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Local Broadcast Reporters Maintaining Social Responsibility and Mental Health While Serving a Community Under Lockdown

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Local Broadcast Reporters Maintaining Social Responsibility and Mental Health While Serving
a Community Under Lockdown

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Journalism

by

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University of Arkansas
Bachelor of Arts in Journalism, 2019

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Abstract

This study looks at local broadcast news reporters working in Northwest Arkansas before, at the start, and during the COVID-19 global pandemic. Research for this study includes a content study of the tweets and Twitter accounts of eleven local reporters. This study considers the social responsibility theory and examines how these eleven local reporters use the theory in their everyday work. Research found, though these reporters don't credit the theory by name, they are still putting its guidelines into effect as a sort of moral compass when creating objective and representative news for their communities. The research also found that the COVID-19 pandemic added a sense of urgency for reporters to uphold the social responsibility theory by getting potentially life-altering news to the public in a timely manner. These reporters consider themselves as community servants, their service being educating and alerting their audience on what's happening around them. By taking upon this role the reporters sometimes face criticism from their audience leading to the reporters needing to defend themselves and their intentions.

This study explores the mental health of local reporters. These reporters don't talk about personal mental health issues, but they often cite symptoms like fatigue and stress as being active factors in their professional and personal lives. As reporters this group is expected to be punctual and timely in all aspects of their career. They also heavily discuss safety as being an issue within the journalism world. These local reporters are often alone while they are in the field covering their stories, something that many find issue with. The local reporters support other reporters outside of the area by sharing or "retweeting" their stories and adding their opinions that advocate for the presence of another person on the scene no matter the time, place, or story being covered.

When looking at self-care and self-appreciation among the reporters studied, the research found these reporters go about achieving this in many ways. Some reporters find their self-worth from within, while others turn outward to family or religion. Many of the reporters studied embrace self-appreciation by sharing life or career events with their Twitter audience. They often share work milestones which are typically met with celebration from other journalists within and outside their respective news station. Reporters exercising self-appreciation and self-care through their Twitter platform are also experiencing a sense of support from others by doing so in most cases.

The global COVID-19 pandemic made up the majority of the news shared by local reporters during the studied time period. These reporters acknowledge the repetition of the stories they were producing daily. The pandemic changed the way reporters everywhere were able to do their jobs. Social distancing and the mask mandates limited face-to-face interviews and gave reporters less access to people or places than they had before. Many of these reporters used their Twitter platforms to educate the public on changes in the pandemic, while also promoting vaccination and social distancing. Some reporters shared their own vaccination experience with their followers.

Keywords: social responsibility, community, COVID-19, mental health, workplace stress, local television news

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Dedications

My thesis is dedicated to my loving and resilient family who have supported me through every turn. I love each of you and appreciate everything you each have done for me.

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Chapter One

Introduction

Many news reporters across the nation and the world will experience potentially traumatizing work-related events during their careers. By holding positions that sometimes require them to be on the frontlines of breaking or violent stories, including the coverage of war, news reporters are sometimes put in a vulnerable position that risks not only their physical but also mental health (Feinstein, 2006; Himmelstein & Faithorn, 2002). The risk of war reporters suffering posttraumatic stress disorder has been found to be as high as it is with soldiers, and it is now recognized that these reporters often come face-to-face with vulnerable situations much like those serving (Himmelstein & Faithorn, 2002).

With around the clock news becoming popularized in the broadcast field, journalists have to adapt to covering more stories, which in turn can make them more vulnerable to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression (Novak & Davidson, 2013). PTSD is defined by the American Psychological Association (2022) as an anxiety problem that affects some people after experiencing extremely traumatic events. Many events are reported to have caused PTSD in journalists, including, natural disasters, sexual assaults, and murders (especially when it comes to children). The “beat” a reporter covers is also a factor in the events in which they cover. For example, a reporter on the “crime beat” is more likely to be exposed to potentially traumatizing events than one covering local economics or politics (Newman et. al, 2009). Various factors including personal trauma history and number of traumatic assignments also play a part in overall reports of posttraumatic stress disorder and mental health issues among journalists (Newman et. al, 2009).

Other factors outside of war can play into reporter's overall mental health while on the job, especially in a local setting. Like war reporters, local journalists can face potentially traumatizing events while in the field while they are also dealing with the monotony of their daily tasks and responsibilities in the workplace (Reinardy, 2015). Reporters feeling more exhaustion and an increase in workload are more likely to experience burnout within their career. In many small-market broadcast news stations reporters are expected shoot their own videos or photos, secure sources, and edit the video footage on top of their main task of reporting. Studies have shown that reporters feeling overburdened with work are more likely to experience burnout and no longer enjoy their careers as they once did (Reinardy, 2015). Workplace stress can be contributed to the cause of burnout amongst local reporters.

The COVID-19 global pandemic in many ways added a new factor of stress into the daily lives of reporters. The everyday workplace stresses these reporters were facing were exacerbated by the pandemic, leaving more reporters feeling anxious, stressed, and generally burnt out of their careers (Storm, 2021). Studies show these feelings could be magnified even greater among local reporters who were assigned to report on a global event they barely understood themselves (Tompkins, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic also forced local reporters to adjust to a lifestyle of social distancing, making it difficult to fulfil basic needs when it comes to interviews and general reporting.

Aside from the pandemic, this scope of time was also met with hostility toward reporters across the country and the world. The press as a whole was often framed as "the enemy of the people" and the idea of them creating "fake news" in order to control the masses rose in popularity (Lardieri, 2019). This ideology often put journalists in vulnerable and dangerous situations. In 2021, the number of journalists who were jailed for their work reached a global

world record and the number of journalists assaulted in that year alone was more than the previous three years combined (Castengera, 2022). This creates a scary reality for journalists reporting in the field and forces reporters to think more deeply about their personal safety while on assignment.

The purpose of this study is to investigate how local reporters navigated their careers and mental health during the COVID-19 global pandemic. It will also take into consideration workplace stressors and current events that potentially affected the well-being of these local journalists. The study also explores the relationship between local reporters and their audience/community and how that relationship can play into reporters' every day work. The effects of social media on general news practices are also considered in this research. Twitter, and social media in its entirety, has created an open forum for members of the community to have access to news immediately instead of during daily scheduled programming, as well as creating an influx of participation from these community members in the news process (Hermida, 2012). Research for this study included a content analysis of over 3,500 tweets by eleven broadcast reporters working in Northwest Arkansas during the period of January 2020 to February 2022.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

Social Responsibility Theory and Journalism Practice

Social responsibility theory is a normative theory created as an ethical and moral guideline for journalists' relationships with their audience (Bates, 2018). Ethical principles governing photojournalists were informed by normative theories of the press that viewed the role of American journalists as one of providing crucial information for citizens in a democratic society (Lippman, 1922). Normative theories of journalism saw the U.S. press as largely compelled by a sense of social responsibility to serve individuals in a free or libertarian society as opposed to functioning as an agent of the state in authoritarian or communist regimes (Siebert et al., 1956). The social responsibility theory stresses the obligation news reporters have to provide factual, independent news to the community. The theory goes as far as to *require* journalists to make an "honest, bonafide" effort to meet the needs of the audiences in their community (Bryant, 1966). Though the social responsibility theory is not named as the most commonly used moral or ethical code within the journalism community today, pieces of the theory can be seen in more modernly implemented codes of professionalism.

Professional Codes and Morals

Journalism's first national code of ethics was adopted by the American Society of Newspaper Editors in 1922 and titled the "Statement of Principles" (American Society of Newspaper Editors, 2002). The first article of this code discusses the responsibility of journalists to serve the general community by keeping them informed on current events and giving them what is needed to make informed decisions. This article also calls journalists to hold those with power accountable.

Ethical and professional codes continued to adapt and be implemented across all branches of journalism as time went on and the career changed. The Radio Television Digital News Association implemented the same aspects of social responsibility into their ethics code but focuses on broadcast journalists rather than print. RTDNA was founded in 1946 with a mission to promote and protect responsible journalism within broadcast and digital journalism. The RTDNA Code of Ethics requires journalists to “place the public’s interest ahead of commercial, political and personal interests” and urges journalists to keep ethical decision making in mind during every step of the journalistic process (RTDNA, 2015). The theory of social responsibility requires journalists to make the people their priority, but this can become problematic when the journalist in question is asked to cover news that could be traumatizing.

Local Risks

Local journalists are not immune to witnessing potentially traumatizing events. Though the likelihood is heavily based on the area and beat being covered and the types of stories being covered, local reporters are still at risk of experiencing trauma while on the job (Smith et. al, 2015). Broadcast reporters have increasingly been asked to take on multiple roles in their day-to-day responsibilities. Reporters in smaller markets especially are especially expected to act as their own camera operator, gather their own information, and edit their news stories while still being required to present those stories on air.

These added responsibilities can take a toll on reporters’ mental health and burnout rates, especially when staff sizes aren’t growing with demand (Reinardy & Bacon, 2014). Multimedia journalists facing this kind of workload are more susceptible to burnout and it can negatively affect their overall enjoyment of their work. Being required to fulfill so many aspects of the job

can make local reporters feel more workplace stress, which has the potential lead to greater mental health risks if not called to attention.

Reporter Mental Health Historically

Workplace stress is not an uncommon theme among journalists and reporters. Treating mental-health problems faced by journalists has been difficult in a culture that supports the idea that treatment can be a risk to their career. Journalists have been historically unwilling to admit to any signs of weakness in fear of losing major assignments or hurting their own reputation (Fedler, 2004). Historically, the culture surrounding reporting has leaned on the side of masculinity and toughness, making it almost undesirable to show “softer” emotions (Elmore, 2007, p. 21).

Journalism textbooks in the 20th century supported the view that stoic detachment involved a psychological process that restricted the displaying of emotions, teaching aspiring journalists that they were to remain cool and impartial observers, especially when covering traumatic events (McCaffrey, 2021). In the 2006 text, *Journalists Under Fire: The Psychological Hazards of Covering War*, Dr. Anthony Feinstein, a psychiatrist, questioned the industry’s role in perpetuating “a very public myth” that professional reporters had the ability to remain so emotionally detached that they could report on the most traumatic events and emerge unscathed (p.6).

It wasn’t until in the mid 1990s that trauma researchers turned their attention to trauma journalists, with the subject gaining broader consideration in 1999 with the formation of the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma (Simpson, 2004). In 1995, the *New York Times* began training newsroom supervisors, such as the chiefs of the foreign desk, to assess "assignment-induced stress" in employees and, if need be, steer them towards getting assistance (Himmelstein &

Faithorn, 2002, p. 553). Despite this effort, which also included deploying counselors in bureaus around the world, the *Times* described the response to the treatment program by journalists as “lukewarm” (Himmelstein & Faithorn, 2002, p. 553).

All of these changes in the way mental health was being treated within newsrooms were due to journalists finally speaking out about their day-to-day issues. In a 2007 journal article advocating a need for “trauma training” in journalism school classrooms, Gretchen Dworznik and Max Grubb wrote that trade publications had only started to document the stress faced by all walks of journalists, but that was because these professionals were finally beginning to talk about it (Dworznik & Grubb, 2007, p. 190).

Global Pandemic and Mental Health

By all accounts, reporter mental health has been more widely considered than ever before throughout the years. This hit a considerable spike when in 2020 the COVID-19 global pandemic began affecting the daily lives of journalists, uprooting their old reporting habits, and forcing them to adapt to a life of social distancing while introducing new factors of workplace stress (Morrell, 2020). Morrell (2020) cites burnout and consistent stress to be the two biggest obstacles faced by reporters working during the pandemic. Journalists assigned to cover the pandemic experienced levels of anxiety and depression similar to those of first responders (Osman et. al, 2021).

In the midst of the global pandemic, journalists were closed off from their typical way of conducting their work to protect their own physical safety. This left many journalists feeling torn between upholding their duty to inform the public and balancing their personal challenges of a global crisis (Perreault & Perreault, 2021). Journalists reporting during this time felt a personal responsibility to inform the public on ways to stay safe and healthy, particularly at the beginning

of the pandemic when a majority felt COVID-19 was an empty threat that the media, government, and healthcare organizations conspired to make a bigger deal of than it was in reality (Perreault & Perreault, 2021).

Safety and Hostility Toward Reporters

The COVID-19 pandemic happened alongside a growth of distrust toward the media. While journalists were struggling with the mental health effects of COVID-19 reporting, they were also having to deal with accusations of “fake news.” Journalists were encountering increased hostility on the job after being labeled “the enemy of the people,” a phrase that vilified all members of the media (Simon, 2018). Broadcast journalists in particular felt increased risk as they went out into public on assignments, with some being threatened as they tried to report the news. Safety became an important factor to journalists reporting in the field. In 2021, one in five news directors reported attacks on their employees, with 15% of these violations happening at random (Farhi, 2021).

Research Questions

The research on correlations between reporter mental health and the struggles of the pandemic and its consequences are ongoing and important to study. This is especially true for small-market broadcast news reporters who are not often the focus of mainstream studies. This study is an attempt to answer the following research questions:

- RQ 1: Do reporters mention specific journalistic principles as guiding them in their work?
- RQ 2: Do reporters talk about workplace stress and mental health risks connected to their jobs?

- RQ 3: Do reporters mention access to mental-health counseling or more informal support systems in their newsrooms?
- RQ 4: Do reporters talk about workplace stress specifically related to the global pandemic and the ensuing community lockdown?
- RQ 5: How did reporters handle covering both national and local elections while maintaining bipartisanship?
- RQ 6: Does the feeling of support from the community and newsroom have any effect on how local reporters cover stories?

Chapter Three

Methods

Research for this study included a content analysis of over 3,500 tweets by eleven reporters working in Northwest Arkansas during the period of January 2020 to February 2022. This study focuses on broadcast news reporters in the Nielsen Designated Market Area (DMA) 95, which includes the cities surrounding Ft. Smith, Fayetteville, and Rogers (OAAA, 2021). Nielsen DMA regions are geographical regions in the United States in which local television hours are monitored by Nielsen (Nielsen, 2022). There are a total of 210 DMA regions across the U.S., with New York City as number one with the most viewers of local television. The DMA of the reporters studied has just over 325,000 total homes with active local television consumers (OAAA, 2021).

Twitter is a social media platform created in 2006. Twitter users can post “tweets,” which can consist of up to 280 characters and can include media such as photos, videos, or photos. Users are also able to “retweet” other user’s tweets, which allows them to share that content onto their own personal Twitter feed. The reporters taken into consideration for this study utilized both retweets and tweeting their own original content.

This time period was chosen to best reflect these reporters’ tweets before and during the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States. COVID-19 was first discovered in December 2019 in Wuhan, China, and was first diagnosed in the United States in January 2020 (National Foundation for Infectious Diseases, 2022). The COVID-19 outbreak was officially declared a pandemic on March 11, 2020 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022). This study’s timeline was set to include tweets from journalists before, at the start, and during the official

declaration of COVID-19 being a global pandemic to evaluate the changes in reporters' content and general feelings about their work.

This study looks at reporters belonging to Northwest Arkansas news stations during the time period stated. There are three news outlets that cover the Northwest Arkansas area. These stations are KNWA/Fox24, KFSM (5 News), and KHBS/KHOG (40/29 News). Each of these stations have websites that include a page typically titled "Meet the Team." This page is dedicated to each respective station's current reporters, anchors, and meteorologists. These web pages were utilized when researching which reporters worked for which station during the period of time studied. KNWA/Fox 24 News' "Meet the Team" page included direct links to reporters' social media accounts, while 5 News listed none and 40/29 included only select social media platforms. During the period studied, there were 16 reporters working in the market. Two reporters were taken out of consideration due to personal connections with the researcher. Out of the remaining 14 reporters, one did not have a Twitter account and two others had not tweeted during the research period. The Twitter accounts for the reporters taken into consideration were found by manually searching within the Twitter platform. Twitter allows users to publish a personal biography or "bio" that will be shown at the top of the profile upon viewing. These bios were recorded and saved next to the reporter's name, along with current and past station affiliations and the reporter's gender. Some of the reporters who were working in Northwest Arkansas at the beginning of the period studied had since relocated to other stations outside of the studied area. Similarly, there were also reporters who were not working in the area at the start of the period studied but joined a local newsroom within that period. In both cases, all of the reporter's tweets were taken into consideration whether they were actively working in the area or

not. This choice was made to best study how reporter moods and priorities changed while making a job shift into different markets and communities.

This study used a method of constant comparison and “axis” categories to manually log each tweet from each reporter and categorize it based on its content. The individual links for each tweet and reporter’s profile were also logged within the document for the researcher’s reference. Categories included focused around social responsibility, mental health, and community. In total, 3,508 tweets from 11 reporters were logged and manually categorized. The categories were chosen to best reflect and answer the study’s research questions, and focus on social responsibility, reporter mental health, and community within and outside the newsroom.

Chapter Four

Findings

This study focused on a small, yet growing, market of young broadcast news reporters who are not typically considered in mainstream studies. These reporters are generally newer to the journalism career field, which can be shown through their handling of workplace stress and the appearance of caution when sharing personal opinions. By using a content analysis of the tweets shared and personally published by local reporters, the researcher in this study was seeking to understand how these reporters responded to and showed resilience through the COVID-19 global pandemic.

Over 3,500 tweets from 11 journalists in the area were considered to answer a series of questions based around major current events of the time including the pandemic, elections, and violence towards the media. Tweets that reflected personal feelings toward any of these events were recorded and divided into each respective category.

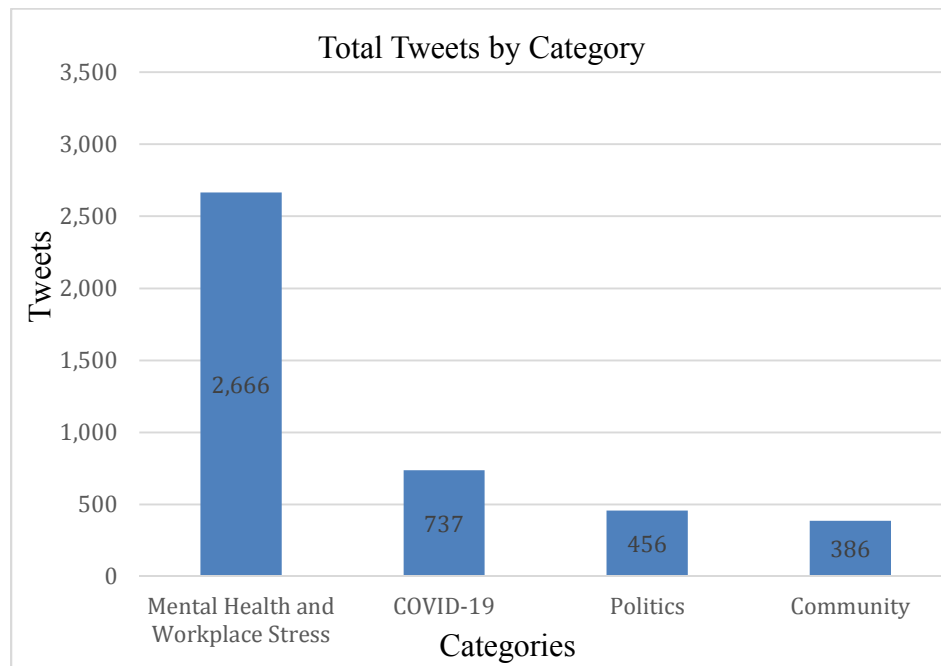


Figure 1: Total local reporter tweets and retweets by category.

Social Responsibility Theory

Though the reporters studied did not *blatantly* reference the social responsibility theory as a part of their personal or professional moral code they do reference aspects of the theory as being important to everyday reporting. These reporters highlight representation and objectivity as crucial when delivering news to their communities. Many of these reporters seem to value themselves as servants to the community, bringing to their attention the most important news happening in their area that they would otherwise never know about. This mindset seems to be a motivational factor for these reporters to take their role in the community seriously and to carefully consider every avenue of the stories they're covering to best serve and represent their audience. In some cases, the reporters studied saw a need to defend how they do their work and why they do it. Some of these reporters were outspoken on how the media was viewed negatively during this time period and the backlash that came with those views. Even locally, reporters felt the need to express to their communities that they are truly trying to do best by them and not using them to further an agenda.

Of the 3,508 tweets recorded, 31 discussed elements of the social responsibility theory. Four local reporters tweeted content that coincides with this theory. Though these local reporters did not specifically name the social responsibility theory, they discuss aspects of journalism that fall into the social responsibility category. These reporters seem to be aware of the standards in which the social responsibility theory holds journalists, and in most cases the reporters are agreeing with those standards.

Reporters tweeted about how their role should be one to not only inform their community, but also do best by them. Reporter Zoie Henry retweeted, "I really need people to stop thinking all journalists and reporters are 'just looking for a story.' A lot of us care about

these community issues more than you think. Stop attacking ‘the media’ out of ignorance.” The social responsibility theory instructs reporters to keep the needs of their community in the forefront of their reporting. These reporters are living among their audience. The issues that are affecting the general public are also affecting them in the same way. When deciding which stories are “important enough” to present to the public, reporters are keeping their audience in mind and sometimes receive backlash for doing so. This reaction from the public also goes hand-in-hand with the underlying need for reporters to feel support from their community, which will be discussed in the following sections.

Henry also retweeted, “Journalism is powerful. But if it doesn’t represent all of our communities fairly and honestly, it doesn’t hold the same power for everyone ...” This way of thinking is crucial for journalist to uphold if they are to report in accordance with the social responsibility theory. The need for objective, unbiased reporting is being confirmed with this statement. When personal qualms come in the way of reporting, stories that are important to different demographics may be overlooked or deemed unimportant. This reporter is acknowledging the power of the press and how important it is for reporters to keep the entirety of their community in mind and not only subsections.

These reporters are also holding each other accountable when it comes to reporting in an objective and ethical manner. This became especially important with the Black Lives Matter movement and fight for justice. Henry retweeted, “good morning good people, dropping a thread here for journalists and media folks on how to ethically report on the protests!” The fact that these journalists care about ethics when reporting on topics indicates that the social responsibility theory is embedded into the day-to-day practices of their reporting in a local environment.

If these reporters are to abide by the social responsibility theory and report on stories that are important knowledge for their communities, they are likely to find themselves on the scene of events that are potentially emotionally or even physically dangerous. Though the local reporters studied do not share personal experiences of witnessing or experiencing events such as this, they are quick to back reporters who do choose to share their negative experiences in the field. Local reporter Samantha Boyd retweeted, “There has to be a reckoning in local news. Reporters should not be working alone.. ever. Not in the dark. Not in the Sun. Not in the rain. Not in good wx. Not on the side of the road. Not inside a building. Not if you’re rich. Not if you’re poor. Ever.” This tweet was accompanied by a video of a reporter being hit by a car while reporting live for her local station. Local reporters see the need for stories to be shared to their communities, but they just as much acknowledge the need for their own safety to be considered. In many cases, local multimedia journalists are required to not only be the reporter, but also their own camera operator, which often leaves them alone when recording stories and going live. Their responsibility not only to their job but also their community can place them in situations that are not always ideal, leaving them vulnerable to situations like the one outlined by Boyd’s retweet.

Mental Health

When it comes to the discussion of mental health, the local reporters studied do not give specifics on their own personal situations, but they are commenting on the concept of mental health in the context of both the general public and within the journalism community. Three out of every four tweets considered in this study mentioned aspects of mental health or workplace stressed faced by reporters. These reporters are very specific about the workplace stress and potential safety issues they face while on the job.

These reporters speak on unfair reporting situations and how aspects of being live in the field can sometimes lead to traumatizing events. They often are showing support of other local or national journalist who choose to share their personal stories of mental health struggles, and advocating for both physical and mental safety precautions that they feel should come with the job of being a reporter. As discussed by the social responsibility theory, if reporters are to do best by their audience and are expected to be on the frontlines of potentially dangerous stories, they want to feel safe while doing so.

Workplace stress is also a common theme seen throughout the tweets of the local reporters studied. Apart from unsafe working conditions as highlighted in the previous section, these reporters also cite aspects of the job like being on time for live shots, working in inclement weather, and working through the COVID-19 pandemic as being stressful. They are not speaking to these topics in a directly negative way, but their bringing up the topics in a comical way still means the issues affect them enough to be discussed. General workplace stress and safety within the job of reporting proved to be the biggest catalysts of mental health struggles by these local reporters.

Situations like the one detailed above that can directly impact the mental health of frontline reporters proved to be a subject local reporters most felt the need to share. When faced with difficulties or harassment in the field, journalists' mental health can ultimately be harmed depending on the severity of the situation. Local reporters took to Twitter to voice their concerns on reporters who are in the field without proper safety precautions. Stories that include elements of violence or mistreatment toward journalists were discussed with a sense of anger. Reporter Samantha Boyd shared a video of a reporter from Little Rock being harassed while she was attempting to go live. In this clip, the harasser continuously insulted the reporter, calling her fat.

Boyd retweeted the original tweet from the Little Rock reporter as well as the statement, “This should never happen to anyone. Period.”

Many avenues of mental health were discussed among these local reporters. Some of their tweets had to do with their audience and community while others specifically had to do with the mental health of journalists. Stories containing elements of violence, specifically mass shootings, seemed particularly difficult for some local reporters to talk about. Reporter Anna Darling tweeted, “Reporting on these mass shootings is never easy, especially when the tragedy hits so close to home. There is no amount of sympathy that can bring back these people senselessly killed in Indy, or in Georgia, or in Colorado. We can only band together and demand change.” When tragic, violent events happen it is likely that they will be covered nationally. Though these reporters might not be in the city or even the state in which these events take place, Darling’s tweet shows reporting on events such as this does affect reporters in some way.

These local reporters seem to know the importance of keeping mental health intact. Some speak out in support of seeking help if one feels their mental health is in question. Reporter Jesse Pierre retweeted a local anchor and co-worker, “Mental illnesses are real. Mental health is important. Today, I wear this bracelet in honor of my best friend who left us two years ago. Take this time today to let your family/friends know you love them. Always let them know.” This tweet was also accompanied by the national suicide prevention lifeline number. By retweeting this Pierre is not only acknowledging the importance of mental health and having a sense of community by checking in on loved ones.

When it comes to the personal mental health of the local journalists studied, they tend to approach the topic in a way that usually involves comedy. If a reporter feels their workload is too much, it can become a large factor in the mental health of a reporter. When the local reporters

studied discuss their workloads they do not outright complain or include any negativity, rather they make it into some sort of joke. For example, Reporter Tiffany Lee responded to a supportive tweet from a community member saying, “Hahah I don’t sleep often! But this job makes it worth it! Thank you so much!!” Many times it is required of reporters to work on holidays when it may seem the rest of the community is relaxing. Reporter Zoie Henry touched on this by retweeting, “*anybody saying anything about not having to work on a holiday* Journalists: DID YOU KNOW I STILL HAVE TO WORK?? THE NEWS DOESN’T SLEEP AND NEITHER DO I!!ENJOY YOUR DRINK BY THE LAKE, ILL BE CHUGGING COFFEE AND LEAVING VOICEMAILS BECAUSE NO ONE ANSWERS THEIR PHONE ON A HOLIDAY.”

These local reporters tweeted 107 times on basic journalistic practices including shooting live shots, being in the field, and gathering sources. In the same sense, these aspects of journalism that can prove to be challenging were not discussed in a negative fashion. Reporter Samantha Boyd tweeted on the pressure of being in the field and preparing to go live for a newscast. She says, “In other news... made my live shot with literally 5 seconds to spare after that school board meeting and that’s on #miraclesinnews.” Boyd even compares reporting live to other self-proclaimed difficult tasks in a comedic way. Boyd tweeted, “In other news... reporting live on air is NOTHING in comparison to parallel parking with other cars behind me watching.” Tweets like Boyd’s reflect that there is a pressure that comes with the job of reporting that is substantial enough to address to some degree.

Though the personal mental health of the reporters studied is not often discussed, these reporters are sharing tweets that acknowledge the importance of maintaining mental health and combatting the elements of the job that might negatively affect it. These reporters are

approaching aspects of their careers that many would find difficult in a comedic light and not blatantly complaining about the hardships they might encounter.

Self-Care and Self Appreciation

Local reporters approach self-care and self-appreciation in many different ways. The way one reporter might relax and take care of themselves can be totally different than the way another reporter goes about achieving the same result. Some reporters find their self-worth from within, taking to Twitter to share personal accomplishments or pictures of themselves in which they feel their best. Others look to personal groups like family or friends, and in some cases, reporters turn to God or religion. The majority of the reporters in this study shared at least one life accomplishment with their Twitter followers. Many shared some of their work milestones on the platform and were met with support from within their respective newsroom. These local reporters excitedly share these accomplishments with their Twitter followers while at the same time they are showing gratitude to the station that provided them the platform in which to do so. By sharing these events and personal accomplishments, these reporters are showing that just as their communities rely on them for up-to-date news, they also need something or someone to rely on whether that reliance comes from self, God, or elsewhere.

The local reporters studied tweeted 75 times about general self-care, but when the tweets are dissected many more prove to touch on the topic. These reporters personally seem to approach self-care from many different avenues, including religion, personal interests, or relationships with their personal families. Self-care can be important for a journalist, especially when erratic work schedules can make it difficult to find time.

Some reporters showed self-care by tweeting photos of themselves paired with encouraging messages. For example, reporter Jesse Pierre posted a photo of herself with the

caption, “There's nothing more rare, nor more beautiful, than a woman being unapologetically herself; comfortable in her perfect imperfections. To me, that is the true essence of beauty!♥.” This tweet was accompanied by multiple hashtags including #naturalhairlove and #myfropoppin in reference to her hair being natural and undone in the posted photo. Reporters also showed appreciation for themselves and their accomplishments by sharing life updates and work anniversaries. After completing three years in the news industry, reporter Anna Darling took to Twitter to share the accomplishment. She tweeted a photo of her when she was first starting her career alongside a current photo of her on the job with a caption saying, “Today marks three years in the TV news biz for me! I'm so proud of the growth between these two photos. A lot of obstacles overcome, a lot of opportunities taken. Can't wait to see what the next three years here in Arkansas have in store for me!”

Some reporters found the best source of self-care came from spending time with loved ones and family. Samantha Boyd shared a couple instances where she found her support and comfort from the people she cares about most. She retweeted, “I will never sit and act like I don't need my ppl. Life is so much easier when you have genuine people who love you, support you, and that are dependable if and when you need them. It's not always about money either. Moral support, having people to trust, etc.” In this tweet, Boyd is expressing importance of having dependable people surrounding her who love and understand her personally. She seems to most find this in family with a number of tweets expressing her love and gratefulness. Boyd tags her mother's Twitter account in a tweet that reads, “Honesty hour: living just a few hours away from my family is still hard sometimes. But they always show up and show out when I'm missing them!!! Shoutout to @fourboyds2 for decorating my apartment this weekend, bringing the dogs & and being the best mom/friend in the world.” The feeling of being a part of a group that loves

and supports you is one that Boyd seems to not take for granted. Reporter Kendall Ashman also shows thankfulness for a family member who consistently supports her in her career. Ashman tweeted, “Appreciation post to my grandma who never misses a show I’m in!!! Even if that means waking up at 5 A.M.☐.” This tweet included a photo of Ashman’s grandma watching her live shot on the morning news.

These reporters tweeted 81 times about God, religion, or spirituality. Many of these local reporters seem to be of the Christian faith, tweeting content on serving and loving God. Reporter Tiffany Lee brings up religion when considering the intricacies of common occurrences in nature. Lee tweeted, “It’s the craziest thing to me that no snowflake is the same. We serve an amazing God!” Reporter Samantha Boyd tweeted numerous times on religion and her belief in God. With one retweet she explains the power of the Christian God as being greater than general spirituality. Her retweet reads, “manifesting your future with “good energy” and “higher vibes” by channeling your “highest self” means nothing when we serve a God who is the Highest and can squash your plans with one word. energies and vibes are not God. God is God.” Boyd seems to find peace from her relationship with God. She recognizes that even when life may seem bad, God’s promises are still in effect. Boyd solidifies this belief by retweeting, “God’s promises for you are in process. Right now. Even in circumstances you can’t see any evidence of good yet. Remember, “not yet” doesn’t mean “not ever.” Keep holding on, friend. God isn’t done with your story #SeeingBeautifulAgain.” Whether these reporters are finding their self-care and self-worth through themselves, family, or God, it is important to have a sense of appreciation for oneself when it comes to mental health.

COVID-19 and Health

The COVID-19 global pandemic changed the way these reporters were able to do their daily jobs on many levels. Before the pandemic local reporters were able to be face-to-face with their interviewees, while during they had to opt for video or socially distanced interviews.

COVID-19 was the most tweeted about category considered in this study, with the majority of the tweets being informational or advocating for community safety. Some reporters chose to share their vaccination stories and encouraged their followers to get vaccinated and abide by the CDC guidelines to protect themselves.

Nearly one out of every 20 tweets examined for this study discussed COVID-19 and the pandemic. The majority of these tweets came from reporters posting local or national stories tracking the statistics of the pandemic, including local deaths and cases. Local reporters tweeted more about COVID-19 than any other category considered in this study. Most of these tweets were state-wide updates on the status of the pandemic. When discussing COVID-19, the local reporters studied for the most part used their Twitter platform to inform the public on changes and updates regarding the pandemic. For example, reporter Jesse Pierre tweeted, “#BREAKING All Arkansans age 16+ are now eligible to get the COVID-19 vaccine.” Informative tweets of this nature make up the bulk of the COVID-19 category, with personal opinions on situations like the mask mandate and mandatory vaccination being rarely discussed.

Some reporters shared the stories of community members who lost their lives to COVID-19. Jesse Pierre retweeted, “#SpringdaleAR teacher dies of #COVID19. Amy Steele taught high school math” with a link included to a story published about the late teacher’s life. Similarly, Samantha Boyd tweeted, “This is Shanna Giboney. She died Friday from COVID-19. Her sister tells me she hadn’t been vaccinated when she contracted the virus just three weeks ago. Shanna

was only 46 years old... I'll share her story tonight on KNWA/FOX24 AT 5." This sense of community is reflected throughout these local reporters' tweets.

Reporters also took to twitter to promote getting vaccinated, with some approaching the situation with comedy. Anna Darling tweeted a photo of herself after receiving her COVID booster with a caption saying, "All boosted up! And got my flu shot too 🖤 ☐☐ Colliers on Dickson Street is hosting walk-ins on Thursdays and Fridays! Let's see which arm hurts more tomorrow ☐." Reporters not only promoted getting vaccinated, but also the regular use of masks during the peak of the pandemic. Samantha Boyd tweeted, "Welcome to 2020 where you get masks for Christmas" and included a photo of herself wearing a mask. In most cases, when sharing opinions on topics that often tend to be controversial such as masks and getting COVID vaccinated, these reporters seem to prefer to take a comical approach.

Stories regarding the pandemic and COVID-19 related issues made up the majority of stories covered during the studied time period. Some reporters joked about the repetition and monotony the pandemic brought their workdays. Samantha Boyd retweeted a tweet published by a reporter working outside the studied area saying, "no one: journalists everywhere: '...amid the pandemic.'" Reporting on the pandemic are still ongoing, even if the severity is not considered as high.

The topic of health came up 747 times within the tweets considered in this study. Many of these tweets were in conjunction with COVID-19 and included local or national stories discussing pandemic statistics. Every reporter taken into account for this study discussed COVID-19 and health within their tweets.

Politics and Elections

Both local and national politics were huge talking points for these reporters during the studied time period. During this period there were both national and local elections that consumed the news space since local reporters are expected to cover both. Reporters used their platforms to promote local voting in local elections, sharing where, when, and how to vote in the area. Election Day was discussed by some of the local reporters as one of the biggest reporting days of the year, implying that the workload on this day is generally heavier than others. These reporters consistently share or “retweet” Tweets regarding important news stories from local and national politicians who otherwise would be difficult to interview in person. The Insurrection of January 6, 2021 was also a talking point for these local reporters. Though they were not present or on the scene for this event, they empathized for the journalists who were and were met with maltreatment.

Politics was one of the most talked about topics by local reporters within this study. During the period this study covers, there were political events that made headlines and some that evoked emotion from the reporters. More than one out of every 10 tweets discussed politics, both local and national. The reporters studied promoted voting in elections, again, both locally and nationally. Reporter Tiffany Lee used her Twitter platform to ask her audience how they will be voting while also promoting the act of voting in general. She tweeted, “We are less than 24 hours to Election Day!! It’s the last day of early voting! Will you be voting early today or going to the polls tomorrow?”

Some provided live, step-by-step coverage of votes. When facing this kind of non-stop coverage, some multimedia journalists reported feelings of anxiety and fatigue. One reporter, Samantha Boyd, acknowledged how tiring covering the elections can be for journalists. She

tweeted, “Election Day!!! Happy to bring you the local election news this morning and praying for all my fellow newsies working tonight!” The same day Boyd also tweeted, “Long workday in the middle of election week and ‘Jesus Take the Wheel’ comes on the radio on my drive home. #mood!” Similarly, reporter Zoie Henry encapsulated her feelings during election coverage by tweeting a meme photo of a Kermit the Frog plush longingly looking out a window and into the street. Along with the photo she tweeted, “This meme describes how I felt on Election Day otherwise known as the journalism Super Bowl. •Highlight: I was sent on a witch hunt in a world where there were no witches. In other words, to find late in person voters, there weren’t any.” Henry went on to retweet, “To all my local journalists: we got this! Be SAFE. Be ready for anything. Don’t forget to care of yourselves this week. Our work matters.” When facing the coverage of election season, these journalists acknowledged the hassle and stresses of providing such intensive coverage but did so in a way that did not promote negativity. The support that they gave each other, whether working for the same station or not, has much to say on the importance of support by those within the profession.

The insurrection of January 6, 2021 was largely discussed among some of these local reporters. This was the topic over which reporters felt the need to share their opinions the most. However, these opinions were only in support of the treatment of journalists on the frontlines during the event. Reporters shared the stories of other reporters who were harassed, mistreated, and even arrested during the insurrection. A video of journalists’ equipment being stomped on and destroyed was retweeted by reporter Anna Darling with the caption, “BREAKING. Mob of Trump supporters swarm the media near the US Capitol. They yell what Trump frequently says, ‘the media is the enemy of the people.’ They destroy equipment and chased out reporters. I’ve never seen anything like this in my 20 year career.” The journalist who originally tweeted this

video and message called attention to the hateful speech directed at the media in the previous administration, while Darling's retweeting of the content solidifies that even reporters who were not on the frontlines of this event recognize how dangerous statements of that nature are for members of the journalistic community. Darling had many tweets in support of the reporter on the frontlines of the insurrection. She responded to a tweet that read, "A reporter is having a panic attack because we're locked in the Capitol without any police protection, and we hear and feel rumblings underneath us. This is scary folks, especially after being labeled 'the enemy' for some 4 years." Darling responded, "I cannot even begin to imagine how the reporters and photographers on the ground at the Capitol right now are feeling. My thoughts and prayers for their safety are with them." While Darling was feeling obvious concern over the reporters covering the insurrection, she was appeared to be feeling anger toward the way they were being treated by first-responding police at the scene. She tweeted in response to a video of a journalist being arrested for covering the event, saying, "Really? These are the people you're going to arrest?" Anna Darling's tweets in particular paint an interesting portrait of how local journalists feel about seeing their peers mistreated, especially in obviously dangerous situations.

Community

The idea of community and social or newsroom support played a large role in how these local reporters do their jobs. Since many of these reporters take on the mindset of themselves being servants of the community, feeling a sense of appreciation and acceptance from said community can become important to the reporter. It seems these reporters strive for a symbiotic relationship with their perspective communities, both helping each other when it comes to providing important, timely stories and finding the sources needed in order to do so. These local reporters share stories of times they felt encouraged by the public, whether through social media

or in-person. The same goes for newsroom support. Many of these reporters are celebrated by their colleagues after a job well done on stories or after achieving work anniversaries or milestones. Reporters who experience either of these scenarios are quick to vocalize how good it made them feel in the moment, and how it in some cases brightened their day.

The topic of community was the subject of more than one out of 10 tweets within the timeline of this study. There is an undoubted sense of the importance of community in the eyes of these reporters. Many of these reporters seem to care about their community and enjoy the feeling of being supported by their audience. Reporter Zoie Henry spoke to this by retweeting, “Just want y'all to know that when reporters tweet to DM/email us for a story we genuinely want to hear from you and SO VERY MUCH appreciate it when you hit us up. Your perspective helps inform the story and/or you end up being part of the story. Y'all are indispensable.” This tweet stresses the need for a symbiotic relationship between local reporters and their communities. With the support of the community, reporters can more easily do their job in supplying that community with the information they need while also feeling like their work is being heard and generally accepted.

There are many instances of local reporters sharing stories of how they felt supported by the people who watch them. Some of the support came directly through the Twitter platform, with community members directly reaching out to individual reporters to tell them they are doing a good job. Samantha Boyd experienced this kind of support from a follower. The community member tweeted Boyd saying, “I really love the fact that Samantha Boyd covers the greatest town in this country.” Boyd responded by saying, “I also love it. Thank u for the continued support, William. Stay #blessed.” This is not the only instance of social support Boyd has experienced and shared on Twitter. She recalled being in the field while reporting when she was

met with kindness by strangers. Boyd tweeted, “still thinking about the couple who drove by me between live shots today and rolled down the window at the stoplight to encourage me with some very kind words. so whoever that was in the red mini-van on College I love u. let’s all do something kind today ☐☐☐.” Reporter Will Moclair shared a similar story with his Twitter followers. He retweeted a former co-worker sharing the story of when he met a college basketball head coach who validated his decision to go into broadcast journalism. The tweet was accompanied by a video of the interaction. The tweet reads, “Another sports clip to smile at: Providence head coach Ed Cooley met our intern Will Moclair last week. Will's got a voice ready for broadcasting, so Ed gave Will a nickname. Meet ‘The White Barry White.’ ” Being appreciated while in the field and on the clock does not seem to be taken lightly by the reporters studied. These local reporters recall instances like the one Boyd experienced with adoration.

Social support is not the only type of support that is appreciated by these journalists. They also share instances of feeling supported by their co-workers and colleagues. Kind words of encouragement were shared between reporters, and in some instances from newsroom management. There were 128 tweets of this nature recorded in this study. When reporter Kendall Ashman covered a story on a U.S. Airforce veteran who was reunited with his military medals after they were sold in an auction, she was praised by one of her newsroom colleagues. Ashman retweeted the encouragement, “An incredible job done by Kendall. Worth the watch!” Many of these reporters seem to have personal relationships with their coworkers, some even spending time together outside of the newsroom. Reporter Kendall Ashman expressed her gratitude for her colleagues after celebrating Friendsgiving together. She tweeted, “I’m so grateful to have the BEST Arkansas family ♥☐” in response to a picture of the coworkers together while celebrating the night before. The original tweet from her colleague read, “Slightly sleepy this morning, but it

was totally worth it to celebrate Friendsgiving with these wonderful humans ☐ so grateful and lucky to have coworkers that are like family ☐☐☐☐.” Similarly, Jesse Pierre retweeted a photo of her station’s reporters gathered for a wine night after work hours. The photo included Bernie Sanders photoshopped behind the group, and the caption read, “Well, at least *we* were having fun in this March 2020 reporter wine night, @BernieSanders...” Having supportive relationships with coworkers seems to be prevalent among these local journalists. They often tweet each other with jokes, funny stories, or words of affirmation that show newsroom support to be a key component of workplace enjoyment.

Chapter Five

Conclusion

The main purpose of this study was to obtain information on how local broadcast news reporters handled their mental health and workplace stress while their careers and personal lives were affected by the COVID-19 global pandemic. This study also had a goal of determining if these local reporters implemented moral or ethical guidelines into their reporting. By focusing on broadcast news reporters who worked within the Nielsen DMA containing Northwest Arkansas during the pandemic, this research provided insight into how small-market reporters generally in the early stages of their careers navigate their jobs and relationships within the newsroom and among their community.

A comprehensive review of more than 3,500 tweets by these local reporters revealed both the stresses and rewards experienced by younger journalists just starting to make their way in an increasingly complicated profession caught in the crossfire of both local and national events. Though the reporters studied did not overtly reference social responsibility theory as a part of their personal or professional moral code, their tweets reveal how they are using its principles as a sort of moral compass to guide their everyday reporting. In keeping with normative theories of the press and its role in a free or democratic society, many of these reporters see themselves as servants to the community. They speak of an obligation to bring objective and factual news to their audience.

The reporters' sense of social responsibility was reflected in their coverage of major stories during this time period, including the global pandemic and the 2020 elections. COVID-19 was the most discussed topic among the local reporters studied. Many of these reporters used their Twitter platforms to educate the public on changes in the pandemic, while also promoting

vaccination and social distancing. Their tweets about the elections also reflected a sense of social responsibility, particularly as it relates to the democratic process itself. The reporters frequently promoted voting in elections, both locally and nationally.

Yet, their tweets revealed how a sense of social responsibility to report the news also routinely drove these reporters into harm's way and on the frontlines of potentially dangerous stories. Three out of four tweets from the reporters in this study related to concerns about workplace stress and mental-health risks on the job. They spoke of the stress resulting from an increasingly heavy workload with little pay and the unremitting deadline pressure and stress of reporting live in-studio or alone on assignment. Some of the stress could be attributed to how the global pandemic and the ensuing community lockdown made their jobs so much more difficult. They talked about the challenges of no longer being able to conduct face-to-face interviews and instead connecting with sources by remote video or in socially distanced settings. A further source of stress could be seen in their tweets regarding politics. They spoke not just about the strain of keeping up with the political races, but also coping with the outright hostility they experienced as politicians attacked the integrity of their profession.

The tweets also touched upon how their stress was tied to more systemic changes to broadcast journalism. The reporters found themselves under pressure to constantly feed a 24/7 news cycle and often doing that job alone. This led to tweets in which reporters raised concerns about their personal safety as they found themselves working as their own camera operator in inclement weather or hostile environments. These reporters spoke about unfair reporting situations and how aspects of broadcasting live in the field can sometimes lead to traumatizing events. They also spoke about the need to protect the physical and psychological welfare of journalists. Stories containing elements of violence, specifically mass shootings, seemed

particularly difficult for some local reporters to talk about. Still, they didn't shy away from reporting important news events, particularly the devastating death toll from the pandemic.

These reporters did not talk about their own personal mental health issues, nor did they mention formal treatment programs at their news stations. They did tweet about how they coped with workplace stress through what could be described as self-care. Others wrote about the support they have received from family and friends and about how they drew strength from religion and their faith in God. The local reporters tweeted about the important role that social support from the community and their newsroom colleagues played in helping them to do their jobs. The reporters acknowledged that their mindset of being servants of the community made it important that they in turn felt a sense of appreciation and acceptance from their audience.

This study had inherent limitations that are suggestive of further research. The sample size was by definition limited to a specific small broadcast market and the findings could be further contextualized by expanding the study to different parts of the country and larger media markets. The focus on Twitter postings is potentially limiting in that journalists may choose to be more discreet in talking about sensitive issues via a medium that serves as a direct feed to the public. Twitter can also serve as a public-relations instrument, raising the question of whether tweets are reflective of the reporters or the image that their TV station wants to project. Still, it is undeniable that analysis of social media not only provided an overview of the way these reporters and their organizations operated during an historic time period, but it also revealed the role that Twitter itself played in enabling that process. A key finding involved the degree to which reporters used Twitter as a means to offer support to each other. A key question might involve whether this digital tool supports or supplants more traditional and enduring newsroom

support systems that have included after-hours social gatherings like the newsroom watering holes and more formal press clubs and gatherings.

Confidential interviews with reporters might provide greater insight into the specific workplace stress or mental-health issues they faced and the ways in which they coped. Reporters also don't talk about how their newsrooms are providing counseling or other means of support. They also don't discuss the roles that newsroom managers might play in perpetuating stressful or outright dangerous assignments or working conditions. Confidential interviews with journalists might provide further insight, particularly if newsroom managers are also queried. Of special interest would be discussion of what aspects of newsgathering might need to change as the profession continues to evolve so rapidly. Complimentary forms of data gathering, such as surveys and questionnaires, might also shed light on these issues.

This research did provide insight into how small-market TV reporters in the early stages of their careers navigate their jobs and relationships within the newsroom and in their community. Collectively, these tweets documented an array of workplace stressors and exposure to traumatic events that have been tied to employee burnout and more profound mental-health problems. The continuation of this type of workplace stress over a long period of time can potentially affect reporter mental health and creates a higher chance of burnout from their career. Though the global pandemic represented a distinctly unique event, it also should be noted that the stressors faced by these reporters are not mere anomalies, but rather factors that are becoming more endemic to news work. Nonetheless, this study revealed that these younger reporters are committed to following enduring journalistic principles despite increasing demands and mounting hostility that has made them targets in the community they have worked tirelessly to serve.

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