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Subjective Precarity and the Normalization of Work–Life Imbalance: Chinese Female Journalists’ Lived Experiences

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Extended Abstract

Prior research showed that long hours, nontraditional schedules, and the integration of digital technologies shape journalists’ ability to balance professional and personal lives (Snyder et al., 2021). As Deuze (2007) observes, journalism is often framed as a “workstyle rather than a lifestyle,” where life itself becomes a way of working and being at work. This perspective is echoed by journalists across both the Global North and South, who report that being a journalist often entails full-time commitment, with little distinction between work and personal life (Brouwers & Witschge, 2019; Lukan & Čehovin Zajc, 2022;), often resulting in work-life imbalance. Over time, the notion that personal sacrifice is an inherent part of journalistic work becomes a dominant, normalized, and even celebrated narrative among journalists. Against this backdrop, scholars also found a strong association between work–life imbalance and negative outcomes such as low job satisfaction, burnout, and mental health struggles (Hamid et al., 2024; Wang & Jiang, 2018; MacDonald et al., 2016).

Researchers often attribute journalists’ work-life imbalance to their affective and moral commitments to the profession, describing journalism as a form of hope labour (Zajc & Lukan, 2023) or aspirational labour (Perreault & Bélair-Gagnon, 2022), where passion and idealism mask or justify self-exploitation. While this framing captures the affective and moral dimensions of journalistic labour, it often overlooks journalists’ agency and the complex, sometimes contradictory ways they navigate these tensions. In other words, how journalists’ ideals and affective attachments evolve and adapt as they confront precarity over time remains underexplored.

Building on this review, I focus on the process through which work–life imbalance becomes normalized in journalism—how it is experienced, internalized, and at times

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resisted over time. This study focuses on Chinese female journalists in their early and mid-career stages, before becoming mothers—a group often overlooked in existing literature, which typically emphasizes married women with children. The experiences of these journalists are particularly significant as they often experience heightened professional aspirations, investing significant time and energy into their careers. However, this dedication, combined with the increasing demands of digital journalism, exposes them to precarious working conditions that blur the boundaries between their professional and personal lives. Understanding their experiences provides critical insights into the evolving nature of journalism and the structural challenges that shape their well-being.

Using precarity as a conceptual framework, this study examines both the material and emotional dimensions of instability in journalism. The general literature on precarity, based in the sociology of work and inflected by (autonomist) Marxist thought, and the specific literature on job insecurity, job loss and non-traditional employment in journalism studies (Örnebring, H. (2018). In journalism, precarity manifests in various ways, including job insecurity, financial instability, overwork, limited organizational support, and harassment (Örnebring, 2018; Guo & Fang, 2022).

While previous studies have primarily focused on the material aspects of precarity, or what Rick (2024) described 'objective precarity', this research expands the discussion by emphasizing its emotional toll. The feeling of being constantly available, the inability to disengage from work, and the psychological strain of blending personal and professional lives all contribute to journalists' emotional precarity. This study argues that work-life imbalance is not merely a practical issue, but an emotional experience shaped by structural cultural conditions and subjective experiences within journalism.

This study draws on three focus group interviews, each with 5-6 journalists from local and regional print media, including early-career journalists (within five years of experience) and mid-career journalists (more than eight years of experience). Thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2019) was employed to identify key patterns in how these journalists conceptualize work-life imbalance, cope with its challenges, and experience precarity in both tangible and emotional ways. The findings reveal three central tensions:

While journalists accept work-life blending as a given, they simultaneously acknowledge that its negative consequences outweigh its benefits, especially in terms of their well-being and health. The supposed flexibility that digital technology provides—such as working remotely or adjusting schedules—often translates into an expectation of constant availability. Journalists describe feeling unable to disengage from work, leading to chronic stress, exhaustion, and long hours extending into the evening, and various health-related issues. Despite believing that work-life imbalance is inevitable, they continue to seek temporary detachment from work. Strategies for temporary detachment include using technology to create boundaries (such as turning off

notifications or setting "do not disturb" hours) and relying on family members to help enforce work-life separation (such as asking a partner or parent to remind them to take breaks).

However, these methods are often short-lived, as the demands of digital journalism pull them back into work-related activities. The paradox of recognizing the impossibility of true disengagement while still striving for it highlights the deep contradictions within their professional experiences. The blending of work and life is emotionally charged but experienced differently across career stages.

Early-career journalists tend to embrace imbalance, driven by passion and hope for the profession, whereas mid-career journalists increasingly distance themselves emotionally, adopting a strategy of investing less meaning and expectation in their work as a way to cope with its demands. This shift is particularly noticeable among journalists who have partners or are considering future family roles, as they start prioritizing their personal well-being over professional ambition. This emotional adaptation underscores the long-term impact of precarious working conditions on journalists' psychological resilience and career trajectories.

Most studies on precarity in journalism focus on material instability, such as low pay, job insecurity, and the decline of traditional media business models. While these factors are undoubtedly significant, this study highlights the emotional dimension of precarity, particularly as it relates to work-life imbalance. The feeling of being trapped in a cycle of constant availability, emotional exhaustion, and an inability to fully disengage from work contributes to a deeper sense of instability. Current solutions for work-life imbalance often rely on individual journalists finding ways to set boundaries, but this places the burden on them rather than addressing systemic issues. News organizations should implement policies that genuinely support work life integration.

By examining work-life imbalance through the lens of precarity, this study provides a nuanced understanding of how Chinese female journalists navigate the blurred boundaries between their personal and professional lives. It highlights the emotional, psychological, and structural challenges embedded in contemporary journalism, emphasizing that work-life integration is not simply a matter of balance, but an ongoing negotiation shaped by passion, expectations, and systemic constraints. This research calls for a deeper conversation about how journalism can foster sustainable work cultures that support both professional excellence and personal well-being.

Acknowledging that precarity is not just about contracts but also about emotions is a crucial step toward building a more humane and resilient journalism industry.

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