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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Survival in the Passion Economy: Mental Health and Well-Being of Local Journalism Entrepreneurs

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the mental health and well-being of local journalism entrepreneurs in the UK context. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 57 journalists in 2020 and 2021, 10 in 2022 and 7 in 2023, the paper focuses on key trade-offs that shape the experiences of local news entrepreneurs. First, these journalists experience their work as meaningful and rewarding, but at the same time it requires significant financial and lifestyle sacrifices. Second, while they enjoy the autonomy associated with their work, some experience challenges due to loneliness and isolation. As such, local journalism entrepreneurs constitute a particular manifestation of workers in the "passion economy": While they are making significant material sacrifices and experience financial precarity, their passion is informed by their embeddedness in the community. The paper ultimately underscores the importance of problematizing the passion economy in relation to both professionals' mental health and well-being and an analysis of the systemic and structural causes of stresses and sacrifices.

Introduction

Local journalism entrepreneurs have stepped into the gap left by the dramatic decline of traditional local and regional newspapers over the past decades. Since 2010, the UK alone has seen the foundation of more than 400 local news outlets, sometimes referred to as hyperlocals or community news providers. All of these are digital journalism outlets, while 40% also publish print editions (Wahl-Jorgensen 2022). The rise of this sector is not accidental: First, the crisis in local journalism has caused the closure of established news organizations and resulted in layoffs of large numbers of experienced journalists. Second, technological change has facilitated the creation of digital news outlets by lowering entry barriers (Chadha 2016). Although most of these outlets are small in terms of geographic and audience reach, they collectively have significant reach, with one in five UK citizens regularly accessing news from such providers (Burrell 2020). They have been seen as crucial to the health of local democracy and community life (Williams, Harte, and Turner 2015). The Covid-19 pandemic

heightened awareness of the importance of the sector and led to targeted support (e.g., Tobitt 2020).

Despite the growing recognition of their importance to local communities, these start-ups operate on a precarious basis in terms of both financial and human resources (Cheverton 2022). They are frequently run by a single person, who serves as both editor and journalist, as well as being responsible for managing the commercial operations of the outlet. A 2021 survey of community journalism practitioners, carried out as part of the larger project that this paper draws on, showed that 18.1% of respondents indicated that just one person was working on their publication, while the remaining 81.9% had two or more people contributing. However, in most cases, additional contributors were volunteers or freelancers, rather than contracted employees (Wahl-Jorgensen 2022). This means that most of these editors see themselves as solely responsible for the outlets. The central reliance on a single person leaves the entrepreneurs vulnerable to risks including illness, burnout or changes in family circumstances. Burnout is endemic among journalists, with particularly high rates amongst those in precarious employment (e.g., Hayes and Silke 2018; Reinardy 2021). For local news entrepreneurs, these challenges are exacerbated by the workload and responsibilities associated with their outlets.

The paper focuses on how their work affects their mental health and well-being. It suggests that the experience of local news entrepreneurs is underpinned by their embeddedness in local communities and shaped by key trade-offs required by their work. First, these editors experience their work as meaningful and rewarding due to the central role of their outlets in local communities. This meaningfulness is viewed as a significant benefit in relation to mental health and well-being. But at the same time, the work necessitates significant sacrifices in terms of both income and workloads. Second, while they enjoy the autonomy associated with their work, some editors experience loneliness and isolation.

Local News Entrepreneurs and the Passion Economy

These entrepreneurs are structurally positioned within a broader "passion economy" in which individuals make material sacrifices to pursue more precarious, but creatively rewarding careers (Davidson 2020). If passion "is deeply embedded in the folklore and practice of entrepreneurship" (Cardon et al. 2009, 511), the growth of precarious and entrepreneurial labor in the creative industries has generated powerful narratives that inform the identities of professionals (Gill and Pratt 2008; Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2008). As Cardon et al. (2009, 515) defined it, "(1) entrepreneurial passion is a consciously accessible, intense positive feeling, and (2) entrepreneurial passion results from engagement in activities with identity meaning and salience to the entrepreneur." The idea of "passion" as underpinning the ideology of creative work "is compatible with and protects structures of work in the new economy because its logic of hyper individualism motivates workers to work hard and work well as a practice of self-care, shifting the locus of critique further away from institutions and more toward the self" (DePalma 2021, 134). As such, it is aligned to "neoliberal tenets of individualization and personal choice" (Duffy 2016, 441) but tends to render invisible structural and systemic causes and consequences of the exploitation of labor.

Recent years have seen a growing salience of "passion" as a commodity in journalistic work. Lindén et al. (2021) found that the decade between 2004 and 2013 saw a significant rise in the mentions of passion in journalistic job advertisements. In the context of journalistic work and other forms of creative labor, commitment to work is often justified with reference to a "higher calling" (Deuze and Witschge 2020, 58). This suggests that for entrepreneurial journalists, the importance of their affective commitment to their work may override commercial concerns.

The experiences of local news entrepreneurs reflect the specificity of their roles: While they are making significant material sacrifices and battle with financial precarity, they still feel passionate about their work because of their strong commitments to their communities.

Well-Being and Local News Entrepreneurs

In most cases, UK local news entrepreneurs have a background in professional journalism, and previously worked for national, regional, and local papers, but decided to start their own outlets in pursuit of greater autonomy and more rewarding work. This decision was made either because of job losses, or because of increasingly challenging working conditions in mainstream media. At the same time, however, these entrepreneurs are driven by an affective commitment to their communities, usually informed by long-standing local belonging, relationships, and networks. As Hanusch (2015) observed, local journalists can be seen as a "different breed altogether," shaped by their belonging in the local community (see also Hatcher and Haavik 2014).

While recent scholarship on local journalism has documented both the importance of this sector and the key challenges facing it (e.g., Harte and Matthews 2021), little attention has been paid to the well-being of its practitioners. However, the broader field of journalism studies has begun to take seriously issues of mental health and well-being. This work has been relatively slow in coming, in the context of a long history of journalists being viewed as detached and objective observers, untouched by the events they cover (Jukes 2020). Growing awareness of mental health issues, including in work settings (Wong and Greenwood 2023), has opened a space for discussion of journalists' mental health and well-being. Early work in this area focused on the trauma associated with covering conflict, spurred in part by several high-profile journalists sharing experiences of post-traumatic stress disorder (e.g., Anderson 2023), and the effort of organizations such as the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma. This work has gained significant momentum, in part because of a growing awareness of mental health issues in society, and in part due to an increase in physical violence, harassment and threats directed at journalists (e.g., Hughes and Vorobyeva 2021; Waisbord 2020).

Over time, this avenue of inquiry has matured into a broader interest in the well-being and happiness of journalists (Bélair-Gagnon et al. 2024; Deuze 2023). This has led to important new avenues for research, informed by ongoing social, economic and technological change. Such research has documented journalists' experience of job losses and exiting the profession (Davidson and Meyers 2016; Rick 2024), highlighting affective attachment to their work (Waschková Císařová 2021). Recent studies have also explored the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on journalists' well-being

(Abeykoon et al. 2024; Šimunjak 2022a), and examined how journalists navigate the pressures of social media, demonstrating the importance of placing boundaries between professional and social lives (Bossio and Holton 2021; Molyneux and Nelson 2023; Šimunjak 2022b). Further, questions of well-being have been considered in the context of the rise of the "gig economy," the casualization of labor and the impact of precarity on professionals (Chadha and Steiner 2021; Dugmore 2021; Palmer 2021).

I am here interested in investigating how local news entrepreneurs navigate well-being at work, informed by their labor conditions. The paper demonstrates that these journalists gain significant enjoyment from the perceived meaningfulness of the work, the autonomy they experience, and the central role they play in their communities. At the same time, they experience significant stress based on their workloads and the financial precarity of their outlets. This suggests that local news entrepreneurs embody a distinctive configuration of precarity: While their *financial* situation may be highly precarious, they also enjoy significant *recognition* and a sense of their work being *worthwhile*, premised on their centrality within their local communities. Their accounts demonstrate that the choice to become an entrepreneur involves complex trade-offs. These include trade-offs between happiness and material well-being; meaningful work and overwhelming workloads; and autonomy and isolation. The paper shows that negotiating these trade-offs is a dynamic process which entails the development of coping strategies and is subject to constant assessment. While this process of negotiation takes place at the individual level, local news entrepreneurs are also aware of structural causes of the challenges they experience.

Methodology

The article is based on in-depth interviews with 57 editors of local journalism startups, carried out over between June and September 2020, ten follow-up interviews in 2022, and a final seven follow-up interviews in 2023.[1] All interviewees were recruited from the membership of the Independent Community News Network (ICNN), the main organization representing the interests of the independent community news sector in the UK, and account for a significant proportion of the 123 members of ICNN. The interviews were carried out as part of a larger longitudinal project on the experiences of local news entrepreneurs, funded by the British Academy and the UK Economic and Social Research Council. While the 2020 and 2022 interviews covered a range of topics to provide a detailed picture of the lived experience of local journalism entrepreneurs, the 2023 interviews focused on issues of mental health and well-being, drawing on themes identified in the two earlier rounds. These included the key challenges experienced by interviewees, and the positive impact of their work.[2] All interviews were carried out over Zoom or by phone. Interviewees were given the option of being identified or remaining anonymous either for the interview as a whole, or in certain parts.[3] Interviews were transcribed with the assistance of otter.ai transcription software.

It is important to note that interviews cannot be seen as a straightforward source of "factual" data about the experiences of subjects. They must be viewed as socially constructed narratives which reveal how interviewees wish to present themselves in relation to prevailing norms and the cultural contexts in which they operate (Atkinson and Silverman 1997). Therefore, the interview data should be read through the lens

of the practitioners' allegiance to and advocacy for the type of journalism they practice. At the same time, the journalists included in this study are established and reputable local news entrepreneurs, given the formal requirements associated with membership of ICNN. This means that they are drawn from a population with a profile which may not be representative of the universe of local journalism entrepreneurs in terms of professional norms and practices.[4]

The article used a grounded theory approach in the analysis of interview data (Glaser and Strauss 1967). In the first phase, transcripts were analyzed in detail to identify key themes across all interviews. In the second phase, these themes were categorized to identify the most prominent and frequent in relation to the paper's focus on the well-being of local journalism entrepreneurs (Charmaz 2014, 113). The analysis revealed that themes around well-being in interviewee narratives were frequently structured in relation to trade-offs around the benefits and challenges of their works. This is, indeed, a commonly observed pattern among entrepreneurs (Cardon and Patel 2015). In the context of interview data analysis, this meant that themes rarely appeared in isolation, but were deeply interconnected. For example, as discussed in more detail below, interviewees frequently mentioned making material sacrifices while simultaneously noting the benefits of the normative value of their work, as well as flexibility and autonomy. In line with a grounded theory approach to interview data (Charmaz and Belgrave 2012, 352), the analysis therefore paid particular attention to language implying trade-offs as a "complication" of their accounts (Labov and Waletzky 1997).

Trade-off 1: Time and Money vs. meaningful Work

Interviewees highlighted that the choice to become an entrepreneur involves a series of complex trade-offs. These included trade-offs between the opportunity to do meaningful work and associated happiness and well-being on the one hand, and financial and workloads challenges on the other. The idea that a move into entrepreneurial work includes careful balancing acts is consistent with evidence from studies on the mental health of entrepreneurs. This body of research has found significant trade-offs between, on the one hand, the perceived importance and prestige of the work, alongside the autonomy (Bradley and Roberts 2004) and, on the other hand, high workloads and stress levels (e.g., Cardon and Patel 2015). As Cardon and Patel (2015, 379) note: "Self-employment is stressful and requires hard work, long hours, emotional energy, heightened job stress, role ambiguity and, above all, risk."

While the entrepreneurial field is diverse, many entrepreneurs are motivated by the promise of financial wealth (Baumol 1990). Social entrepreneurs, including editors of local news startups, however, diverge in this crucial respect: they frequently accept significant financial sacrifice and increases in workloads to do work that is perceived as socially valuable and rewarding.

Local journalism entrepreneurs referred to positive emotions in discussing their motivations, based on their "passion," "joy" and "love" for local journalism. This reflects a broader trend within the passion economy of the creative industries, where "doing what you love" has become a key mantra, which is widely used to justify individual sacrifices (Duffy 2016). At the same time, the journalists'

incantations of positive affect were frequently accompanied by accounts of their sacrifices, which they perceived as taking a toll on their mental health and well-being.

Ben Black, the editor of *Cwmbran Life*, juggled his journalistic work with a full-time job as a communications officer for the local housing authority. He discussed the challenges of fitting his journalistic work into his spare time, noting that it "takes a toll on family life, working evenings and weekends." At the same time, he said: "I love it, I love to do, I love it, I can't explain how happy it makes me just doing it" (2020 interview).

Community Belonging and Embeddedness as a Source of Well-Being

The love for local journalism was linked to a sense of belonging and making a positive difference in the community. One editor who had previously worked for mainstream news organizations around the UK before starting his news outlet in his hometown, observed that the work was worthwhile because of "the closeness of being in my community, doing what I love…a big part for me is when…people sort of stop me and tell me their news, and I don't think I would get that working for another organization, that closeness" (Anonymous editor 1, 2023 interview).

Research has found that a sense of belonging in the local community is essential to the identities of local journalists. For Seth Lewis and colleagues, practices of community journalism are essentially about "connectedness and embeddedness" (2014, 232) within a particular location, enabling meaningful exchange or "reciprocal journalism." Vos and Hanusch (2024) further developed the idea of embeddedness. They propose the term as a key tool for advancing a holistic understanding of journalistic cultures, encapsulating the extent to which journalists are embedded within "communities' experiences, values, histories, places, and languages" (1). Closeness to the community, while essential to local journalism practitioners, has been viewed as problematic in journalism scholarship because it represents a challenge to professional ideals of detachment and objectivity (Vos and Hanusch 2024). Indeed, being embedded in local communities was a core positive value for interviewees and was seen to merit their significant sacrifices.

James Hatts, who had been editing a long-standing community news website in an affluent area of London since taking over from his father, reflected on his reasons for carrying on:

> I mean, I believe in local news. I believe this is important. When things go well and you can make a difference, it's enjoyable. I'm very privileged in the area that I cover is one of the most stimulating and lively parts of central London. And the other reason I carry on is because of encouragement from, from our community, from our readers, from people who clearly value what we do and that kind of, it gives you a bit of energy to push on to the next challenge. (James Hatts, Bankside Press/London SE1, 2020 interview)

The sense of normative value associated with embeddedness in the community was also reflected in editors' pride in important stories they had covered. These ranged from nationally important issues such as knife crime and unsafe social housing to stories that may seem mundane in broader contexts but made a significant difference

locally, including the closure of public toilets, dog fouling, local council corruption and campaigns for green space.

Beyond the intrinsic rewards of working on stories that the journalists view as important, many also expressed appreciation for their recognition and social standing within the community, and the opportunities that this brought. Their examples included meeting famous actors in covering the local Christmas pantomime, cutting ribbons for local buildings, being recognized while participating in the weekly local Parkrun, and being invited to receptions at the UK Prime Minister's residence in Number 10 Downing Street.

For entrepreneurs who valued markers of recognition and standing in their community, such perks of the job weighed heavily in their assessments of trade-offs. Michael Casey of *Your Thurrock* reflected in detail on this. In the morning before our interview, Casey had been called to a police scene in an underpass, where a dead body had been found. The encounter with the dead body was traumatic for Casey, who had worked as a police officer prior to entering journalism, and had started to find frequent encounters with death difficult to handle emotionally:

> There's a lovely theatre group called the Heath Players. They're based in Hatfield Heath, just outside of Harlow. And when I go to review their shows [...] they have my ticket for me and my program, they take me into my reserved seat. At the interval, they have a complimentary glass of red wine. [...] And sometimes I wish every day was a Heath Players day. And I think you've got to make sure you have the balance in your police scenes and your Heath Players scenes. (Michael Casey, 2023 interview)

For Casey, then, the management of mental health relied on an ongoing and deliberate balancing act, ensuring that the elements of the job he viewed as emotionally difficult (the police scenes) were counterbalanced with those that were rewarding (the Health Players days).

To other entrepreneurs, the assessment of trade-offs took a more holistic form, encompassing longer-term considerations, which in some cases included an understanding of a positive impact of their meaningful work on their mental health and well-being. Andy Vallis, the editor of *Wells Voice*, believed that his work a local news entrepreneur had a transformative impact on his personality. Reflecting on his involvement in organizing local community awards, and the social encounters resulting from that, he observed:

> I've [always] shied away from things and stayed in the background. Now I'm much more confident and enjoying the adulation and meeting people. It's just it's the best thing I've ever done, running *Wells Voice*. It's just been fabulous for me. Because I've come out of my shell more and so I think I've developed as a person and as a character. And I've found that I've liked being a part of the community in a way that I never was before... And it feels like I'm an important cog in the community of Wells. I get massive job satisfaction which I never got working for the local papers I worked for. (Andy Vallis, *Wells Voice*, 2023 interview)

Like other creative workers, the symbolic power of local journalism entrepreneurs rests in part on the reach of the news they produce (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2008). However, as the interview data demonstrates, it is also distinctive from the type of symbolic capital enjoyed by other workers in the creative industry because it is cemented by practitioners' embeddedness in their communities.

Negotiating the Material Sacrifices of Meaningful Work: The Challenges of Time and Money

While the transition to the role of local news entrepreneur enhanced quality of life and job satisfaction due to the perceived meaningful nature of their work, linked to community embeddedness and symbolic capital, this transition was usually accompanied by significant material sacrifices in relation to both income and workload. John Baron, who has edited *West Leeds Dispatch* since 2010, after a long career in regional and national journalism, saw his salary halved when he moved into entrepreneurial journalism. He described the cut in salary and increase in working hours as having a significant impact on his personal life, noting: "You come home from work and you've got another five hours of work" (2020 interview).

Jeremy Morton, who started the hyperlocal news site, *South Leeds Life,* with a group of local volunteers in 2010 while working a full-time job, credited his journalistic activities with helping him to overcome depression. His account draws on a common narrative structure in the interviews that makes explicit the idea of entrepreneurial work as a trade-off:

> So, probably about a year into, into doing *South Leeds Life*, I got made redundant and sank into a fairly awful depression. And one of the things that helped me through that was writing. So I sort of channeled my energy into, into *South Leeds Life*. And then we sort of worked out that actually, if we do this right, we ought to be able to generate small amounts of income and turn it into a job.[…] And I get paid now a small amount monthly. I think it works out at about 8000 to 9000 pounds a year. So it's not a proper wage, but it keeps wolves from the door. I'm very dependent on my wife. (Jeremy Morton, *South Leeds Life*, 2020 interview)

For Morton, his role involved a complex negotiation between pros and cons: The mental health benefits of his entrepreneurial role justified the material sacrifices he has had to make, while the blow of the financial hit was softened by financial support from his wife. Indeed, entrepreneurs supported their activities from sources including pensions, family wealth, and spousal income. Andy Vallis (2020 interview), who saw his pay cut in third when he started *Wells Voice* in 2016, was able to afford the life of an entrepreneur by drawing on existing resources to pay off his mortgage:

> I cashed in one of my pensions, paid off the mortgage, which I was still contributing towards. When I started *Wells Voice*, it was clear that I wasn't going to earn enough […] to pay the mortgage and all the other bills, that I needed to be paying towards. So as soon as I paid that off, the financial burden sort of lifted off my shoulders because then it didn't matter earning a much smaller income. And so, I feel comfortable now, with the amount that I earn and it's perfectly enough for me to live on.

For entrepreneurs who could cross-subsidize their labor of love through other forms of wealth, it enabled them to carry on, albeit from a position of structural privilege. However, editors in this situation commented on the questionable longer-term financial sustainability of their outlets. For example, Cathy Watson (*Uckfield News*, 2020 interview) described her annual income of £18,000 as a "reasonable part time income" or "pocket money." Although she was able to survive on this income, she was concerned about succession planning, because "nobody with my level of experience would want to take it on for earning that amount of money."

Una Murphy of *View Digital* put the terms of the trade-off most bluntly by distinguishing between "social capital" and "actual capital": **"**In terms of social capital, we're very rich, but in terms of the actual capital, we've felt quite impoverished at some stages" (2023 interview). This pattern is not unique to local news entrepreneurs, but representative of the experience of creative industries workers in the passion economy.

Financial sacrifices were frequently accompanied by significant sacrifices in terms of working hours and work-life balance. Paul Henderson, of *South Molton News*[5] (2022 interview), put it simply: "Don't expect to have a personal life."

Ben Black recently started spending more time working on *Cwmbran Life* as he had taken redundancy from a previous full-time role and was now doing freelance communications work. As a result, the growth in flexibility allowed him to spend more time pursuing local journalism. This had, however, increased his visibility in the community, and requests for him to cover community events. He cited a range of examples of invitations for time-consuming but worthwhile community events, including photographing a local rugby team; attending a talk on homelessness in the local theatre; covering a local charity providing solar panels to villages in Zambia, and documenting the progress of Santa's truck through the streets of Cwmbran at Christmas time. He reflected on his workload and the resulting challenges to family life as follows: "I'm completely and utterly snowed under, I could spend the next few days and I still wouldn't be anywhere near the stuff that I've got to do… And yeah, I've got my wife, my daughter. Sometimes I'm like, 'What am I doing?'"

Phil Creighton, who has been editing the *Wokingham Paper* since 2015, and recently launched a second paper; *The Reading Paper,* reflected on his unsustainable working hours:

> I'm working seven days a week at the minute. Often I'm working from when I get up Monday office at half eight. I'll leave the office about half five, six o'clock, and then I'll do another couple of hours in the evening. So, some weeks I'm working till 11 o'clock at moment… I just have to, because there's so much that needs to be done on both papers. (2023 interview)

He mentioned the presence of "dark moments," when he questions the sustainability of his work, both financially and logistically:

> The dark moments come when we worry about whether there's enough money to book a photographer for a shift. Whether we can afford to go out on a job. Whether we can actually spare the reporter to go on something that will be fun and interesting or whether we need them in the office to write more stuff. Yes, it's that kind of juggling act. We're trying to keep the ship afloat. It's like the plate spinners where they they've got six plates on sticks when they have to go around and keep spinning them. […] I feel like a plate spinner. I'm not very good at it. (2023 interview)

Creighton's experience of plate-spinning, while reflecting the time pressures so salient in interview data, is not unique to local journalism. Instead, it can be seen as reflective of the sense of acceleration, "high-speed tempo" and "time compression" that characterizes contemporary social experience (Wajcman 2008). However, for local journalism entrepreneurs, given the multiple challenges they were facing, these pressures played a significant role in their calculations around the sustainability of their operations. Such ongoing considerations came up frequently in the interviews. Mark

Baynes of the *East End Enquirer*, a local investigative website, reflected on the sacrifices he had made to sustain his outlet, noted: "I might be keen enthusiastic, but I'm not a martyr. It certainly is affecting my health. And, yeah, sorry but there's a limit" (2020 interview).[6] Baynes' observations demonstrate that the decision to continue publishing under challenging circumstances is active, dynamic and ongoing, reflecting both the salience of sacrifice and the agency of entrepreneurs.

Michael Casey, of *Your Thurrock,* was only able to manage the workload through the logistical and practical support of his wife, whose labor enabled him to maintain a single-minded focus on his journalism: "I remember hearing about athletes like Paula Radcliffe and Mo Farah. You saw their lives - they just ran, and other people ran their life for them. And that means they could just concentrate on that one thing and I'm very similar" (2023 interview). On that basis, Casey concluded: "my mental health is very dependent on what she does."

Alongside the challenges of juggling workloads, interviewees also reflected on the demands for emotional labor that came with the role (see also Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2008). As Stephen Kingston of *Salford Star* observed:

> Oh God, everyone thinks I'm a bloody social worker. […] the amount of people that phoned us up about personal problems. I mean, every news desk gets it. When people have got nowhere else to turn, they find us. (2020 interview)

While support for community members with personal problems was not necessarily a time-consuming activity, editors tended to view it as especially emotionally demanding, and female entrepreneurs saw themselves as particular targets for such labor. The demands of emotional labor in journalism have been attracting increased attention among scholars and news organizations (Hopper and Huxford 2015; Pantti and Wahl-Jorgensen 2021). While most attention has been focused on the impact of journalists caught up in traumatic events such as war and disasters (e.g., Dworznik-Hoak 2022; Stupart 2021) the routine emotional labor of journalists in broader contexts has tended to be overlooked. Emotional labor arising from interactions with community members is intensified in local journalism, due to the embeddedness of practitioners who live and work locally and are widely known. As such, this type of labor is a trade-off for the forms of recognition enjoyed by the journalists. For local journalism entrepreneurs, serving the emotional needs of community members, while recognized as an important responsibility, represented an additional set of tasks to fit into their already-overloaded working days.

Trade-off 2: Autonomy and Loneliness

Another prominent trade-off relevant to mental health and well-being was that between autonomy and loneliness. The importance of autonomy as a motivation for entrepreneurial journalists is well established in the literature (e.g., Heft and Dogruel 2019), while literature on the wider community of entrepreneurs documents tensions between autonomy and loneliness (Zhu et al. 2023).

Although the value of autonomy is shared across the journalism profession (e.g., Willnat, Weaver, and Choi 2013), it articulates in distinctive ways across role types (Gollmitzer 2014). In the case of local journalism entrepreneurs, the trade-off between

autonomy and loneliness was a key issue because a significant proportion of the outlets are run by a single person, who is solely responsible for all aspects of the operation, including editorial, financial and technical elements.[7] Interviewees frequently mentioned the benefits of the flexibility that comes with "being your own boss," "having control" and "not having to be at anyone else's beck and call." This flexibility allowed them to "do what I want to do when I want to do it;" to choose "how I spend my day" and not having to "depend on other people."

However, this flexibility should be understood in the context of the challenging workloads already discussed. Kathy Bailes of Isle of *Thanet News*, who reported working 12-hour days, seven days a week, reflected on her work patterns as follows:

> You know, it's just how I operate and I find different ways of resting, of working in the garden. I might stop and sit in a chair in the sun and have cup of tea and just leave it for an hour or something or half an hour, whatever. And those are the ways that I get my breaks. And of course I can work from wherever I want to, so that kind of helps as well. (Kathy Bailes, *Isle of Thanet News*, 2020)

For Graham Smith, who had started up his successful news site, *Cornwall Reports*, after nearly 30 years working as a TV news production manager, the ability to work without interruptions felt like a luxury. Having line managed 20–30 people in that role, he had found it "very difficult to get anything finished":

> It wasn't until after they'd all gone home that I felt that I could do anything creative, or anything directly useful to any project that I was working on myself, because I was constantly managing them and administering to their needs. (2022 interview)

After starting *Cornwall Reports*, he found that working on his own boosted his productivity. On the flip side, however, it brought about occasional feelings of loneliness and professional isolation:

> And I actually quite welcome working on my own, because it enables me to maybe do a dozen stories in a day. […]. But it does sometimes feel a little bit lonely. And I do miss being able to bounce ideas off other people…[…] that process of sharing that creative process that you get, the more minds you bring to something, the better the eventual outcome. (2022 interview).

Conversely, Carole Bond, who had collaborated with a business partner on *Your Local Voice* until his death shortly before the interview, reflected on the greater agility associated with her enforced autonomy:

> I've done a number of things since the death of my business partner, probably been able to make decisions much more quickly, I suppose, because I don't have to debate it with anybody. And if I want to do something I can just go and do it now. (2020 interview)

While the vast majority of interviewees suggested that they enjoyed the autonomy and flexibility of their work, four of the sole operators brought up challenges to editorial judgements and creativity resulting from their isolation. Julian Calvert, who edited *Lochside Press* alongside a full-time job as a journalism lecturer, said:

> Now it's generally just me, making my mind up about whether to approve this comment on a story or whether, what angle to go with in this particular story, and that sense of working on your own is something I find quite difficult. (2020 interview)

On the other hand, those entrepreneurs who headed up teams of journalists frequently experienced stress associated with the managerial responsibility. Two anonymous editors suggested that this responsibility generated its own form of loneliness:

> There are times when it feels very lonely. Because I'm trying to keep the ship afloat. I can see the overall picture. The individual journalists can't for whatever reason. [...] And so having to navigate through telling people, "you need to do this," and then they don't, and you still need to fill that space within the paper. (Anonymous editor 2, 2023)

> I can feel that I'm spread too thin. So it's a challenge that you simply have so many responsibilities in one person, because you're such a small news organization. (Anonymous editor 1, 2023)

Other entrepreneurs working with teams of journalists felt the weight of responsibility for the livelihoods of their employees. Mark McGinley, *Peckham Peculiar*, speaking in 2020 in the aftermath of the Covid-19 lockdowns, which led to a temporary pause in publication, commented:

> The one thing I do feel bad about is, you know, people who work with us, haven't had work that I would like to have given them. So obviously, they're coming back now. And I just feel like, you know, I think everyone struggled. So that's difficult…. You know, we have huge empathy because we know what it's like if it takes a month for us to get paid from someone.

Despite these challenges, the autonomy afforded by their work was usually perceived as a source of happiness and enjoyment, enabling entrepreneurs to pursue creativity in support of the community.

Developing Coping Strategies

For these local news entrepreneurs, then, the trade-offs required to enable their work were tangible in their daily lives and foregrounded in their accounts. While their commitment to work was primarily affective, their discussions of trade-offs also suggested an active, dynamic and rational consideration of pros and cons. This also entailed a high level of awareness of the need to develop coping strategies, and proactivity in doing so.[8] As Una Murphy (*View Digital*) put it, it's important to "continuously develop resilience to overcome what seems like insurmountable challenges":

> You have to really mind your head, you have to think about [the effect] these uphill struggles are having on you as well […] I haven't met anything as challenging as being in a small business and just really not knowing if I was going to make my bills that month. (2023 interview)

For entrepreneurs who experienced loneliness as a challenge, a frequently mentioned strategy related to building networks with colleagues facing related challenges. This included connecting with other local news entrepreneurs, in a sector characterized by an ethos of collaboration, rather than competition:

> Everyone I've spoken to over the years has been so helpful. We work in different areas and patches and so there's no competition, so everyone's really keen to sort of share experiences and similar sort of worries. (Ben Black, *Cwmbran Life*, 2023 interview)

Perhaps the most important recurring theme in the discussing of coping strategies was around protecting mental and physical health. In the 2023 round of interviews, which included specific questions on coping strategies, two respondents mentioned reducing or refraining from alcohol consumption. Una Murphy (*View Digital*) mentioned her avoidance of alcohol in reflecting on her long career in journalism:

> When I started off as a journalist, we spent our time in the pub, and we spent our time in the pub for good reason. We were covering murders and we were covering riots and we were covering all the social unrest in Northern Ireland back several decades ago. We self-medicated with alcohol. So I know that pattern, and I know a whole generation of older journalists who that's how they coped to deal with working in the news and, you know, in the society. So, I think I'm very mindful now as an older woman looking back, I'm sort of glad that sort of pub culture is out of the newsroom now.

Similarly, exercise was frequently mentioned as a way of protecting mental and physical health. One anonymous editor, who had gone through a personal crisis in the summer of 2023 reflected on the benefits of going to the gym:

> So I started going to the gym a lot now. Over the last three months, I've made a real effort to go to the gym almost daily. It gives me an opportunity to switch off or it gives me an opportunity to think about things, so I found that really beneficial. […] I'm doing this now and everything else can wait. (Anonymous editor 1, 2023 interview)

Building in time for exercise was mentioned far more frequently by men than by women. For example, three editors, all male, mentioned running as a mental health coping strategy in the 2023 round of interviews.

Interviewees explicitly discussed their "optimism" and "hopefulness" as a helpful resource for dealing with the challenges of operating a local news outlet. In some cases, positive sentiment about the future was linked to assessments of the current state of their outlets. For instance, Francesca Evans (*Lyme Online*, 2020 interview) noted that "I think the future looks good" based on a recent increase in advertising revenue. In other cases, however, interviewees described themselves as inherently optimistic. Lynne Thomas, who at the time of the interview worked a full-time job in university administration alongside editing the hyperlocal blog, *Inksplott*, noted:

> So, I'm terribly optimistic, by nature. I was once described as 'too happy', by two different people on the same day, completely unrelated. Because my natural bent is yes we're all going to be fine, we'll find a way, people will pull together, the world is an amazing place. (Lynne Thomas, *Inksplott*, 2020 interview)

The view of optimism as an important resource chimes with literature on the well-being of entrepreneurs, which suggests "dispositional positive affect" makes a significant difference for the ability to entrepreneurs to manage the heightened levels of stress they experience (Baron 2008; Cardon and Patel 2015).

Although interviewees' reflections on their mental health and well-being in work tended to focus on individual experiences, they also showed awareness of the structural issues underpinning the challenges – as well as potential solutions. Interviewees mentioned the decline in advertising revenue caused by the predatory practices of major online players like Google and Facebook, and the lack of recognition and compensation afforded to their outlets. Two respondents specifically critiqued the

structural limitations of "passion" as a driver for entrepreneurship, pointing to the need for viable funding models to sustain the sector:

> So, when you've got a sector that is so often based around people who are doing it as a passion project, it's highly understandable they find things within their own existing circles and contacts and there's no resources to break out into different areas or to take on different people. Then, that's a massive failure. But it's hard for anyone to do anything about that because there's so little money in the industry. (Darryl Chamberlain, *853 London and Charlton Champion*, 2022)

> Somewhere […] you have to draw the line. And I would say, I still, like probably every other hyperlocal, I still would do far more hours than I ever would get paid for, for the income you know. So, passion is good but passion is also dangerous because it pushes you to try things to the best of your ability and forget the fact that you need to put food on the table (Columba O'Hare, *Newry.ie*, 2020 interview).

These two editors point to the "exploitation of emotional labor in journalism" (Lindén et al. 2021, 1701) as a feature of the passion economy which enables the maintenance of unsustainable levels of stress and deprivation.

At the same time, interviewees reflected on the privilege of their work. This theme came up particularly prominently in the 2023 interviews, which focused on mental health and well-being. As Michael Casey (2023 interview) noted: "I'm not working down the mine or up a roof. And I'm happy doing what I do. And actually, if Ridley Scott at the age of 85 can get up at four o'clock in the morning and make Napoleon, Michael Casey at the age of 62 can pop off to an underpass [to report on the discovery of a dead body] at nine o'clock in the morning."

Conclusion

This article has shed light on the experiences of local news entrepreneurs in relation to mental health and well-being. For these practitioners, maintaining mental health and well-being is a constant balancing act, informed by the importance of the entrepreneurs' embeddedness in their community. Being embedded and making a difference in the community is seen as a normative value and a justification for significant lifestyle sacrifices.

Working as a local journalism entrepreneur involves several key trade-offs. First, these journalists experience their work as meaningful and rewarding, but it has been enabled by significant sacrifices in terms of income and working hours. Second, while they enjoy the autonomy and flexibility afforded by their choice to be entrepreneurs, some experience challenges due to loneliness and isolation.

The entrepreneurs identify a range of coping strategies to manage the mental health and well-being challenges they encounter. At the same time, these coping strategies reveal their engagement in an active, dynamic and rational assessment of the pros and cons of their work. However, this assessment is informed by the significant normative value of their work, linked to their community embeddedness. While the trade-offs they negotiate are not unique to their sector and activity, their affective attachments to the communities they serve renders their situation distinctive.

Even if local news entrepreneurs make individual choices based on what are often deeply held normative principles, they are nonetheless enmeshed within broader

economic circumstances which shape the conditions for creative work. The study underscores the importance of problematizing the passion economy in relation to mental health and well-being. A conceptual emphasis on professional well-being and happiness (e.g., Bélair-Gagnon et al. 2024; Deuze 2023) should not detract from an analysis of the systemic and structural causes of stresses and sacrifices, as well as the potential solutions. If anything, the paper higlights the need to make explicit the lived and embodied consequences of the passion economy, with particular attention to how the normative ideals of particular forms of journalism contribute to justifying the pursuit of such work.

Notes

1. The larger project, funded by grants from the UK's British Academy and Economic and Social Research Council, focused on investigating the experiences and working practices of local journalism entrepreneurs. Ethics approval was granted for the project following review in May 2020, with SREC reference: 2020JOMEC009.
2. The first round of 57 interviews, carried out in 2020, lasted between 59 minutes and one hour 20 minutes, the ten follow-up interviews lasted on average 30 minutes, and the final follow-up interviews, carried out in 2023, lasted between 29 minutes and one hour.
3. In the first round of interviews (2020) the vast majority of respondents (50 out of 57) preferred to be identified. In the second round (2021), all ten interviewees preferred to be identified. In the third round (2023), where questions were directly related to issues of mental health and well-being, three out of seven interviewees requested anonymity for the interview in parts or in whole. In cases where respondents wished to remain anonymous, they have been described by gender and broad geographical location, and any details which may reveal their identity have been removed.
4. This is important to note because some scholars of emergent local journalism outlets have observed significant problems in their professional practices, including poor sourcing practices (D'Heer and Paulussen 2013; Reich 592008), lack of adherence to journalism ethics (Tenor 592018), and cozy relationships with local politicians and businesses (Gutsche 592015).
5. South Molton News ceased operating in 2023.
6. Baynes passed away in 2022.
7. For more detailed evidence on local news start-up labor patterns and operations, drawing on survey data, see AUTHOR, YYYY.
8. Please note that explicit questions about coping strategies were only included in the 2023 follow-up interviews, although the topic came up without prompting in some of the earlier interviews.

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