

## Title

When is a journalist no longer a journalist: Ambivalence, dilemmas and ethics in journalism

## Extended Abstract

In an April 2015 interview for “Longform Podcast”, journalist Scott Anderson was asked about his work as a war correspondent and if the experience had changed him in any way. While at first the journalist seemed restrained and coy, as the interview progressed, however, so did the gravitas of his replies. When he was questioned specifically about his “non-reporting life”, and if he had figured out a technique to “turn off” after returning from a war zone, Anderson replied bluntly: his process of disassociation, before returning to his civilian life, often involved a feeling of deep anger, typically resolved after a day of loneliness and heavy drinking. Anderson also admitted that he knew other journalists who coped with these issues similarly.

Throughout time the effects of trauma and post-traumatic stress have been traditionally associated to survivors, army veterans and first responders; and yet, more and more studies from prestigious institutions, like the American Psychological Association, acknowledge that this issue also befalls numerous members of the press (“Journalists as vicarious first responders”, Clay, 2020). Indeed, many feel the burden and pressure of this profession, with recent evidence pointing out to high levels of stress and mental health strains for journalists who report on topics such as climate, natural disasters, abuse and other human stories (“The unspoken truth about journalist’s mental health”, Göktaş, 2023). Moreover, since there is no cure in sight for trauma, journalists have to regularly find coping strategies or seek psychological support, often at their own expense since most newsrooms are yet to fully recognize this issue (“It’s time for newsrooms to tackle taboos about mental health. Here’s how”, Storm, 2020).

While it is often difficult to address this topic, due to its ongoing development and complexity, we here argue that perhaps a different approach might offer some revealing insights. Indeed, as this study hopes to show, an insightful way to address journalists’ mental health would be by considering the intricacies that define this profession and the rules that guide it. Objectivity and neutrality, for example, as cornerstones of journalistic integrity, imbue the reporter with the high responsibility of detaching him or herself from the reported event, no matter the issue, so much so that the end result has to be as accurate and unbiased as possible. And yet, one has to be reminded that preconceptions and prejudices define journalism to begin with, and that it is impossible to calculate how a journalist will react to the unexpected, and how he or she will face ethical and professional dilemmas while reporting. With this in mind, we should analyze the crucial and complex concept of “ambivalence” in journalism, in other words: the need to be professional, ethical and unbiased towards a story;

while also being humane and a witness to a troubling reality, one where the reporter's direct intervention might even solve the issue at hand, at the price of losing/changing the truth of the story.

To this point, this study hopes to contribute to this pressing discussion by considering personal experiences and insights from journalists who have faced these issues firsthand, such as: Isabel Wilkerson's argument for caring for journalism without sacrificing her story's subjects, Anne Hull's reasons to not intervene in a moment of life and death, Tom Wolfe's argument for journalism becoming more based on emotion before facts, Sonia Nazario's ethical dilemmas when facing the prospects of not helping the subject of her story, to Walt Harrington's decision to go against his publishers' rules in order to be truthful to his story's subjects; among others.

With this in mind, as this study will argue, it is imperative that newsrooms and journalism schools take into serious consideration the issues here discussed, in hopes that integral facets of journalistic endeavor, such as objectivity and neutrality, do not come at the expense of a detachment from reality and possible personal trauma. Additionally, as journalism seeks to reinvent itself in the ever changing 21<sup>st</sup> century, this study will also explore the importance of recognizing journalists' dilemmas and conflicting thoughts whilst reporting, and how confidence in their decisions, as well as support for its aftermath, might just be part of the solution.

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Brief Bio

Manuel Carvalho Coutinho is a Researcher and an Invited Assistant Professor at Católica University (UCP-FCH), Research Centre for Communication and Culture (CECC). He holds a Bachelor Degree in Philosophy, a Master Degree in Philosophy of Education, and a Master and a PhD Degree in Communication Sciences – Media and Journalism Studies. His main research subject is contemporary Portuguese literary journalism and the relationship between literature and journalism throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century. His investigative interests also cover a number of other topics such as sports journalism, comics journalism and cultural journalism.