described methods offer detailed data and in-depth analysis, it is important to note that the participants might not be fully aware of the influence of certain challenges on their personal well-being or might encounter difficulties in relating their experiences. As with any interview-based study, this research is thus limited to the research participants' discursive and narrative sense-making and identity construction.

## Challenges in cross-border investigative journalism

Investigative journalists engaged in cross-border collaborations face a myriad of general challenges, encompassing difficulties in accessing data, grappling with the intricate process of identifying compelling stories, contending with powerful subjects and potential harassment, and managing the relentless pressure of tight deadlines. Additionally, sifting through extensive datasets to develop narratives proves time-consuming and stressful, with potential emotional tolls when investigations yield no significant findings. On a structural level, major issues pertain to legal challenges complicating cross-border collaborations due to a lack of cross-border legislation, inadequate financial support structures, varying levels of protection for journalists in different countries, and digital and physical threats. Each of these areas would require a separate study; in this paper, we only map their most significant implications for cross-border investigative journalists' mental well-being.

Financial challenges are a pervasive issue in investigative journalism, with a chronic lack of resources affecting journalists and organisations. Most of the interviewees highlight economic pressures and emphasise the success of cross-border collaborations hinging on adequate funding. Economic strains are particularly severe in Central and Eastern Europe where concerns about structural funding and related burnout (see below) are prevalent. Independent media outlets, especially small and young ones, face significant economic challenges, impacting core funding. The cross-border collaborations further intensify the financial pressure, often requiring additional time and effort on top of journalists' regular responsibilities, particularly from freelancers:

“If we work on a huge global investigation programme, they never pay. This is, you know, everyone finances themselves.” (freelance CEE journalist)

These resource limitations particularly impact countries with younger or weaker traditions of investigative journalism, and also junior journalists, who thus “feel that they are never done” (Dutch journalist), exacerbating existing challenges. Another factor mentioned is funding being blocked or prevented by corruption, which can delay the process of working on projects.

Legal challenges in investigative journalism vary depending on the legal framework of the country, impacting the protection and well-being of journalists. Thirteen out of the eighteen participants had encountered legal issues, ranging from threatening letters to SLAPPs (Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation). While Dutch and Danish journalists highlight



the security and privilege afforded by their countries' robust legal frameworks, emphasising the positive impact on their well-being and freedom to work, in countries like Romania and Slovenia, participants express apprehensions about working safely due to inadequate legal support. Journalists in countries with less legal backing, such as Malta and the UK, view legal threats as commonplace. "What they do, usually, is they try to make your work and your life miserable", a journalist from Switzerland says about subjects under investigation, saying they intend to "make you mentally unstable". Journalists universally underscore the critical role of a strong legal framework for their safety and investigative freedom, navigating a complex relationship with authorities that involves both reliance on protection and, paradoxically, potential threats and harassment.

Cross-border collaborations are inherently remote, and navigating the digital landscape brings about a spectrum of challenges, with online harassment at the forefront. Whereas the gravity of general, legal and financial challenges appears to depend on journalists' geographic location, online harassment notably comes with gender disparities. While some male journalists report minimal harassment, their female counterparts often grapple with intensified attacks and stalking and describe facing trolls and hateful comments, reflecting a broader societal issue. A CEE journalist cuts to the chase when asked about online harassment:

"I have a lot of haters, of course."

"Having haters" online is sometimes seen as a norm in journalism more broadly. Our interviewees describe the constant uncertainty and potential risks as stressful, labelling digital security as a significant challenge. Another issue journalists experience is digital surveillance. A CEE journalist mentions how difficult it is to completely protect oneself from being surveilled, and highlights the importance of recognising and preventing potential threats in their work:

"You can't really protect yourself from being followed. It's not up to your decision if you are followed or not."

Beyond the digital realm, physical threats emerge as a tangible concern for journalists. Eleven journalists mentioned physical threats, including physical attacks, stalking, and receiving threatening letters and objects at their home addresses. While journalists from certain countries express little concern about physical safety, the chilling cases of journalists' murders in Malta, Slovakia, and the Netherlands serve as stark reminders of the potential severity of these threats. A CEE colleague summarises:

"You know, I think most of the European countries are safe. At least in terms of basic physical safety, even though the Daphne case has shown that it can be different."

#### Radical sharing with 'international family': Higher stakes, higher standards

The cross-border nature of investigations introduces disparities between journalists based in different countries, as lawsuits can arise within respective jurisdictions. Several journalists highlighted the vulnerability of individual legal exposure despite collaborative efforts, which can prove particularly challenging for freelancers who lack the robust legal support typically available in established newsrooms. A CEE journalist was once sued for their involvement in an international investigation, while the same body of work earned a major journalism award for his colleagues based in the United States. They said:

“You are publishing that reporting and adding whatever local stuff, with your byline on it, and you do it in your own country. You will be sued and you will have to pay for it. Nobody will cover your ass for that, it’s ridiculous.”

Journalists feel a heightened responsibility in collaborative projects. Accuracy is of critical importance, as any mistake can lead to a loss of trust and credibility, impacting not only individual journalists but the entire collaborative effort:

“Even if you think you’re being paranoid, you’re still probably not being paranoid enough. [...] You should never ever think in terms of a small mistake and a big mistake. A small mistake can be just as bad and you undermine everything else, you betray your colleagues. [...] You’re either credible or not credible. [...] The small mistakes would turn out to be damn big ones.” (Journalist from the UK)

Journalists also emphasise the demanding nature of cross-border collaborations in journalism, particularly regarding the concept of “radical sharing”. This involves sharing all materials, such as data and research, with colleagues abroad, writing memos in English, and aiding colleagues. Collaborations are built on trust and reciprocity, where help is both given and received quickly, which is simultaneously highly stressful and time-consuming. A Finnish journalist explained:

“If it’s a cross-border collaboration, you get a lot of extra jobs because it’s about radical sharing. So we share everything. [...] You can trust each other, but it’s even more stressful or more work when it’s a cross-border collaboration. [...] And the bad part of the work is, it’s much more, it’s always more coordination. You have to help out and that takes time, and you do a lot in your spare time, and so on.”

At the same time, a quarter of the journalists emphasised the importance of trust and support, as such collaborations are depicted as a means of providing mutual assistance, protection, and a sense of community among international journalists. Collaboration means sharing ideas, findings, and emotions, enabling journalists to work together on complex investigations. The Swiss journalist states:

“I think if you’re a little experienced in this field, we all know that mental and physical errors in our work are big problems. So of course, there is this mutual support. We totally understand each other and there is never a judgement.”

The sense of responsibility is likened to the notion that a collaboration network is a big family, transcending geographical borders, becoming a support group, and providing both fun and motivation. Trust is underlined as a crucial element in these partnerships, and it’s emphasised that personal ego must be left behind to foster successful collaboration. However, there are also flaws in the collaborations. One journalist notes the absence of formal debriefing protocols in the field, leading journalists to resort to informal, often alcohol-tinged gatherings and conferences for discussion and reflection.

## ‘Closing the door from your office can cost your life’: Burnout, insomnia, and impossible work-life balance

According to our interviewees’ narratives, all these challenges specific to investigative *and* cross-border project work, directly – and usually negatively – impact their mental well-being. The lack of funding and related financial struggles is a stress factor in itself and also results in poorer infrastructure to cope with mental well-being. SLAPPs and other legal threats aim to undermine journalists’ efforts, creating stress and discouraging investigative work, and are deemed toxic and psychologically impactful. The pressure to meet high standards, comply with various countries’ rules, and maintain confidentiality adds to the stress. While digital risks such as online harassment are also present in other journalistic beats (Lewis et al., 2020; Posetti et al., 2020), the continuous fear of digital surveillance poses an investigation-specific challenge, compromising journalists’ security and contributing to heightened stress levels and paranoia (the latter mentioned e.g. by a CEE journalist). Despite taking precautions, instances of compromised digital security lead to feelings of unsafety. The need for meticulous self-policing and the psychological toll of being constantly under surveillance are evident, highlighting the delicate balance journalists must strike between safety and functionality.

As a result, investigative journalists involved in cross-border collaborations often grapple with significant mental well-being issues, ranging from burnout, exhaustion, and sleep disturbances to an overall imbalance between their personal and professional lives. In the sample of eighteen journalists, ten participants reported experiencing burnout, tiredness, or exhaustion, while others stated that it is a common occurrence among colleagues:

“I think burnout, in my line of work, it’s just normal. Everyone, everyone had it a few times. I have, I think, I had two times or three even.”

While these issues are relatively common among reporters witnessing extreme violence (e.g. Feinstein et al., 2014), the psychological and mental well-being of investigative journalists can be targeted by the powerful actors they write about through legal threats or digital surveillance and affected by continuous pressure and fear. A Swiss journalist who faced both physical and online threats during their investigations said:

“The goal is to make you weaker. You know, let you give up. So it’s really targeting your mental health. Because I mean, then you don’t feel strong anymore. You might be fearful and then you might give up.”

The Swiss journalist recounts instances of panic attacks triggered by their work, emphasising their need for strategies to safeguard their mental health. They confess to moments when the threats were overwhelming enough to evoke a desire to “run away”. Another journalist confesses to one incident where stress led to physical sickness, though they preferred not to delve into the specifics.

Another common issue among investigative journalists is sleep deprivation, often in combination with “running on adrenaline”. Rather than deriving their energy from rest, journalists often rely on the stimulating effect that their work provides. The combination of sleep deprivation and adrenaline-fueled energy may serve as a short-term coping mechanism for journalists working under high-stress conditions (like reporters covering conflicts), but also

suggests an unsustainable practice that could contribute to long-term well-being challenges. A Finnish journalist admitted their team sleeps “very badly”, while an Italian journalist says:

“I can work until four or five in the morning the night without being exhausted, because you’re so excited. [...] Of course, at five o’clock in the night, I have to go to sleep.”

The intense nature of cross-border investigations and the high demands they impose on journalists raise concerns about their working conditions, such as working long hours, a lack of breaks during an investigation, and the pressures that come with responsibility. While some journalists highlight the flexibility that comes with the investigative nature of the job, the stress of managing the workload appears to be a challenge for all participants, regardless of their employment status. Spanish and Italian journalists shed light on this immense pressure faced by investigative reporters during cross-border investigations, detailing the high stakes that come with decision-making and an absence of mental breaks. A freelance CEE journalist also mentions the constant pressure and uncertainty faced in the profession, stating there is a lack of professional support. Additionally, there are logistical challenges in cross-border collaborations, such as different time zones necessitating meetings at unconventional times and extra coordination.

Over half of the journalists thus say that a healthy work-life balance is difficult to reach in a field where long working hours are the norm and work-related thoughts often spill over into personal life. The all-consuming nature of investigative journalism, where work and investigations are a constant, round-the-clock activity, makes disconnecting from work a challenge, infringing on personal and family time. A journalist stated that “you never really stop”, which is “very toxic for your mental health”. At the same time, a CEE journalist highlights the risk that comes with separating work from your personal life:

“You can’t just close the doors from your office and, you know, stop following what’s happening, because it can cost your life. [...] You need to find the limit of risk you’re willing to take to live a normal life.”

## Coping mechanisms: Normalisation and individualisation of mental well-being issues

Journalists commonly normalise such hardships and accept them as intrinsic to their profession, the prevailing sentiment being that challenging conditions are simply “part of the job”. Journalists from various countries share this perspective, emphasising the need for a thick skin as pressure is a permanent aspect of their work. Other journalists trivialise the challenges, asserting that they “learn how to live with it” and that experience helps develop coping mechanisms. Another method by which these journalists mitigate the perceived risk and challenges associated with their work is by comparing the working conditions in their safe and democratic countries to the situation in more perilous regions with a history of physical threats. Another journalist, for instance, minimised the potential dangers of their work, stating:

“We don’t live in Russia. They do have such physical threats. ... We live in a democracy, and it’s not so dangerous.”

While dismissing struggles as an unavoidable “part of the job” indicates an underlying reluctance to acknowledge and address such concerns, most journalists say they have developed resilience and coping mechanisms through experience. Most coping mechanisms among journalists dealing with challenges affecting their well-being are, indeed, individualised. The interviewees reveal diverse strategies, such as accurate reporting, intensive fact-checking, and self-censorship to prevent threats and minimise mental stress. Some journalists emphasise the importance of discussing mental well-being with colleagues, friends, and family, while others rely on (dark) humour to bond over shared hardships. Despite universal and structural challenges faced by journalists, the coping strategies remain predominantly individualised, leaving journalists to navigate systemic pressures on their own.

There has been a systemic neglect of mental well-being in the profession (see Bélair-Gagnon et al., 2024). Cultural norms within the sector still appear to stigmatise emotional expression, fostering individual coping mechanisms over structural support (Kotišová, 2019b). A few journalists call for systemic improvements, including better support and training, challenging the prevailing notion that mental well-being threats are an unavoidable part of journalism. For example, having a supportive editor to rely on is a crucial coping strategy (cf. Perreault & Tham, 2023). The universal consensus among journalists is also the key role of a strong legal framework in ensuring safety and investigative freedom, despite the paradoxical nature of their relationship with authorities, involving both reliance on protection and potential threats. Our interviewees altogether paint a picture of a profession fraught with complex pressures, relying on a blend of informal, communal, and tactical support systems, which may call for a more organised and institutional approach to well-being and professional development.

The mental well-being challenges, but also the support (systems) mirror country-specific challenges, arising from varying legal constraints and institutional disparities. Where safety measures beyond physical safety are lacking, and this lack is coupled with additional burdens on journalists engaged in cross-border work, especially freelancers or women, the mental well-being risks are more difficult to navigate. At the same time, however, a quarter of the journalists underscore the importance of mutual assistance and support that cross-border collaborations, unlike more individualised modes of journalism practice, provide (see also Aucoin, 2005).

## Discussion: Cross-border investigative journalists’ well-being must stop being overlooked

In summary, investigative journalists engaged in cross-border collaborations face formidable challenges with profound implications for their mental well-being. The data suggests that the relentless nature of their work, combined with external pressures such as legal threats, online harassment, and compromised security, leads to pervasive issues like burnout, sleep disturbances, and heightened stress levels.

The role of investigative journalists working on large cross-border collaborations involves confronting powerful entities. This interaction can yield an array of physical and online threats, posing significant psychological challenges. Journalists are frequently subjected to intimidation tactics, including threatening letters, psychological manipulation, and false accusations (Cohen, 2019). Journalists observe that these tactics are insidious by design, seeking to undermine the journalists’ resilience and psychological well-being. For example,

SLAPPs are seen not only as a legal challenge but also as an intimidation mechanism that is meant to weaken the journalists' determination (see Rucz, 2022).

The multifaceted challenges faced by journalists do not exist in a vacuum. They are embedded within broader, structural issues, such as financial constraints, precarious working conditions and a lack of systemic support for journalists' mental well-being (Kotišová, 2019b; Bélair-Gagnon et al., 2024).

While the cross-border collaborative model provides a space for dialogue, mentorship (Aucoin, 2005), and togetherness, it also increases the stakes, responsibility, and workload, and complicates coordination. The regional disparities add a layer of complexity, with legal constraints and different degrees of protection against threats, creating diverse challenges for journalists across different sociopolitical contexts. The challenges that investigative journalists face are thus significantly influenced by country-specific factors, including legal constraints which may limit the scope of investigations, restrict the publication of certain information, or impose varying standards of privacy and personal protection. Moreover, the disparities extend to an institutional level, with stark inequalities observed between countries that primarily serve as sources of news and those that control its collection and publication. Freelance journalists, particularly those in countries with shorter traditions of investigative journalism or journalistic professionalism, and junior journalists often bear the brunt of these disparities, facing an array of challenges which can include inadequate support structures, precarious job security, and inconsistent remuneration. Furthermore, these journalists often bear the consequences of their publications personally, facing backlash, legal action, or other forms of retaliation. Such country-specific problems underscore the need for a more equitable global framework for journalism that recognises and addresses the unique challenges faced by journalists across diverse sociopolitical contexts.

Alarmingly, the responsibility to confront these issues and manage mental well-being tends to fall on the individual, with coping strategies existing at a predominantly individual level, highlighting an institutional reluctance to recognise and rectify systemic problems. Yet, the described complexity of the challenges underscores the urgent need for systemic improvements in supporting journalists. While some normalise these hardships as an inherent part of the job, others stress the toll on mental well-being and call for increased awareness and resources. The profound impact on personal lives, sleep patterns, and work-life balance emphasises the necessity of addressing these issues for the sustainability of cross-border investigative journalism.

For investigative journalism to contribute to democracy and social responsibility (De Burgh, 2000; Lanosga & Houston, 2016), journalists need to be mentally and physically well. As Gollmitzer (2014, p. 837) writes, "journalists who value 'good' journalism [...] find it increasingly difficult to exercise this kind of journalism [...] in an environment conducive to – or at least not jeopardising – their physical and mental well-being". Investigative journalists consider their work important, rewarding and fulfilling, but the discourse of social responsibility (De Burgh, 2000) becomes somewhat paradoxical as their personal mental well-being tends to be overlooked despite the pressures they face. The everyday stressors associated with the profession, coupled with journalists' tendency to downplay their effects rather than seek support, significantly strain their mental well-being.

Addressing mental well-being within the journalism profession is complicated by cultural norms that stigmatise the expression of personal emotions and employ denial and avoidance strategies. The belief is that emotions may lead to bias or misrepresentation of facts (Seely, 2019; Buchanan & Keats, 2011) and journalists are expected to be resilient and emotionally detached. This is particularly the case of investigative journalists fulfilling the watchdog role that comes with critical attitude and detachment (Hatnizsch, 2011). As showing personal emotions is often seen as taboo in the profession, journalists tend to use denial and avoidance strategies to cope, often resulting in their emotional well-being being side-lined.

It is important to note that a precarious landscape is not exclusive to investigative journalism but pervades the entire journalism profession, reinforcing the necessity for a comprehensive understanding of these issues (Cohen, 2019). While the content of journalism can induce mental stress (Feinstein et al., 2014; Beam & Spratt, 2009), it is not the sole cause. As this study shows, underlying issues may stem from precarious working conditions, an entrenched overwork culture, and a lack of systemic support for journalists' mental well-being.

In light of these findings, this research advocates for comprehensive reforms within the industry, urging a paradigm shift that prioritises the mental well-being and safety of investigative journalists. Recognising mental well-being in journalism as a systemic rather than individual concern is crucial for preserving societal transparency and accountability. Improved mental well-being could contribute to higher-quality collaborative cross-border investigative journalism initiatives, benefiting society at large. Enhancements in working conditions, work culture, and coping strategies can illuminate a path towards this much-needed change. With concerted efforts towards systemic change, the field of journalism can move from a precarious landscape to one that respects and nurtures the well-being of its critical players.

This study explores the broad context for a path towards improved well-being in cross-border investigative journalism. Further research using different methods is needed to determine the scope of the work-related mental well-being issues within the sub-field, as well as the role of individual factors such as freelancing, seniority, and gender. Future research could also scrutinise existing initiatives supporting the mental well-being of (investigative) journalists, such as *The Self Investigation* (2023). Coping mechanisms, their cultural variations and variable safety standards in cross-border projects is another potential topic for future exploration. Comparative analyses of how cultural contexts and legal systems influence journalists' experiences and in-depth examinations of handling legal threats and digital challenges could illuminate the strengths and weaknesses of current coping strategies and stimulate discussions on how they could be enhanced to better support journalists.

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