Well-Being and Creative Careers

Preface: Outline, Positionality, and Gratitude

In my research, I try to come to terms with the fact that so many of the people who work professionally in the media – in journalism, advertising, music, games, film and TV, and in online content creation – struggle mentally and physically at work, while they at the same time do not hesitate to express gratitude, happiness, and joy about the creative career. In the process, I have found that this seeming contradiction turns out to be a fairly consistent explanation for the health crisis in the media, as what makes people happy doing what they love is also what becomes a problem for them. Everything in this book serves to engage this enigma, and sometimes this means that the same topics occur across different chapters. I hope and trust the reader forgives me for doing so, as at times we need different disciplines, perspectives, and examples to elucidate the same or similar phenomena. This also means that the book can be read in any particular order – possibly saving the concluding chapter for last.

I feel passionately about the issue of health and well-being in media work – and not just because of my insight in hindsight, after studying and interviewing practitioners in various fields since the late 1990s (and having been a freelance journalist in the Netherlands and South Africa before that). One of the reasons I love working with people in their pursuit of a creative career is the energy, enthusiasm, and idealism of the students and professionals involved, and I struggle to corroborate that passion with the material reality and lived experience of media work. Working in the media is, for many, very much a luxury only a few can afford – both in terms of its precarity and the many challenges it brings to one's mental and physical health. At the same time,

young people in particular are eager to step up to prospective careers in the various media industries, and many (if not most) professionals I have had the privilege to meet acknowledge how thrilled they are to be working in the media – despite (and sometimes even thanks to) precarious and perilous circumstances. Let me hasten to add that the same observation can be made about the university. Acknowledging the profound impact of precarious working conditions and widespread institutional inequities, a global critical awareness emerges around the lack of health and well-being of academics (including my particular field of journalism, media, and communication research).[1]

My research project and this book engage the health crisis in media head-on by combining the insights gained from industry sources (surveys and interview-based research commissioned by professional associations, nonprofit organizations, and media firms around the world), published scholarly work in media management and production studies, and meta-reviews in the field of occupational medicine on the association between work-related psychosocial risk factors and stress-related mental disorders. A bizarre aspect of this crisis is that few seem to care: movies and games still get made, ad campaigns run on all the websites we visit and channels we watch, and journalists report the news regardless of their distress. Underneath the glossy surface of all these media, there is a dark world of rising health insurance and other labor costs, lost productivity, absenteeism and presenteeism (as people still keep working through periods of mental ill health), high staff

1. Demeter, M. (2018). Changing center and stagnant periphery in communication and media studies: national diversity of major international journals in the field of communication from 2013 to 2017. *International Journal of Communication*, 12(29), 2893–921. Comel, N., et al. (2024). Academic production and collaboration among BRICS-based researchers: how far can the 'de-Westernization' of communication and media studies go? *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 101(1), 71–96. Hanitzsch, T., Markiewitz, A., & Bødker, H. (2024). Publish and perish: mental health among communication and media scholars. *Journal of Communication*, 74(6), 429–42. Wright, P.J. (2024). Improving mental health among communication and media scholars: four structural suggestions. *Health Communication*, 39(8), 1–4. Indeed, I would go as far as stating that all the conclusions that can be drawn from the research as documented in this book apply to what work is like in higher education, requiring similar interventions.

turnover, talent leaving the industry in droves, up to and including people committing suicide rather than speaking out about their misery for fear of judgment, dismissal, and exclusion.

Outline of the book

In the opening chapter, I tackle the issue of why industry reports and trade publications across the different media professions in recent years all talk about a 'mental health crisis' that affects everyone at work. As key stressors in media work, I emphasize the intensity and volatility of the work, the limited professionalization of management and ways of working in the sector, and the profound role passion plays in creative careers. While awareness about the importance of health and well-being in the workplace is rising worldwide, a characteristic aspect of the creative career is that practitioners so embody their labor, identify with their craft, and, in a way, 'become' their work. This is why it can be exceptionally difficult to relate effectively to potentially problematic aspects of the industry.

The all-important 'so what' and 'why now' questions are subsequently asked and answered in Chapter 2. I outline the ethical duty of care stakeholders in creative careers have – from policymakers, owners, and directors to co-workers and educators, up to and including the audience. Emphasizing issues such as dignity and autonomy at work, a detailed discussion follows about the prevalence of transgressive behavior – such as bullying, abuse, discrimination, and toxicity – in the media industry. While these concerns are not necessarily new, what makes them pertinent is a cocktail of growing mental health awareness worldwide, the pandemic, changing meanings and expectations of work, and the rise of social media (including new social movements such as #MeToo and Black Lives Matter).

Before digging deeper, in the third chapter I engage the issue of defining what we talk about when we talk about health, well-being, and happiness at work (in the media). Acknowledging our generally limited knowledge about health and well-being and how inaccurate we often are in interpreting and acting on our feelings, I move on to define health in an integrated way – including mental, physical, and spiritual elements – and suggest approaches to

well-being at work that include both individual and social parameters. In other words, it is not enough for a well-rounded conceptualization of health and well-being to simply have fun, nor does doing meaningful work suffice. An integrated, complete definition of healthy work and being happy on the job not only means that working conditions are conducive to people not getting sick nor being stigmatized for sometimes struggling but also includes professionals doing well, being valued and recognized, experiencing autonomy, and having agency at work.

Armed with concepts and context, the focus turns to the corpus at the heart of my overall argument: a narrative review of hundreds of reports, white papers, and industry and academic studies on well-being at work in six key professional groups: advertising (including marketing communications and public relations), music (including performing and recording), film and television (including documentary), digital games, social media entertainment (and online content creation), and journalism. A word of warning: the numbers regarding the levels of distress and pain are, at times, overwhelming, disturbing, and distressing. The overview cannot escape the conclusion that the very industry that people choose to be part of is what makes them sick.

In Chapter 5, I first explain why things at work in the media are – or can be – so harmful to people's health and well-being. Understanding media work requires an appreciation of how ambivalent and paradoxical everything about a creative career in these industries is. While so many practitioners clearly struggle or even suffer at work, the same or even greater number of people express being so happy and grateful for a chance to pursue their creative career. Industry lore and vocational awe conspire to make the creative career escape meaningful critique, and this turns any problems people may have into personal and private ones. Still, seeing the work in these anomalous terms allows me to tie in discussions about the cultural sectors' lack of diversity, struggle with innovation, and overall precarity to the mental health crisis in media work.

Taking a step back, the next chapter tickles my fancy as a historian at heart, tracing the genealogy of work-related stress and lack of well-being across the various industries under investigation. In doing so, I emphasize the significance of love throughout all the accounts of what it is like – what it feels like – to pursue a

creative career (in the media). Getting to do what you love as a job and career can set people up to fail, as whatever happens, people still feel thankful to be given a chance. Despite being paid poorly, treated unfairly, and having little or no control over one's future, so many artists, creators, writers, actors, programmers, and developers still insist that what they do for a living is not really 'work' at all. The problem is: the work does not love you back.

This sets up the link between reported health and well-being issues across all media professions with the insights gained from the field of occupational medicine, which explains what it is about work-related psychosocial stressors that make people sick. In short, three key factors together exhibit the largest increased risk of occurrences of disorders: lack of reciprocity, low organizational justice, and unusually high job demands. The analysis of these factors (in Chapter 7) follows the central themes across the industry and scholarly literature on creative careers: people's unconditional love *for the work*, the precarious experience *of the work*, and how these professionals turn to unhealthy and otherwise problematic ways of coping *with the work*.

In the concluding chapter, I synthesize what I have learned from doing the research for this book, using my writing about it as a method to explore the full range of making sense of people's health and well-being in media work. Specifically, I address the *cruel optimism* that makes professionals come back for more, even though they know or feel that this may make them sick.[2] In all of this, I have a hopeful point of view regarding how people, organizations, industries, and policymakers remedy the situation affecting all. It must be clear that I am not offering prescriptions for how things should be – I document and bring into conversation what is already known and what efforts are undertaken across different media professions to improve workers' autonomy, support their well-being, and enable practitioners to do the kind of work that matters to them. The book ends with celebrating the life-affirming and transformative power of love that people feel for their work and for turning their creativity into a career in the media. Perhaps *love* is the most radical of all the positions I consider and explore throughout this project.

2. Following Berlant, L. (2006). Cruel optimism. *Differences*, 17(3), 20–36.

A note on positionality

Everyone in the media deals with complex and persistent challenges to their mental health and well-being on the job. This is not something exclusive to rock and pop stars, war correspondents, or influencers with millions of followers. The mix of such challenges, one's disposition and circumstances, and the particular context of the work determine the extent of stressors escalating to disorders or illnesses. Still, as the research documented in this book unequivocally shows, practitioners up and down the creative pipeline of the media struggle with the work. With mental health issues for media professionals making headlines around the world in recent years, it is crucial to acknowledge that a lot of the vagaries of precarity, struggles over the paradoxes of media work, and stressors particular to how the production process gets managed affect those already marginalized much earlier, and much more directly. When the various reports and studies do parse the data accordingly, a consistent finding is that women, newcomers, young workers, practitioners with minority or Indigenous backgrounds, those with a disability, and LGBTQ+ people bear the brunt of altogether precarious working circumstances, exploitative, discriminatory, and transgressive behaviors in the workplace, and subsequently face most of the problems regarding voicing concerns or addressing the consequences.

Given the relatively recent awareness about all of these issues, amplified by global social movements such as #MeToo and Black Lives Matter, as well as the shared experience of the pandemic, one possible explanation for the fact that industry recognition and academic scholarship on all of this in journalism, media, and communication is so new, may be because it is starting to impact the working lives of 'dominant' classes and segments. As the privileged classes begin to experience precarity – if anything, because workers rightfully demand recognition and respect, and as stable white-collar careers disappear – the consequences thereof are also felt by people like me – entitled white men reaping the benefits of working and living in rich, Western countries. Let me be upfront with this: I have studied, documented, and interviewed the working lives of media professionals since switching from a budding career in cultural reporting – interviewing some of my favorite bands – to academia in the late 1990s. I have also played, recorded,

and performed with bands my entire adult life. In all this time, when talking with journalists, musicians, game developers, advertising creatives, and so many others throughout the media, it never occurred to me to ask them directly about their struggles, their ways of coping, and their feelings about the work and their industry. This blindness is very much a function of my privilege, my gender, and my position in society as seemingly natural – which affects the way that I see and interpret the world around me and how the world sees and interprets me.

What opened my eyes to all of this was an invitation by my university in 2019 to take on a project that would benefit people across campus. In the years leading up to that, numerous reports came out about a growing mental health crisis among students around the world.[3] Earlier, in 2015, faculty and students occupied campus buildings of the University of Amsterdam in protest against budget cuts and other austerity measures planned by management.[4] Dissatisfaction, vulnerability, and a growing awareness about the consequences of an increasingly alienating working and studying environment fueled people's participation. Considering a project to engage with, I picked the issue of student and faculty well-being, asking myself the question: next to addressing problems, how can the university improve people's happiness across campus? I set about to interview student counselors, mental health experts, and professionals involved in all kinds of projects, such as the global Caring Universities initiative, the International Health Promoting Universities & Colleges Network, the UK Healthy Universities Network, the European University of Well-Being (EUniWell), and the 'UvAcare' program at my employer.[5] In the process of this project and learning about the extent and depth of the problem, I realized how all of this affected me deeply, how it resonated with some of my own experiences, and especially how it

3. Auerbach, R.P. et al. (2018). WHO World Mental Health Surveys International College Student project: prevalence and distribution of mental disorders. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology,* 127(7), 623–38.
4. For context: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bungehuis_and_Maagdenhuis_occupations.
5. Sources: https://caring-universities.com. https://www.healthpromotingcampuses.org; https://healthyuniversities.ac.uk.

made me look fundamentally differently at earlier conversations and experiences with colleagues, students, and the people I studied as an academic researcher.

The happiness project at my university made me aware of how all the questions I always asked of media professionals – about how they 'made it work' and what managing their careers entailed – were always also questions about how they felt, how they languished and prospered, and how the particulars of their working environment (in newsrooms, studios, agencies, offices, cafés, and coffee shops around the world) played a role in it all.[6] At the same time, the project opened my eyes to myself and my struggles, especially my lack of literacy when it came to my mental health and well-being through the years. To some extent, I have had my fair share of challenges – as a first-generation student, a non-native speaker studying and trying to build a career abroad, being precariously employed as a freelance journalist in the Netherlands and South Africa, as well as in my early years as an academic in the US while on a temporary visa, and growing up with loving yet traumatized adoptive parents. However, none of this posed profound problems, given my distinct advantage of being white, a man, able, heterosexual, without caring responsibilities, and with a class background where parental support for 'becoming who you are' was the norm.[7]

In other words, I could always take my physical safety and mobility for granted. My passport gave me easy access to any place around the world. The written and informal rules and protocols of the countless institutions and organizations I interfaced with were generally designed with someone like me in mind. Technology and other essential resources were almost always readily available to me. My demeanor, outlook, and identity required little or no effort

6. As primarily documented in the books *Media Work* (Polity Press, 2007), *Managing Media Work* (Sage, 2011), *Making Media* (edited with Mirjam Prenger, published by Amsterdam University Press in 2019), and *Happiness in Journalism* (edited with Valérie Bélair-Gagnon, Avery Holton, and Claudia Mellado, published by Routledge in 2024).
7. In this personal reflection I follow the positionality mapping exercise as proposed by: Jacobson, D., & Mustafa, N. (2019). Social identity map: a reflexivity tool for practicing explicit positionality in critical qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 18, 1–12.

for people to navigate or negotiate around – or so it always seemed, which itself is a profound privilege. The project archived in this book comes from a growing awareness of how the same circumstances can be a dream come true for some while a nightmare for others. In assessing this, a quote from a book by Holocaust survivor and psychologist Edith Eger inspires me:

> [T]here is no hierarchy of suffering. There is nothing that makes my pain worse or better than yours, no graph on which we can plot the relative importance of one sorrow versus another [...] Being a survivor, being a 'thriver' requires absolute acceptance of what was and what is. If we discount our pain or punish ourselves for feeling lost or isolated or scared about the challenges in our lives, however insignificant these challenges may seem to someone else, then we're still choosing to be victims.[8]

Eger's insistence on realism guides my research, and I hope this project of mapping the mental health crisis among the people who work in our media may serve to, paraphrasing Eger, guide people to a position of empowerment in the face of all of life's hardships.

Standing on shoulders

There are so many giants on whose shoulders I stand and lean on. What drew me into this project and inspired the coupling of production studies and the sociology of media work with insights from occupational medicine, (clinical/social) psychology, and psychiatry is the work and friendship of Karen Nieuwenhuijsen of the Amsterdam University Medical Centers and Jeroen Knipscheer of the Department of Clinical and Health Psychology at Utrecht University. Their support and guidance keep me on track, while their research fills me with awe. Along the way, several scholars spurred me on, and I especially want to thank Sharon Clarke, Manuel Menke, Diana Bossio, Sally Anne Gross, George Musgrave, Brooke Erin Duffy, Jérémy Vachet, and Valérie Bélair-Gagnon.

8. Eger, E.E. (2017). *The Choice: Embrace the Possible*. Scribner, 14.

These wonderful colleagues offered encouragement, review, and feedback at critical moments. Several researchers over the years of working on this project offered me a chance to share work in progress at their universities and conferences, for which opportunities I am tremendously grateful: thanks to Paul McDonald, Gustavo Cardoso, Katarzyna Kopecka-Piech, Steve Jones, Darren Kelsey, Maja Šimunjak, Tamas Tofalvy, Alex Wake, Anna Jupowicz-Ginalska, Jessica Roberts, and Henrik Örnebring. Likewise, I am indebted to the work and support of numerous colleagues at Intellect and elsewhere, including Julia Brockley, Laura Christopher, Helen Flitton, James Campbell and Ivan Butler.

In the field, my research benefited from the invaluable advice and support from numerous media professionals. In the process of writing this book, I regularly posted updates and snippets on social media (mainly on LinkedIn and Facebook), receiving hundreds of comments and direct messages from around the world. With a few of these practitioners, I had the chance to set up video interviews and email exchanges, providing unique insights or just confirming that my analyses made some sense and are relevant to the people most directly involved.

For journalism: Jon Crowley (Headlines Network), David Seglins (CBC News), Tanmoy Goswami (Sanity by Tanmoy), Amy Zerba (*New York Times*), Karlijn Goossen (NPO), Freek Staps (ANP), Kim van Keken (Spit), and Amantha Perera (Dart Center Asia Pacific). For digital games: Tamir Nadav (Kokku Games) and Angie Smets (Sony Interactive). For advertising: Mark Woerde (LetsHeal), Andy Wright (Never Not Creative), Natalie Villarroel-Redureau (leadership coach), Hans van Gils (independent strategy director), Liz Hammond (Rare), Sam Bradley (Digiday) and Charlotte McEleny (Monks). For film and TV: Femke Lakerveld (actress), Karen Percy (Media Entertainment & Arts Alliance), Rupert Lee-Jones and Marcus Ryder (Film + TV Charity), Eliza Anyangwe (The Fuller Project), Rosan Boersma and Anna de Beus (Cinemind), Brian Steward (independent filmmaker), Cora Aarnoutse (Assistant Directors Club), and Ben Steel (Screen Well). For music: Ineke Daans (PIAS) and Adam Ficek (psychotherapist; Babyshambles). For social media: Qianna Smith Bruneteau (American Influencer Council).

In the process of doing all this work, the pandemic happened. As for so many people around the world, this period changed my life. It confronted me, and held a mirror up to me, forcing me to make some difficult choices. Without the love and support from my family and friends – Bart, Alja, Marianne, Laura, Kim, Piet, my Skinflower bandmates Leon and Eric, and so many other loved ones as well as my team at the University of Amsterdam – Henk, Mirjam, Erik, Vera, Leendert, Johana, Alice, Stijn, and Erwin – I would not have made it this far. Special shoutout to Jason – you always make me smile.