

From Individual Disconnection to Collective Practices for Journalists' Wellbeing

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Abstract

Journalists are increasingly experiencing the negative consequences of online news transformations, such as trolling and harassment, as well as audience distrust. Despite acute need, intra-organisational efforts to support journalists' online wellbeing have so far been limited. More recently, research has explored how journalists have turned to individual practices of disconnection, such as blocking, muting, or small breaks from online media to mediate the impacts of their everyday online labour (Bossio et al., 2024). Building on this research, this study explores how these individual practices are moving toward collective practices of disconnection. Using interviews with 21 journalists, this study traces how emergent collective practices might contribute to systemic change in journalism. We argue that in lieu of intra-organizational support, journalists seek to disconnect through informal sharing of experiences and support as well as collective efforts toward inter-organisational training and intra-organisational formalization mentoring programs.

Keywords

disconnection; journalism; journalism practice; online connection; professional identity; social media; wellbeing

1. Introduction

The impacts of constant online connection with audiences through social media platforms have been seen in journalists' reports of exhaustion or burnout due to long hours spent mediating the consequences of increasingly complex forms of online connection (Bossio & Holton, 2021; Reinardy, 2011). These negative

consequences have been exacerbated by the lack of organisational support for journalists to avoid or manage online connections (Bélaïr-Gagnon et al., 2023; Bossio et al., 2024; Holton et al., 2023; Martin, 2018). As a result, journalists have reported developing individual disconnection practices to counterbalance the demands of remaining connected online (Bossio et al., 2024).

Disconnection refers to the ways connection to a particular platform can be negotiated through temporary refraining from social and technical affordances. These practices include blocking profiles or muting specific online interactions (Karppi, 2018). Journalists, like other media professionals, have developed disconnection strategies that allow more autonomy over the forms of professional connection used in their online work (Bélaïr-Gagnon et al., 2022). However, journalism differs from other professions in the information economy in that online production and more importantly, online presence has become imperative to journalistic labour. Journalistic work has changed in response to the opportunities brought by online connectivity and related cultures of collaborative, transparent, and engaged communication (Bossio & Holton, 2021). This has meant that journalistic labour is framed by organisational and institutional logics that demand increasing connectivity through practices of online engagement. In this context, disconnection is not simply a matter of turning away from individual social media use, but rather developing professional strategies to manage the material impacts of the “always on” imperative in journalism. These individual disconnection practices have contributed to understanding the rapidly transforming online practices, values, and competencies that constitute contemporary journalistic practice and professional identity (Hayes et al., 2007). In particular, they have been linked with improving journalists’ professional wellbeing by allowing more autonomy over the interactions journalists need to manage in their online work (Šimunjak, 2023).

Previous research on disconnection has focussed on strategies media users have developed to improve their wellbeing by managing or avoiding forms of online connection. Critiques of the tropes have framed this work as an individual responsibility and self-optimisation aligned with online connection (Syvertsen, 2020). For example, studies have shown how these tropes are enabled by principles of digital capitalism and exploitative data collection practices framing utopian models of ubiquitous social connection (Bucher, 2020; Natale & Treré, 2020). Several disconnection studies have prioritised the self in studies of online abstention, meaning how individuals use disconnection practices to challenge the forms of ubiquitous connection promoted by living and working online. However, such an approach can sometimes obscure the opportunities for collective advocacy for broader application of disconnection strategies. As Light (2014, p. 155) suggests, while individuals often understand disconnection through social and technical practices, it also emerges as “a collection of lenses, which allow us to understand who or what is involved [in disconnection], where it occurs and how it is enacted.” Light’s perspective has given space for research highlighting forms of disconnection that move from an individual responsibility to a collective focus on changing the structural frameworks that contribute to professional wellbeing online (Lomborg, 2020; Natale & Treré, 2020).

Following this conceptualisation of social forms of disconnection, this study focuses on how journalists have collectively developed systems of disconnection to support their wellbeing. We argue that focussing only on journalists’ individual practices of disconnection risks reifying the tropes of individual responsibility for online practice, and obscures more social practices that move toward collective knowledge and approaches to online labour. Using semi-structured interviews with 21 journalists based in Australia and the US, this study traces the emergence of collective practices of disconnection that are beginning to contribute to systemic change in journalism. We identify four elements of collective disconnection in journalism.

Contextualisation of disconnection strategies, which then move toward “informal” collective supports, such as sharing disconnection practices socially, and then finally, attempts to move individual strategies towards intra-organisational training and mentoring. While we position these as nascent practices, they are significant as they identify how journalists are beginning to recognize forms of disconnection beyond individual responsibility and moving into more collective approaches to wellbeing in online spaces.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Wellbeing in Journalism

In psychological research, achievement of wellbeing—the state of being comfortable, healthy, and happy—is described according to three philosophical approaches: the ability to balance emotions; the satisfaction that elements of lifestyle, such as work and pleasure, contribute to overall satisfaction; and a sense of autonomy, purpose, and opportunity to achieve mastery (Alexandrova, 2015). Workplace wellbeing is defined similarly as achieving a balance between physical and mental health maintenance, and individual satisfaction with workplace processes (Leiter & Cooper, 2017). Workplaces like newsrooms that require emotional labour from journalists, such as connecting with audiences online based on maintaining a professional persona, can affect wellbeing (Thomson, 2021). For these workers, the perception of social and organisational support and demonstrations of care can mitigate the negative effects of this labour (Brunetto et al., 2014).

In media and journalism studies, elements of wellbeing have been described in negative relation to media tools. As Enli (2015) suggests, elements of wellbeing have been used to prioritise offline interaction as more authentic, real, or healthy than online media tools. Journalism research has referred to wellbeing as a casualty of journalists’ interactions with war (Feinstein, 2013), crises (Backholm & Björkqvist, 2010; Brambila, 2024; Tandoc et al., 2022), social platforms (Bélair-Gagnon et al., 2022), and the increasingly difficult work environments produced by a struggling news industry (Abeykon et al., 2023; Monteiro et al., 2016).

More recent research has focussed on the individual, organisational, and structural elements of achieving wellbeing in journalists’ different work environments (Bélair-Gagnon et al., 2023; Mabweazara & Matsilele, 2023; Šimunjak & Menke, 2023). Defining wellbeing in this context has balanced both balances of “mastering” (meaning working effectively online and “satisfaction”) and balancing the positive and negative impacts of online and social media connection (Bossio, 2017; Crilley & Gillespie, 2019). Organisational approaches to online and social media journalism have rarely supported online wellbeing. Instead, such approaches have forwarded punitive consequences for social media missteps (Bélair-Gagnon & Holton, 2022). Thus, online wellbeing for journalists has frequently focussed on managing emotions online (Šimunjak, 2023) and managing negative interactions online often through disconnection (Bossio et al., 2024).

2.2. Online Connection and Disconnection

Public discourse on online connection advocates for disconnection strategies including “digital detox” (Syvertsen, 2020), “digital minimalism” (Newport, 2019), and “wellness practices” that would allow for “authentic forms of connection” (Enli & Syvertsen, 2021; Jorge et al., 2022). These practices rely on individuals to exercise restraint or set boundaries, suggesting that remedies for social media burnout are not social but individual. In other words, if a person feels exhausted by the social expectation of constant

connectedness online, they can self-regulate (Newport, 2019; Treré et al., 2020) and optimise their participation (Moe & Madsen, 2021).

Research on disconnection constitutes a response to the increasing role of digital technologies and communication in daily life. Such research reflects normative discourses in which (over)use of digital technology is problematised (Lomborg & Ytre-Arne, 2021). As such, research suggests that we should be concerned with the effects of digital and social media on users (e.g., privacy, lack of autonomy, and wellbeing; Lim, 2020; Lomborg & Ytre-Arne, 2021). Research on disconnection argues that connection–disconnection constitutes a continuum of mutable individual practices users deploy (Chia et al., 2021; Light, 2014). For example, Lindell and Båge (2023) discussed the ways disconnection from digital news comprises many factors including the multi-dimensional character of social inequality, the symbolic value of different types of news genres and outlets, and social inequalities in the normative problematization of how people decide to avoid the news. Less-resourced groups, for instance, have been seen to be more likely to be disconnected from information online (Bossio et al., 2024; Zhu & Skoric, 2022).

Kaun (2021) argues that disconnection has thus emerged “as a civic virtue that puts the individual users’ responsibility at the forefront” and the identity of the “good citizen” forward. That is, even if we know that disconnective practices are informed by inequalities including socioeconomic status, access, gender, and race (see Hargittai, 2007; Treré et al., 2020), a good citizen would be someone critical of their own media consumption and able to adopt balanced practices. Kaun (2021) refers to the role of responsibility for engaging and disengaging from online information. Essentially, users need to assume a position of responsibility and question their level of connection. Similarly in journalism, online connection is both a social and professional expectation. This poses several challenges to journalists’ which the literature on digital disconnection has started to address.

2.3. Individual and Collective Approaches to Disconnection in Journalism

Research in journalism studies has found that disconnection coping mechanisms are based on virtue (although the concept used is “individual”; Bossio et al., 2024; Šimunjak & Menke, 2023). Kaun (2021) argues that “highlighting the relevance of digital disconnection on the epistemological, ontological, and political level will allow for [a] deeper understanding of how sociality emerges nowadays including all its unresolvable contradictions and ambiguities.”

As such, journalism research has implicitly explored the ways disconnection may be characterisation through ontology (what is journalism), process (what does journalism do), epistemology (what do journalists know and how do they know it), and ethics (what is good journalism; Bossio et al., 2024; Miller & Lewis, 2022; Molyneux, 2019). For example, journalists added disconnective safety practices (e.g., adding two-factor authentication, blocking trolls, taking time off, etc.) all on their terms to the process of journalism (noting that two-factor authentication or more largely safety measures may be integrated into large organisations through safety cultures approaches such as in investigative journalism teams; Henrichsen, 2022). As another example, journalists have been disconnecting from journalism norms and practices to adapt to the needs of social media. These include adopting Instagram personas to be more authentic or relatable to audiences, among other ways of blending personal and professional identities (Bossio, 2023). Research suggests that these approaches emerge as coping mechanisms within journalism because of the industry’s lack of

organisational or institutional support (Holton et al., 2023). This could be the consequence of specific established norms and practices, such as that journalists must protect their independence by eschewing collaboration, or that journalists must be “always on” and work at non-traditional hours. At worst, the individual-focused approach to disconnection represents a lack of acknowledgement by organisations that those practices now contribute to journalism’s ontology, process, epistemology, and ethics.

In response to these observations, scholars have advocated for adopting a collective approach to disconnection. These approaches may include creating intentional spaces for strategic forms of connection and disconnection or rethinking journalism practice with these emerging forms of journalism (Bélair-Gagnon et al., 2023). Bélair-Gagnon et al. (2023) suggested such a collective approach needs to go beyond individualisation mechanisms (e.g., seeing a therapist or taking a break; see Martin, 2018; Posetti et al., 2022). Research also points to the challenges of individual approaches, including stigmatisation attacks on journalists as consequences of individual weakness, or failure to recognise and account for the substantial effort journalists expend to protect themselves (Bossio et al., 2024).

2.4. Conceptualisation of Collective Practices of Disconnection

This study explores how journalists have begun to collectivise forms of knowledge and experience around disconnection. Disconnection research often prioritises autonomy and control over individual connectivity. Disconnection has often been centred as a mode of individual agency over the ways users connect online. Even in the context of journalism and other media workers, who are often compelled organisationally to consistently engage online, forms of disconnection are often framed as an emancipatory choice of self-regulation or choice.

One issue that emerges from this framing of disconnection is that it is limited by the individual’s choice of action and its focus on individual productivity and wellbeing. That is, individual forms of disconnection, especially in journalism, often focus on optimising future connections to be productive at work. This subsequently ignores social and collective actions that contribute to changes in the structural elements of connection. Thinking about collective disconnection practices re-centres the question at the heart of disconnection studies: What are autonomy and control in these spaces?

To sum up our argument, the dominant model of disconnection studies defines media non-use as an individual pursuit (Figuera & Britas, 2022). Individual disconnection strategies are often seen to provide users with autonomy over the socio-technical affordances and limitations of online spaces. Yet this research frames individual users’ disconnection practices with the organisational and social trends toward online self-optimisation and connectivity. Self-choice and negotiation of connectivity are often related to self-regulation for productive digital economies (Karppi, 2018). Albris et al. (2024) have argued the forms of individual wellbeing prioritisation by disconnection strategies are also becoming more commodified, as digital economies forward user accountability over collective action or governmental and organisational regulation of online intervention into private time. Thus, individualisation strategies risk reifying personal responsibility for digital culture, to the detriment of more social forms of disconnection as collective resistance to it (Bélair-Gagnon et al., 2022).

Conversely, collective disconnection is conceptualisation as a social process, constituting personal choice, and collaborative work (Figueiras & Brites, 2022). Collective disconnection also frames how resistance to

the structural impacts of these socio-technical affordances emerges. These forms of disconnection aim to collectively reject the “affective bonds” (Karppi, 2018) of connectivity. Collective disconnection is a process of tracing how individuals begin to challenge the premises of ubiquitous connectivity on social media (Syvertsen, 2020, pp. 7–8). However, these individual users’ disconnection practices are guided not only by the impact of organisational and social trends towards productive online self-optimisation and connectivity. Users also seek to resist the increasingly ubiquitous examples of exploitative digital data practices and capitalism that underpin these social network models (Bucher, 2020). The conceptualisation of collective practices of disconnection provides a framework of resistance that moves away from the individual practices of disconnection that would otherwise risk reifying the self-optimisation and productivity techniques inherent in the principles of digital capitalism (Bélair-Gagnon et al., 2022).

Collective disconnection can be theorised following Light’s (2014, p. 150) assertion of social states where something other than connectivity can exist. This framing of collective disconnection as a social state considers four elements. First, it considers the contextualisation of disconnection practices within particular times and spaces. This means, as Karppi, Chia, et al. (2021) suggests, framing different forms of connectivity and disconnection as dynamic processes. These processes respond to cultures of use—the ongoing techno-socio changes that accompany its changing use—and the wider cultural and political implications of these changes.

Second, shared experience is an important element of collective disconnection (Lomborg, 2020). Sharing does not always denote agreement but rather a shared realisation of the impacts of connectivity and the ways this has been individually negotiated. Third, informality is often at play in the collective sharing of individual realisation of the impacts of connectivity, underscoring the messy and unplanned sharing of disconnection, and that these collective practices are rarely part of formal regulation, policy, or any other formalised recognition of collective resistance. Lastly, the most important aspect of these collective practices is ultimately the aim of challenging digital cultures of connectivity, framing these impacts not as an individual problem to be fixed but as a collective challenge (Lomborg, 2020). Disconnection does not require collective consensus or formalisation through policy, etc.; the mere act of sharing experiences and knowledge is already an act of resistance (Couldry & Mejias, 2019).

Finally, collectivising knowledge about disconnection is thus a social state of resistance that prioritises what Karppi, Stäheli, et al. (2021, p. xi) frames as the “embeddedness of ubiquitous connectivity...and how it can be challenged and denaturalised from within.” These speak to specific issues journalism as a profession is dealing with, such as digital embeddedness (Blumell et al., 2023). Martin and Murrell (2020) proposed the concept of collective care to support acts of resilience in contexts of online harassment. Salamon (2024) also proposed adding support to collective bargaining. Collective states of disconnection still often culminate in individual acts—putting the phone away after work, not answering work calls, etc.—but it is the shared experience and acceptance of these forms of resistance that changes the structure of connectivity of everyday work life.

3. Methods

Using a grounded theory approach, this study conceptualises emerging collective approaches to support journalists’ online connective and disconnective practices. Twenty-one semi-structured interviews with journalists were conducted to explore how journalists characterise individual and organisational practices of

disconnection that contribute to professional wellbeing online. The interviews included 15 US and six Australian employees of news organisations, in roles including reporter, editor, and staff writer, which in this study we refer to as “journalists.” The sample included broadcast, print, and online journalists working in commercial, nonprofit, and public service media organisations. An Australian interviewee was employed outside of journalism, in the office of the Australian eSafety Commissioner to support journalists’ online safety and was identified in the analysis. One US interviewee is an academic who has founded an online support network and resources to support journalists online. Of the US journalists, eight identified as men, six as women, and one as non-binary; among Australian interviewees, two identified as men and four identified as women. We focussed on both US and Australian journalists to provide a broader approach to a research area that has often focused on single-nation studies. Although Australian and US journalists follow similar professional models of journalism, there are several organizational differences in scale and population that we surmised might reveal some market-driven differences in journalistic individual and collective practices of online disconnection. Of note is the highly concentrated news media ownership in Australia. Just three newsgroups—News Limited, Seven West Media, and Nine Entertainment—dominate mass media ownership in Australia (“Australia media guide,” 2023). Australia also has a relatively small number of journalists working in permanent, full-time positions; less than 10,000 across the country compared to nearly 40,000 in the US (Stanford, 2021).

The study used purposive sampling to draw on the knowledge and experience of journalists working in collaborative approaches. Such a sampling tactic helps develop an exploratory approach to understanding an emerging area of journalism research and practice. Recruitment was conducted through a social media call for journalists who had either developed, led, or received mentoring or professional development in the newsroom or from an external organisation regarding any aspect of online or social media wellbeing. We did not specify the type of organisation or medium in the call for participants, as all the organisations had significant online presence, regardless of the primary publication medium. We have delineated the difference in mediums in Table 1. “News” indicates a digital-first publication, whereas “newspaper” was the primary medium, this indicates a traditional print organisation, with a mirrored online presence. Instead, we wanted to reach a broad range of journalists, especially as the number that had received or led development for professional wellbeing was small.

Researchers contacted journalists who met the criteria and invited them to complete interviews about their social media work and disconnection practices. Ethical approval was sought and approved, with stipulations for anonymity due to discussion of organisational policy and professional wellbeing. Interviews were conducted from February to mid-April 2024 in-person and using Zoom video conferencing technology (see Deakin & Wakefield, 2014). Following respective institutional review boards, responses were anonymised and given a unique identifier code in the analysis (see Table 1). The interviews took up to 60 minutes and were digitally recorded, transcribed, and for some de-identified. Data from the interview responses were analysed using a grounded approach, where themes were hand-coded and discussed between researchers as they emerged and finalised once saturation had been reached (Given & Olson, 2003).

The authors first conducted open coding in an ongoing and iterative manner to allow for dynamic comparison between the responses from the participants (Given & Olson, 2003). This focused on close reading of transcripts, which allowed researchers to capture emerging themes. Then, the authors conducted iterative axial coding to conceptually group the responses (Corbin & Strauss, 1998). The interview questions

Table 1. Interviewees.

Identifier	Area of journalism	Medium	Seniority
J1	Sports reporter	Local digital news	Early-career
J2	Breaking news and business reporter	Regional newspaper	Early-career
J3	Science reporter	Regional newspaper	Early-career
J4	Platform editor	National digital news	Early-career
J5	Social media editor	National digital news	Early-career
J6	Commerce reporter	Regional newspaper	Mid-career
J7	Data editor	Regional newspaper	Mid-career
J8	Director of social media	Regional newspaper	Mid-career
J9	Editor	National digital news	Mid-career
J10	General assignment and arts reporter	Local nonprofit news	Mid-career
J11	Reporter	National nonprofit news	Mid-career
J12	Science reporter	Local nonprofit news	Mid-career
J13	Political reporter	National nonprofit news	Late-career
J14	Director of collaboration	Local nonprofit news	Late-career
J15	Reporter	Local newspaper	Retired
J16	Digital reporter	National digital news	Cadet
J17	Reporter	Metropolitan newspaper	Mid-career
J18	Journalist turned content creator	Freelance	Mid-career
J19	Reporter	Metropolitan digital news	Mid-career
J20	Lifestyle journalism	Freelance	Mid-career
J21	Reporter	National broadcast	Junior

focused on: (a) whether interviewees had particular individual and collective strategies for online wellbeing; (b) their approaches to online labour, and whether these had changed over time; (c) whether they had received mentoring or professional development in the newsroom around online wellbeing; and (d) whether they had ever provided advice or mentoring to others about how to create strategies to protect online wellbeing based on their experiences.

4. Findings

The interviews conducted with Australian and US-based journalists are presented along the four key elements of collective disconnection: contextualisation, informality and shared experience, and finally, collectively denaturalising or changing digital cultures. The themes that emerged from the interviews showed how collective disconnection was contextualised in journalism in responses that indicated (a) individual strategies for maintaining wellbeing while working in online environments and (b) a lack of organisational support for journalists' online wellbeing. Shared experiences and informality were described in interview responses that suggested how (c) informal sharing strategies for collective support and online wellbeing had been created and finally, (d) collective action for change in digital cultures emerged from interview responses that showed how journalists had worked together to foster (d) online wellbeing cultures and development opportunities in newsrooms. While the first two themes confirm existing disconnection

research, the second two themes speak more broadly to the emerging collective practices occurring in mainstream journalism.

4.1. Contextualisation of Emerging Collective Disconnection in Journalism

The development of collective disconnection practices in journalism can be contextualised according to aspects of journalism's traditional newsroom work cultures. The context for many of the disconnection practices that individual journalists subsequently implement is based on the increasing demands of online work in already busy newsrooms. Increasing frustration, anxiety, and reports of burnout have been commonly reported among journalists working online and on social media. A journalist reflected on the always-on culture of the newsroom: "What looms most large for me—and a lot of the working journalists here—is that separation of when to turn off if you are always expected to be on. When do you stop?" (J19).

The consequence of this newsroom culture is that journalists did not have methods for managing their wellbeing. For some journalists, this had several physical and psychological impacts. For example, a journalist said:

I don't get much sleep. There is a significant amount of labour, particularly in producing the videos and managing the communities....Unfortunately, I don't have a strategy long-term. At the moment I'm just going to keep going until I burn out—that's the plan. (J20)

Other journalists perceived an always-on culture in the newsroom that had led to their development of individual disconnection strategies. For example, journalists reported strategies including setting online profiles to silent, turning off comments, and only creating content on work phones as their methods for balancing work and home life. While much of the research around disconnection practices in journalism has outlined some of these successful strategies, other journalists interviewed suggested that their strategies of disconnection were no longer relevant in a post-pandemic newsroom. For example, a journalist said that the pandemic made journalists feel as though they are "always on a kind of standby mode. It was already happening, but this kind of turbocharged it" (J17).

This journalist (J17) said they developed disconnection strategies to combat the pitfalls of living a professional life online. But during extended Covid-19 lockdowns, they watched as newly online colleagues fell into the quagmire of 24/7 connection, overwork, and burnout that they could now easily avoid. Another journalist also mentioned the Covid-19 lockdowns as a time of both enhanced pressures, but also the realisation that this was unsustainable:

When we all worked at home for a couple of years it embedded this culture of always being available, always on-screen, your phone always in your pocket. Because we weren't together, we weren't realising how much our jobs asked of us. (J19)

Journalist J19 was reflecting on how the increased individualisation of their work concentrated during the pandemic lockdowns and turned into overwork without the balance that the newsroom's collective labour can bring.

Despite this “always on” culture of online work, many journalists suggested that there was little to no organisational information or support to protect journalists’ online wellbeing, before or after lockdown. One Australian journalist reported feeling an increased sense of safety risk reporting due to the anti-vaccination and anti-lockdown protests during lockdowns in Victoria: “One of these people must have worked in government because the protestors had managed to find some politicians’ home addresses. I realised pretty quickly that it would be pretty easy to get my personal details too” (J17).

Despite the safety risk presented by what the journalist (J17) described as a group “hostile to journalists,” no support or training was produced to help journalists navigate these risks. The journalist independently took steps such as purchasing secondary mobile phones and SIM cards to protect their location and personal details.

Another cadet digital journalist (J16) suggested that wellbeing and safety were not part of their training. They instead described compulsory training focussing on physical safety in the workplace, and when working from home, such as reporting hazards in the workplace and using proper lumbar support. This type of formal safety training content is provided by all large Australian organisations as part of compliance with Australian workplace health and safety legislation. Similar regulations are in place in the US and elsewhere. They said:

I don’t think there have been any conversations about work–life balance...when I first joined there was a lot of online learning I had to do, almost 13 training sessions. They go into safety, but online safety? They didn’t go into it. (J16)

Other journalists said organisations provided very little information or support around online safety regarding negative online experiences. For example, one journalist (J19) said their news organisation said “use common sense” if faced with online harassment or trolling.

With no formal professional development or support for online wellbeing in the news organisation, journalists spoke about offering information to recruits, supporting struggling colleagues, and sometimes, beginning to normalise sharing supportive practices for wellbeing in the newsroom.

4.2. Shared Experience and Informal Sharing of Practices of Disconnection in Journalism

The last two themes emerging from the interviews were journalists’ descriptions of informal sharing and support for online wellbeing amongst journalists. These are nascent themes emerging in research around disconnection in journalism. However, several journalists interviewed described practices focused on informal knowledge sharing to support online wellbeing. They spoke of informal strategies, which had begun to move into more formal opportunities for sharing experiences, knowledge, and strategies among groups of journalists meant to address the difficulties of online work. These were framed as part of supportive practices for wellbeing in the newsroom.

Journalists reported noticing that they were not the only ones in their profession feeling overburdened by pressure to maintain a constantly updated online presence. Sharing this concern with colleagues led journalists to offer solidarity and problem-solve together. A late-career journalist remembered one-on-one conversations with a colleague serving as a social media editor who permitted them to adapt individual practices: “Everybody can carve out something different” (J14). They noted that adaptations in online media

work had always travelled by word-of-mouth and other peer-to-peer channels, because even “in the early days, you totally just had to figure it out for yourself, right?” (J9). Facing a lack of organisational support, journalists began to turn to each other to address their concerns. For example, a journalist said where they once believed their disconnection practices were personally curated to match their professional persona online, they realised they could share what they knew about managing online work: “It wasn’t until we all started coming back to the newsroom, we all started to realise how much our jobs ask of us. But now, the difference is—we talk about it” (J17).

Also, a journalist said that they gained more understanding of the risks associated with online reporting from the everyday behaviour modelled by their senior peers. For example, they said the small team of senior journalists they worked with informally checked-in to ensure they were working appropriately online:

When we were reporting on a controversial story about the election in Indonesia, they [senior peers] made sure I had all the right privacy settings on my phone. They said that I should turn my profile “off” when the story came out. (J16)

Similarly, a senior journalist had suggested that they had considered, or even attempted, developing these informal connections into normalisation journalistic practices. They attempted to persuade junior colleagues that obtaining a second phone was standard professional practice. Though this was not an organisational requirement, this journalist noted that many senior journalists did this to provide a physical separation between work and personal life. The journalist felt others should understand “one of the very few tools for coping mentally with this job” (J19).

These practices were considered informal because they occurred without the sanction, or often even the knowledge, of senior editorial staff or the organisation itself. In this case, the direction of influence is from journalist to journalist as peers rather than within any hierarchical leadership structure. As another journalist described:

We do small talk about the content and the stories all the time. We basically go to each other: “Oh my god this thing happened [online] what should we do?” Because my seniors have a lot of experiences, and they’ve received a lot of hate for their past stories, I’m pretty lucky that if I have one of those instances, I can go to them to get advice. (J19)

Journalists described how informal support networks grew on the social media platforms they felt conflicted with, further complicating their relationship with digital media. And yet, now that Twitter has been renamed X and much of its functionality has changed, the thing journalists said they miss most about it was not the self-promotion or audience engagement: “It was a way for me to connect with people like me” (J7). Journalists reported that these informal support networks have recently moved to other spaces. Rather than forming and maintaining connections on publicly visible platforms, journalists report using closed systems (such as the workplace chat software Slack) to connect with their peers and receive support. This means that while journalists continue to seek and offer disconnection strategies collectively, the support networks are not institutionalised and maybe even less visible: “It’s going to be in their Slacks and group chats. I think a lot of the conversation has just moved to those more private settings” (J11). Another journalist (J7) suggested this was because Slack communities can be but aren’t necessarily tied to workplaces, enabling people with

similar jobs at different organisations to connect and support one another in communities of interest. This practice shows that disconnection practices require connection to develop and spread.

4.3. Emergent Practices of Collective Disconnection in Journalism

Journalists mentioned forms of informal sharing and support to be collegial in the newsroom, to offer information to recruits, to offer support to colleagues who were struggling, and to begin to normalise practices of support for wellbeing in the newsroom. In this way, journalists engaged in collective approaches to develop and spread better practices of online wellbeing. A journalist said they sought to ensure that more individualisation disconnection practices were normalised into collective approaches to cultural change in the newsroom. This was described as a process of senior journalists modelling professional behaviours prioritising wellbeing. Rather than “hard-and-fast rules” dictated through formal organisational policy, collective behaviour modelling was identified as a way of changing newsroom culture:

I am trying to make it culturally “not cool.” It’s not cool to call people on their day off. Or to call people in [to work] on their annual leave. It’s not as functional to make this idea like a “hard-and-fast” rule because of the industry we’re in, but if we can culturally make it like a worst-case scenario to pick up the phone when they are not supposed to be working, it can be a reflection of how much we are meant to give in this job. (J19)

Our interviews also highlighted how these emerging shared practices had begun to filter into organisational efforts to support journalists’ online labour. For example, a cadet journalist said they had benefited from a mentoring program provided by their news organisation as an optional form of professional development for junior reporting staff. The program allowed cadets to request mentoring from specific senior journalists based on their professional focus—a program fostered by the organisation due to continued cadet journalist requests for mentoring that extended the cadetship program. They said they had chosen a senior journalist based on their shared background as international students living in a culturally and linguistically diverse community:

I got paired up with this person who works on the TikTok team and is originally from Hong Kong. I’ve met up with her twice [in the first three months of work] and I asked how they adjusted to [the organisation]. (J16)

While wellbeing was not a specific focus of the mentoring sessions, the journalist said they talked about balancing work and personal life in adjusting to a new cultural context.

Another interviewee suggested that some of these informal modelling behaviours had filtered into wider institutional practice. For example, in Australia, some work has begun to formalise organisational processes for promoting journalists’ online wellbeing. A collaboration between the Australian Broadcasting Corporation and the office of Australia’s eSafety Commissioner has piloted the employment of a social media wellbeing advisor role. The role centres forms of “digital allyship” in training junior journalists for online work. Digital allyship prioritises collective modes of support for online wellbeing, working within teams to develop best practices models for online safety, and strategies to manage and mitigate negative social media interactions. This includes the normalisation of managerial responsibility for supporting journalists’ online work, including creating risk assessments for possibilities of online abuse when

commissioning news reportage and creation of moderation planning for organisationally owned social media accounts. The social media advisor role has since been formalised at the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, with protocols now established for open discussion of the types of online abuse encountered by journalists working at the organisation, formal training and resources to maintain and normalise individual and newsroom-wide boundaries for online work, including disconnection strategies such as removal of social media handles and bylines from stories considered a risk for abuse. Similarly, US academic Michelle Ferrier's work with Trollbusters has advocated for formalised processes to ensure journalists' online wellbeing. These initiatives reflect a growing recognition of journalists' collective effort at advocating for wellbeing to be an everyday part of newsroom procedure.

Despite knowledge of these broader initiatives, journalists reported little through the development of organisational or institutional norms around wellbeing in journalism. More collective frameworks for maintaining wellbeing in journalistic work have been apparent in some newsrooms, as reflected by a small number of our interviews, though newsroom efforts and wider organisational changes to prioritise online wellbeing in journalism should be considered emergent rather than established.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

In response to the lack of intra-organizational effort to support journalists' wellbeing, this study explored how journalists collectively supported online wellbeing through disconnection. Interview data shows this emerging collective approach may be conducted primarily in collaboration—among groups of journalists, or between them and inter-organisational actors. In terms of informal support, journalists said this occurred by coming up with their strategies, the presence of intra-organizational networked approaches, and the normalisation of network approaches. Our findings showed that journalists still use individual strategies to maintain their wellbeing through practices of disconnection. For example, journalists referenced a trial-and-error approach to finding disconnection strategies that “work” for them to manage the demands of online connection. Journalists also indicated a professional movement towards sharing knowledge and experience of disconnecting as informal mentoring from senior to junior journalists.

We also found that movement toward collective disconnection practice was apparent, and driven along four identified elements of contextualisation, sharing informal practices and movement toward wider collective action. Journalists shared informal strategies to support one another's wellbeing and online disconnection. For example, communities of practice that once thrived on X have now moved to less-public group chats and Slack channels. Journalists suggested that they had given or received informal mentoring (e.g., collegiality, information sharing, and supporting colleagues such as through problem-solving, etc.). Informal, practical advice on coping mechanisms served to build solidarity and counterbalance organisational demands for connection. These connections may blossom into broader efforts. In this way, findings show that journalists are akin to online users as they need to assume responsibility and question their level of online connection (see Kaun, 2021). The interviews showed a lack of understanding of peer/employer support for the need to disconnect and the consequences of what journalists think they are and what they are doing constitutes obstacles to journalists' wellbeing.

Even if journalists recognised the absence of intra-organisational support for their wellbeing and support for their practices of disconnection (see Henrichsen, 2022, on the lack of safety cultures), in terms of collective

support, journalists emphasised inter-organisational training and intra-organisational formalisation mentoring programs. Journalists described professional development for online practices that focussed specifically on online connection. This approach came with little discussion of how to deal with trolling, harassment, or other negative impacts of online work. However, journalists recognised that their newsrooms began offering professional development opportunities to learn how to negotiate online practices through disconnection. Evidently, there is potential and appetite for collaboration between journalists and external organisations, such as with the work of the eSafety Commissioner.

Journalism studies literature suggests that inter-organisational collaboration may be challenging to journalistic normative constructs. Values, norms, and assumptions that such actors bring to journalism may conflict with journalists' conception of what journalism is and how it ought to be carried out (e.g., working long hours, having a thick skin, etc.; Bélair-Gagnon et al., 2023; see Bélair-Gagnon & Holton, 2018; Eldridge, 2017; Hanusch & Löhmann, 2023). Rather, a focus on intra-organisational climate may be a fruitful path forward for news organisations. There were very few examples of a supportive newsroom climate, which would otherwise acknowledge that there are determinants to wellbeing over which the organisation has some control. A supportive organisation would demonstrate willingness to structure journalists' work to reduce exposure to unnecessary stressors and offer both preparation and respite when journalists must face necessary stressors (noting that examples of this exist but are scarce). The precise approach and remedies will vary based on journalists' gender and beat, the type of organisation, etc.

There are some limitations to this study. The findings from this small sample size may not be generalized to the overall work practices of all journalists. Similarly, while we found similar experiences recounted by both Australian and US journalists, the small sample, and broad selection of reportage areas covered is not generalizable overall. Further studies could begin to account for how particularities of reportage rounds, like lifestyle or political rounds may account for the types of impacts journalists experience in working online, and their specific practices of disconnection. Further studies could also begin to account for the differences in online labour and their impacts within countries and organisations that operate differently from Australian and American Western liberal traditions.

Overall, however, we found little support for journalists within news organisations, and journalists have turned to each other and to external organisations to support managing the demands of online media work. This constitutes an opportunity for the industry to build on these developments and establish new collective cultural constructs such as "collective care" (Martin & Murrell, 2020). As such, news organisations should pay attention to this problem as it is a human resource issue central to the "institutional crisis of journalism" (cf. Reese, 2020).

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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