



A STUDY OF PROFESSIONAL BURNOUT IN NEWSROOMS OF TOP MEDIA HOUSES IN NEW DELHI

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ABSTRACT

Once a lucrative profession, journalism today is among the worst jobs. Studies reveal that by the year 2022 the number of newspaper reporters will decline by 13%. The factors responsible for it are identified as low salary, job insecurity, uncertain working hours, high rate of professional burnout and increasing risk of even death, as the journalists have to put themselves in dangerous places during reporting. In India, 11 journalists were killed in 2017. The Upper House of Indian Parliament on February 7, 2018 was informed that 90 cases of attacks on journalists were reported between 2015 and 2017 in India. Since 1992, a total of 1,305 journalists, including 47 in India, were killed worldwide in 26 years—either murdered or killed in crossfire or on dangerous assignments (*Express News Service, 2018*). Experts say if the deaths of journalists who died under their 50s in recent 5-10 years are seriously investigated, stress will come out as the prime reason of their untimely demise. Studies show that many budding journalists are reluctant to continue in newsrooms and many have quit the profession within two years of joining it. The health risks emerging in the newsrooms invite urgent attention.

KEYWORDS : Professional burnout, stress, job insecurity, newsroom, death of journalists, job attrition

Introduction

"It's hell." This is how Sharmita Singh, a reporter with *Aaj Tak*, describes her life in the newsroom (NR). Rakesh Upadhyaya working with '*Hindustan*', leading Hindi daily from national capital, (New Delhi) says, "There is no time even for myself, forget caring for my family members." "I left journalism 14 months after joining it, and I would not return to it again in my life," says Anjali Singh, who worked with *The Hindustan Times*. These are only three comments out of the total 130 comments that the researcher received from working journalists while studying various NRs of New Delhi from April to May 2017. Every comment made by the working journalists exposes the dark side of the profession of journalism, which used to be seen as a highly glamorous, lucrative and reputed profession till two decades ago. Now a big section of the talented next gen is reluctant to join it, while those who are working in it for some time find it difficult to continue and many are in search of better options in other fields. The major cause behind most of the problems in NR is professional burnout attributed to stifling workload. As the race to be first in 'breaking news' assumes monstrous proportion, the journalists working in NR find themselves trapped under excruciating stress. Till two decades back, the competition was chiefly among the newspapers but with the emergence of myriad news channels, countless web portals and social media platforms, journalism has now turned into one of the most stressful careers. Anxiety to meet deadlines, crazy schedule, highly demanding editors, fear of being shunted out, stressful work environment, uncertain duty hours, poor salary, deteriorating work conditions, lack of facilities, etc force the media persons to risk their health every day. Taking into account all these factors, the world's leading job-linked website, *CareerCast.com*, has put newspaper reporters and broadcasters in the "worst jobs list" and warned that 'within seven years, the number of newspaper reporters will decline by 13%' (*CareerCast, 2015*). Tony Lee, publisher of '*CareerCast.com*' counts decreasing pay and high stress as the major reasons for the abysmal ranking.

Methodology

The study is based on the interviews of 23 journalists working in NRs of various media houses in New Delhi, case studies of four newspapers and two news channels including *The Indian Express*, *The Times of India*, *Dainik Bhaskar*, *Rajasthan Patrika*, *Aaj Tak* and *Times Now* and their web portals. Also, the opinion of 169 journalists working in various NRs was gathered through an Opinionnaire. The researcher also visited seven NRs in Delhi to understand how the journalists manage their daily stress. A small study on the same topic was conducted by the researcher in 2016 also.

Causes of Professional Burnout

For some time, professional burnout has emerged as the root cause

of many health problems among media persons. Initially, most people ignore it because they are unaware of the symptoms and they visit the doctor only when they encounter the problem of upsetting dreams or sleeplessness, indigestion or heartburn, muscle pain, headaches, uneasiness, dizziness, trembling or eye twitches, frequent urination, insomnia, tiredness, impotence, low sperm count, etc. Doctors say severe stress can lead to panic attacks, chest pains, phobias and fears of being seriously ill. During the study, the major causes of professional burnout detected in the NRs are: Uncertain duty hours—when to come is certain, but when to leave is unsure; Deteriorating work conditions; Growing contract system; Loss of job & social security and post-retirement benefits; Hunt for scoop and ideation for packaging the stale news; Struggle to be ahead of rival newspapers, channels or web portals; Pressure to meet the deadlines; Challenge posed by web portals and social media platforms like Facebook & Twitter; Pressure of accommodating new advertisements or filling the space owing to cancellation of advertisements at last moment; Change in story angles at the eleventh hour and the challenge of incorporating last minute updates, Obstacles put up by bosses and seniors and overbearing intrusion of marketing department, Business interests of the owner; Personal likes or dislikes of editors with some the newsmakers; Undue tempering with the stories at desk; Multiple pressures on reporters to collect news, advertisements or act as PR person for the owner or editor; Donning multiple roles due to reducing staff; No protection for covering life-threatening events like terrorist attack, communal violence, natural calamities, war, epidemic, etc; Professional rivalry with the colleagues, Threats by mafias, builders, anti-social elements, politicians, etc.

Apart from the reporters, the people working on desk face different kinds of stress. The major causes of their stress include no respect to deadline by reporters, poor qualities of copies submitted by reporters, stringers and contributors, alteration in advertisement schedule at last moment, stifling workload, change in layout at last moment, poor quality photos, pressure from printing press, etc. There are some personal reasons also that the journalists have to face every day. Some of such reasons recorded during the study are: apprehension of being shunted, unsatisfactory job profile, dearth of jobs, frequent changes in tasks, salary not paid in time, pressure to pay to the media house in the form of advertisements, personal health issues like growing age, diagnosis of any complicated disease or health issues with the family members, etc, family disputes with spouse, parents, children, death of a loved one, changing jobs, shifting house, retirement, financial issues, unsafe environment, not getting leave for picnic or to join family function, etc.

Digital, the Master Stroke

Since digital has changed the complete landscape in media

including the reading habits of people, almost all newspapers, magazines, news channels etc have started focusing more on digital than their traditional products. Hence, the persons working in digital section face the highest amount of pressure. "Working online means remaining available all the time. Even if there are office hours, the fact that one can log on any time, even after office hours from any place across the globe. This has killed the concept of office hours. Consequently, one can't switch-off even after office hours. The moment anyone breaks the news, the beat reporter is expected to respond to it. He has to do basic research and file the story at the earliest," says Debobrat Ghose, Chief of National Bureau in 'Firstpost', the leading digital platform of Network 18. In the name of speed, some newer trends like ranking of websites have further worsened the situation. Success of a story or news item in online media is now measured through the likes, views, shares and comments it gets. Hence, apart from filing a story, the reporter has to maintain a large network of social media friends to ensure plenty of shares and likes. The moment the story is posted, one gets engaged in 'marketing' the story in social media. US-based 'Christian Science Monitor' sends out daily emails to reporters listing the number of people who viewed their stories. Equally, New York-based 'Gawker Media', a blog network, pays its writers based on the clicks the articles or story receives.

Global Trends

Sufficient attention might not have been paid in India to assess the growing professional burnout among people working in NR, but a high amount of work has been done in some developed countries on it. Madison (Wisconsin) based Centre for Ethics of Journalism in University of Wisconsin conducted a study on the stress and trauma faced by war journalists (Ward 2016). The Leveson Enquiry (Ball, 2012) recorded the stress and pressure faced by NR members of 'The News of the World'. 'The Huffington Post' in May 2015 (Arana, 2015) carried a five-series story highlighting different aspects of stress that the journalists undergo in NR. "...specific data about journalists and mental health is hard to come by. Research on this topic began to pick up steam in mid 1990s, but the journalists were notoriously reluctant to divulge information about themselves. A 2001 study found upwards 85% experience work-related trauma. Other research shows that 4 to 28% suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder over the course of their careers, and up to 20% experience depression. Even when psychological symptoms like nightmares, flashbacks, insomnia and anxiety don't rise to the level of a disorder, they still take a toll," the report in 'The Huffington Post' says.

Astonishing Revelations in the Study

The present study reveals some astonishing facts about the level of professional burnout among the people working in NR. Twitter and Facebook have proved to be a nightmare for the journalists covering different beats in newspapers, news channels or web portals. A total of 73% daily reporters, out of 169 journalists who joined the study, say Twitter is the biggest cause of stress for them, as they have to keep a close watch on it round the clock because most newsmakers now comment through Twitter. As far as health is concerned, 48% journalists above 30 years of age suffer from any of the health disorder. Continuously, sitting for long hours or working on computers, laptops induced 26% of them with orthopaedic problems, cholesterol, hypertension, diabetes, while 27% complained of eye-related ailments. 76% working in news channels, web portals and daily newspapers, are not able to follow their food schedule. Hence, 23% have complaints in the digestive system. As far as working hours are concerned, 76% have to work for more than 11 hours, which causes depression. 67% said they do not get time for their own treatment. Job insecurity is a major concern as 82% have a terrible sense of job insecurity. Only 12% are satisfied with their job. 88% of journalists work on contract or even without any written agreement. These findings present dismal picture than the findings of a similar study conducted in 2016 (Kumar, 2016).

West Shows the Way

Amidst the disappointing scenario emerging in most Indian NRs,

there is good news from the West, which is normally blamed for many wrong practices in the Indian media. US-based 'The Huffington Post' (Taibi, 2015) carried a report focusing on how the newsrooms there are "putting employees' happiness first." 'The Business Insider' (Taibi, 2015), a New York-based business and technology news website, shifted its office to a location which "fosters creativity and provides a good writing environment". It encourages its employees to stand throughout the day, and provides standing desks as well as a variety of chairs, couches, tables and mats. "We really encourage them to make themselves at home," company's president Julie Hansen says adding that it is because of it "no 'Business Insider' staffer quit during their first four months in the office" (Taibi 2015). The office of popular liberal web-based political journalism organisation of the US, 'Talking Points Memo' came with one of the most beautiful spaces in any newsroom. The room, tucked away behind the kitchen, is soundproof and equipped with a TV, a sound system and a wall covered with a stunning collage of mirrors. LED lights on the walls illuminate the walls in different hues on a rotating basis. Its editor and publisher, Josh Marshall, says a majority of people use the room for 20 or 30 minutes during the day for "quiet time" or "power napping." "The nap room was originally a video studio. But I decided a nap room was more important for the organisation," Marshall told 'The Huffington Post' (Taibi 2015). For 'Forbes' keeping employees well-fed is top priority. Each staffer is granted \$100 credit per month to spend on anything in the pantry. It helps keep the employees satisfied and energy in the newsroom high. 'The Huffington Post' office too has relax and recharge section. "Writers and editors can take a quick snooze in one of its nap rooms, find some peace in the meditation room, join a weekly restorative breathing class and recharge in one of the many massage chairs scattered throughout the office. ...Our two nap rooms were met with skepticism and reluctance when we installed them in the spring of 2011. Many were afraid their colleagues might think they were shirking their duties by taking a nap. We've made it very clear, however, that walking around drained and exhausted is what should be looked down on—not taking a break to rest and recharge. And now our nap rooms are occupied most of the time," says Arianna Huffington, editor-in-chief of 'The Huffington Post' (Taibi 2015).

However, any such good news is yet to come from the Indian media houses. The Indian media houses are hardly expected to initiate in this regard but the media persons too have no courage to force their management to think over it. It was noticed during the study that a large number of journalists were not ready to share their sufferings with the researchers. "Senior journalists holding top posts in the NR are mainly responsible for this deterioration in the NR. They act as a tool of management and indulge in most unhealthy practices for petty gains. It is those who are responsible for winding up certain welfare measures provided to the media persons and also introducing majority of the wrong practices in NR," says eminent journalist Dr Ravindra Agrawal (Agrawal, 2018). Unaware of the reality, scores of budding journalists are trying to join the newsroom. But a good number of talented youngsters are forced to say goodbye to the profession even within one year of joining it. Instead of working in the NR they prefer to work in a PR firm. "If we do not pay attention to it immediately and young journalists continue to leave the profession, the media will be deprived of good journalists," warns Jagdish Upasane, Vice Chancellor of Makhanlal Chaturvedi Rashtriya Patrakarita Vishwavidyalaya, Bhopal (Upasane 2018).

The Way Ahead

'The Economist' in 2006 did a cover story on the ills causing havoc in the media under the title "Who Killed the Newspaper? Media mogul Rupert Murdoch was quoted in the story confessing that media owners only think of earning high profit, they hardly do anything to provide their staff good working atmosphere. Murdoch went on to say that the media houses have ignored the 'human capital' in the greed for 'real capital.' "The corporate culture is cruel. The only rule there is—perform or perish," adds Upasane. "Journalists are not like other employees. They are the humans, who first face the trauma,

happiness, sorrows, pains, suffering, problems of the society and then tell them to the people. They are the live receivers. That value has to be understood by all," adds Upasane. However, Director General of Indian Institute of Mass Communication, New Delhi KG Suresh feels that stress in journalism will continue. "It will be like you are in army and fear of dying. This is part and parcel of the job. Yes, we can find ways to reduce the stress," Suresh adds (Suresh, 2018). HoD, the Department of Journalism and Mass Communication in the Central University of Jammu Prof Govind Singh feels the problem emerging with the technology is that we adopt the technology blindly. The media owners in India want the fullest benefits of technology, but they don't want to think about the health issues caused by their use (Singh, 2018). As a remedy, Debobrat Ghose says that speed matters more in the present media, but the media need to think beyond news. "If there is no compulsion to report to the office every day, people will be able to contribute more," he adds (Ghose, 2018).

How the Journalists Get Relaxed

Since there is no predefined mechanism in Indian NRs for journalists to get relaxed, most journalists do it on their own ways. Some take several cups of tea; some chew *paan*, some do yoga or meditation, some talk to friends on phone, some abuse others, while many take alcohol. Each has his/her own way to get relax. Experts feel that the editors in NRs should develop an effective stress management programme. They must acknowledge professional burnout as reality and concern, not as a 'career stopper'. They must regard stress management as part of staff well-being, similar to other programmes. They can offer confidential counselling. They should encourage journalists to monitor themselves and their colleagues. Stress and trauma management training should be part of the ongoing training for reporters. Stress faced by journalists is more than that of policemen. A journalist is like a surgeon, who always makes efforts to save the patient. If they are not provided with minimum comfort, how can they discharge their duties?

Conclusion

It needs no elaboration that as the editor's institution hits the rock bottom, owners themselves don the role of 'editors' and MBA professionals chair editorial meetings, everything in the NR is planned to keep 'profit' at centre stage. To achieve the 'targets' the journalists whether reporters in the field, sub-editors on desk, photographers, camerapersons, people in the production department and even editors have to undergo heavy stress. They generally work 14 to 16 hours risking their health every day. Online editions by newspapers or news channels and social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook have aggravated the situation to the extent that the beat reporters do not find time to visit the doctor in case of their own health issue, forget caring for their ailing family members, relatives or even sparing time for visiting the crematorium in case of death in relation or friend circle. For some time the security of journalists has also emerged as an important issue. Union Minister of State for Home Hansraj Ahir informed Rajya Sabha on February 7, 2018 that "90 cases of attacks on journalists were reported across India between 2015 and 2017 and 108 persons were arrested in connection of these attacks" (PTI, 2018). This shows the gravity of security threat to media persons who have been demanding enactment of the Journalists Protection Act in the country for many years, but the Central Government is yet to take any decision in this regard. It is because of all these reasons that many budding journalists are reluctant to work in the media and many have quit the profession. As the media trade unions have become irrelevant to fight for the cause of media persons, this dark side of the newsrooms demands serious attention of the policymakers, media planners and the media persons for corrective steps on an urgent basis. The media houses need to think out of the box like lifting the compulsion of reporting to the office every day. Even bureau meetings can be organised using digital platforms. The time seems ripe to allow reporters to work from the spot, home or field.

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