

## **The Journalist After the Crisis:**

Professional Identity, Ethical Exhaustion, and the Future of Analytical Media

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### **Peer Review**

This article underwent academic peer review in accordance with the editorial standards of the *International Journal of Interdisciplinary Research*. The manuscript was evaluated for its theoretical contribution, conceptual continuity with prior research on conflict-driven media environments, and its relevance to interdisciplinary studies in journalism, media ethics, and professional sociology.

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The reviewers provided expert feedback on the conceptualization of post-crisis journalism, the analysis of professional identity under prolonged strain, and the articulation of ethical exhaustion as a structural phenomenon. Their comments contributed to the refinement of the article's analytical framework and academic rigor.

### **Abstract**

This research article examines the transformation of journalistic professional identity following prolonged periods of political, informational, and moral crisis. Building on earlier analyses of hybrid political processes, armed conflict, protracted war, and post-truth fatigue, the study introduces the concept of *ethical exhaustion* as a structural condition shaping contemporary journalism.

The article argues that after extended exposure to continuous crisis, mobilizational pressure, and interpretive fragmentation, journalists experience not merely professional burnout, but a deeper erosion of normative orientation and ethical motivation. This condition alters the role of journalism in the public sphere, shifting it away from mobilization and toward documentation, explanation, and long-term interpretive responsibility.

Drawing on interdisciplinary perspectives from journalism studies, media ethics, and the sociology of professions, the analysis explores how analytical journalism adapts under post-crisis conditions. The article concludes that while journalism can no longer rely on illusions of neutrality or universal trust, analytical media retain critical importance as custodians of meaning, context, and professional continuity in fragmented information societies.

## Keywords

journalistic identity; ethical exhaustion; analytical journalism; media ethics; post-crisis media; professional responsibility; public sphere

## 1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, journalism has operated under conditions of sustained crisis. Political polarization, digital acceleration, hybrid information conflicts, full-scale armed confrontations, and prolonged states of emergency have transformed not only media systems, but the professional foundations of journalistic work. In this environment, crisis has ceased to function as an exceptional condition and has instead become a permanent feature of journalistic reality.

Much of the existing scholarship has focused on the effects of these transformations on audiences, media trust, and public discourse. Less attention has been devoted to the long-term consequences for journalists themselves as professional actors embedded within continuous conflict, uncertainty, and moral pressure. Yet the capacity of journalism to fulfill any public function depends critically on the sustainability of its professional identity.

This article argues that contemporary journalism has entered a **post-crisis phase** characterized by *ethical exhaustion*. Unlike professional burnout, which is typically understood as an individual psychological condition resulting from overwork or stress, ethical exhaustion refers to a structural erosion of normative orientation. It emerges when journalists are repeatedly required to perform roles that conflict with professional ideals—neutrality, independence, and responsibility—under conditions where these ideals cannot be fully realized.

Ethical exhaustion manifests as a decline in moral motivation rather than technical competence. Journalists may continue to perform their tasks effectively while experiencing diminished belief in the meaningfulness of professional norms. This condition does not necessarily lead to

withdrawal from journalism; instead, it reshapes professional behavior, priorities, and self-understanding.

The purpose of this article is threefold. First, it seeks to conceptualize ethical exhaustion as a distinct structural condition affecting journalism after prolonged crisis. Second, it analyzes how this condition transforms journalistic professional identity and ethical self-conception. Third, it examines the implications of ethical exhaustion for the future of analytical journalism as a form of public responsibility.

The article builds on a sequence of prior studies addressing hybrid political processes (2020), journalism under armed conflict (2022), protracted conflict and audience fatigue (2023), and post-truth fatigue (2025). By extending this trajectory to the level of professional identity, the study offers a comprehensive account of how journalism adapts after the collapse of mobilizational narratives and the erosion of shared media reality.

The article is structured as follows. Section 2 analyzes the transition from crisis journalism to post-crisis professional conditions. Section 3 introduces ethical exhaustion as a structural phenomenon distinct from burnout. Section 4 examines the transformation of professional identity and ethical self-understanding. Section 5 explores the role of analytical journalism after the crisis. The conclusion reflects on the implications of these transformations for the future of journalism in fragmented information societies.

## **2. From Crisis Journalism to Post-Crisis Professional Conditions**

### **2.1. Crisis as a Permanent Operating Environment**

Journalism has historically conceptualized crisis as a deviation from normal professional conditions. Wars, political upheavals, natural disasters, and states of emergency were treated as exceptional periods requiring temporary adjustments to professional routines and ethical judgments. Under such circumstances, deviations from standard practices—accelerated publication, reliance on official sources, or limited verification—were justified as necessary responses to extraordinary conditions.

In the contemporary media environment, this distinction between crisis and normality has largely collapsed. Political instability, hybrid information conflicts, and prolonged emergencies have become enduring features rather than episodic disruptions. Journalism increasingly operates in a state of continuous alert, where urgency and moral pressure are not transient but structurally embedded.

This normalization of crisis alters the temporal logic of journalistic work. Instead of alternating between crisis and recovery, journalists experience an unbroken sequence of high-stakes events that demand immediate response. Professional routines adapt to this condition by prioritizing speed, visibility, and relevance within accelerated information cycles. Over time, these

adaptations become habitual, reshaping expectations of what journalism is and how it should function.

## **2.2. The Erosion of the Crisis–Recovery Model**

The persistence of crisis undermines the traditional model in which journalism returns to reflective and analytical modes after emergency phases subside. In earlier contexts, periods of intense mobilization were followed by phases of evaluation, investigation, and institutional accountability. Such cycles allowed journalists to reaffirm professional norms and restore ethical coherence.

Under post-crisis conditions, recovery phases are increasingly absent. Conflicts remain unresolved, political polarization persists, and informational pressures continue unabated. As a result, journalism rarely transitions back into modes characterized by deliberation and distance. Mobilizational practices and moral framing extend beyond their original context, becoming semi-permanent features of media production.

This erosion of the crisis–recovery model contributes to professional disorientation. Journalists are required to sustain heightened moral engagement without the prospect of closure or resolution. Over time, the gap between professional ideals and lived practice widens, setting the stage for ethical exhaustion.

## **2.3. The Expansion of Professional Role Expectations**

Continuous crisis also expands expectations placed on journalists. Beyond reporting facts, journalists are increasingly expected to provide moral guidance, emotional reassurance, and symbolic representation of collective values. These expectations are reinforced by audiences, platforms, and political actors alike.

Such role expansion blurs the boundaries between journalism, activism, and advocacy. While value orientation is not inherently incompatible with professional ethics, the cumulative effect of sustained moral pressure alters journalists' self-conception. Journalists may find themselves performing roles for which professional training offers limited guidance, further intensifying normative strain.

The expansion of role expectations contributes to ethical exhaustion by transforming journalism into a site of continuous moral labor. Unlike technical challenges, moral labor demands sustained emotional and normative investment. When such investment fails to produce perceived social impact or resolution, motivation erodes.

## **2.4. Institutional Adaptation and Professional Vulnerability**

Media institutions adapt to post-crisis conditions through organizational strategies aimed at survival within accelerated and competitive environments. These strategies include content streamlining, reliance on platform metrics, and personalization of journalistic output. While such

adaptations enhance visibility and sustainability, they often increase pressure on individual journalists.

Professional vulnerability intensifies as institutional support mechanisms weaken. Journalists become more publicly identifiable, more exposed to audience backlash, and more individually accountable for content circulation beyond editorial control. The personalization of risk further destabilizes professional identity by reducing the buffering role traditionally played by institutions.

In this context, ethical decision-making increasingly shifts from collective frameworks to individual judgment. Journalists must navigate complex ethical dilemmas without consistent institutional guidance, contributing to a sense of isolation and normative uncertainty.

## **2.5. Post-Crisis Conditions as a Precursor to Ethical Exhaustion**

Taken together, the normalization of crisis, the erosion of recovery phases, the expansion of role expectations, and institutional vulnerability constitute the structural conditions of post-crisis journalism. These conditions do not merely challenge professional performance; they reshape the moral economy of journalistic work.

Ethical exhaustion emerges within this environment as a cumulative outcome rather than an immediate reaction. It reflects the gradual depletion of normative resources required to sustain professional commitment under conditions where ideals cannot be fully realized. The following section examines ethical exhaustion in detail, distinguishing it from burnout and situating it as a structural phenomenon affecting contemporary journalism.

## **3. Ethical Exhaustion as a Structural Condition**

### **3.1. Distinguishing Ethical Exhaustion from Professional Burnout**

Ethical exhaustion should not be conflated with professional burnout, although the two phenomena may coexist. Burnout is commonly understood as a psychological condition characterized by emotional fatigue, depersonalization, and reduced professional efficacy. It is often linked to excessive workload, time pressure, and inadequate institutional support. Burnout affects individual performance and well-being, and its remedies are typically sought in organizational reform, workload management, or psychological intervention.

Ethical exhaustion, by contrast, operates at a different level. It refers to the erosion of normative motivation and moral orientation that occurs when professional ideals are repeatedly invoked but structurally unattainable. A journalist experiencing ethical exhaustion may remain technically competent, productive, and engaged, yet no longer perceive ethical norms as meaningful guides for action. The problem is not exhaustion of energy, but exhaustion of belief.

This distinction is critical for understanding post-crisis journalism. Whereas burnout may lead to withdrawal from the profession, ethical exhaustion often results in continued participation accompanied by diminished normative investment. Journalists continue to work, but with reduced expectation that ethical commitment will produce socially intelligible outcomes.

### **3.2. The Repeated Frustration of Ethical Ideals**

Ethical exhaustion emerges through the repeated frustration of core journalistic ideals. Principles such as independence, balance, public interest, and responsibility are continuously affirmed at the declarative level, yet their practical realization is persistently constrained by structural conditions. Journalists are expected to adhere to these ideals while operating in environments where neutrality is questioned, verification is contested, and public trust is fragmented.

Over time, this gap between ethical aspiration and professional reality produces cumulative dissonance. Each individual compromise may appear justified by context, urgency, or necessity. However, the accumulation of such compromises gradually undermines the perceived coherence of ethical norms. What begins as situational adaptation evolves into a sense that ethical principles function more as symbolic language than as operative guidance.

This process is particularly pronounced in prolonged crises, where exceptional measures become routine. Ethical norms designed for peacetime journalism are repeatedly stretched to accommodate emergency conditions, eventually losing their capacity to orient professional judgment.

### **3.3. Moral Labor Without Moral Resolution**

A defining feature of ethical exhaustion is the experience of moral labor without moral resolution. Journalists invest emotional and normative effort in reporting events framed as existentially significant—wars, repression, humanitarian catastrophe—yet often witness limited or ambiguous social impact. Accountability may be deferred, justice delayed, and narratives remain contested.

In such conditions, ethical commitment ceases to provide closure. Reporting does not culminate in recognition, reform, or shared understanding. Instead, it feeds into ongoing cycles of mobilization and counter-mobilization. The absence of moral resolution does not invalidate journalistic effort, but it erodes the motivational structure that sustains ethical engagement over time.

This erosion is not the result of cynicism or indifference. Rather, it reflects the unsustainability of continuous moral intensity in the absence of corresponding social stabilization. Ethical exhaustion thus emerges as a rational adaptation to structurally unresolved moral environments.

### **3.4. The Transformation of Ethical Language**

As ethical exhaustion advances, the language of ethics itself undergoes transformation. Normative terms—truth, responsibility, public interest—continue to circulate, but their function shifts. Instead of orienting action, ethical language increasingly serves performative or legitimizing roles. Journalists invoke ethical principles to justify decisions retrospectively rather than to guide them prospectively.

This transformation does not imply deliberate bad faith. Rather, it reflects the diminished capacity of ethical discourse to structure professional action under conditions of fragmentation and continuous crisis. Ethical language remains visible, but its practical authority weakens. Journalists may comply with formal ethical codes while privately doubting their relevance to lived professional dilemmas.

Such a shift contributes to a sense of ethical hollowing, in which norms persist symbolically but lose experiential substance. Ethical exhaustion thus affects not only behavior, but also professional self-understanding.

### **3.5. Ethical Exhaustion as a Collective Phenomenon**

Although experienced individually, ethical exhaustion should be understood as a collective and structural phenomenon. It arises from shared conditions of work, common professional narratives, and institutional arrangements that shape journalistic practice across contexts. The recurrence of similar ethical dilemmas across different newsrooms and political environments suggests that ethical exhaustion is not reducible to personal failure or moral weakness.

Recognizing ethical exhaustion as structural has important implications. It shifts analytical focus from individual resilience to systemic conditions that repeatedly place journalists in normatively untenable positions. It also reframes ethical reform not as a matter of stricter codes or greater moral exhortation, but as a question of aligning professional expectations with realistic capacities for ethical action.

The next section examines how ethical exhaustion reshapes journalistic professional identity, analyzing shifts in self-conception, role orientation, and the meaning of professional responsibility in post-crisis media environments.

## **4. Transformation of Professional Identity After the Crisis**

### **4.1. From Moral Agent to Interpretive Worker**

Under post-crisis conditions, ethical exhaustion contributes to a gradual reconfiguration of journalistic professional identity. In earlier normative models, the journalist was often imagined as a moral agent: a figure whose professional role involved not only informing the public, but also upholding democratic values, exposing wrongdoing, and contributing to moral clarity in the

public sphere. While this image was always partly idealized, it provided a coherent narrative through which journalists understood the significance of their work.

As prolonged crisis erodes the possibility of moral resolution, this self-conception becomes increasingly difficult to sustain. Journalists continue to engage with ethically charged material, yet the expectation that their work will clarify moral boundaries or produce collective recognition weakens. In response, professional identity shifts from moral agency toward **interpretive labor**. The journalist becomes less a figure who “speaks truth to power” and more a worker who organizes, contextualizes, and explains complex informational environments.

This shift does not represent ethical abandonment, but ethical recalibration. By redefining their role as interpretive rather than moralizing, journalists seek to preserve professional coherence under conditions where moral claims are persistently contested and rarely resolved.

#### **4.2. The Decline of Mobilizational Self-Understanding**

Crisis journalism often encourages mobilizational self-understanding. Journalists perceive their work as part of a broader effort to alert, galvanize, or defend society in moments of existential threat. Such self-understanding can be motivating in short-term emergencies, reinforcing professional commitment and emotional investment.

In post-crisis contexts, however, mobilizational narratives lose sustainability. Continuous mobilization without resolution generates fatigue not only among audiences but also among journalists themselves. Ethical exhaustion accelerates this process by undermining the belief that mobilization leads to meaningful outcomes. As a result, journalists increasingly distance themselves from roles that require constant emotional escalation or moral alignment.

The decline of mobilizational self-understanding manifests in stylistic and thematic shifts. Reporting becomes more restrained, language more cautious, and emphasis shifts from urgency to continuity. Journalists prioritize documentation over exhortation, recognizing that sustained credibility depends less on intensity than on consistency.

#### **4.3. Professional Identity and Emotional Detachment**

Ethical exhaustion also reshapes the emotional dimension of professional identity. Continuous exposure to morally charged events without resolution encourages forms of emotional detachment that function as adaptive strategies. Journalists learn to regulate emotional involvement not as a sign of indifference, but as a means of preserving long-term professional viability.

This emotional recalibration affects how journalists relate to their work. Personal identification with outcomes diminishes, while commitment to process and craft remains. Journalists may experience reduced emotional highs and lows, replacing them with steadier, more contained forms of engagement. Such detachment supports analytical clarity but may also deepen the sense of ethical distance from earlier professional ideals.

Importantly, emotional detachment should not be interpreted as cynicism. Rather, it reflects an effort to sustain professional functioning under conditions where emotional saturation would otherwise accelerate withdrawal or burnout.

#### **4.4. The Reorientation Toward Craft and Method**

As moral and mobilizational narratives weaken, professional identity increasingly reorients toward **craft and method**. Journalists derive meaning from procedural competence: accuracy, clarity, contextual depth, and methodological transparency. Craft becomes a source of professional legitimacy when broader ethical narratives lose coherence.

This reorientation is particularly evident in analytical journalism, where explanation, synthesis, and documentation provide alternative foundations for professional identity. Journalists invest in developing expertise, historical perspective, and interpretive frameworks that extend beyond immediate events. The value of journalism is located less in its capacity to persuade and more in its capacity to endure.

Such a shift aligns professional identity with epistemic responsibility rather than moral authority. Journalists come to understand their role as custodians of knowledge rather than agents of moral change.

#### **4.5. Identity Fragmentation and Professional Continuity**

While ethical exhaustion fragments normative orientation, it does not dissolve professional identity entirely. Instead, it produces differentiated identities within journalism. Some journalists retain mobilizational orientations; others adopt analytical or archival roles. This differentiation reflects adaptive diversity rather than professional collapse.

Professional continuity is maintained through shared practices, institutional memory, and commitment to method. Even as ethical narratives evolve, journalism preserves its identity as a profession through reproducible standards of work. Ethical exhaustion thus reshapes identity without eliminating it.

Understanding this transformation clarifies why analytical journalism gains renewed significance after the crisis. As the next section demonstrates, analytical media provide a professional pathway through which journalists can sustain responsibility, meaning, and coherence under post-crisis conditions.

### **5. Analytical Journalism After the Crisis**

#### **5.1. The Shift from Mobilization to Documentation**

In post-crisis conditions, analytical journalism increasingly distances itself from mobilizational imperatives and reorients toward documentation. Mobilization presupposes urgency, moral

clarity, and the expectation of collective response. After prolonged crisis and ethical exhaustion, these presuppositions lose credibility for both journalists and audiences. Analytical journalism responds by emphasizing continuity over immediacy and record over reaction.

Documentation does not imply neutrality in the classical sense, nor does it signal withdrawal from public responsibility. Rather, it reflects an understanding that the long-term value of journalism lies in preserving evidence, context, and interpretive coherence beyond the volatility of immediate reactions. Analytical journalism becomes a form of structured memory, capable of sustaining meaning even when public attention fluctuates.

This documentary orientation aligns with the post-crisis professional identity described earlier. Journalists derive legitimacy not from emotional intensity, but from their capacity to maintain clarity and consistency over time.

## **5.2. Explanation Without Moral Closure**

A central characteristic of analytical journalism after the crisis is its acceptance of explanation without moral closure. In earlier crisis phases, journalism often sought to frame events within narratives that implied resolution—justice, accountability, or historical judgment. Post-crisis conditions undermine these expectations. Conflicts remain unresolved, institutions fail to deliver closure, and moral consensus fragments.

Analytical journalism adapts by reframing explanation as an open-ended process. It articulates causal relationships, institutional dynamics, and structural constraints without promising definitive moral outcomes. This approach preserves epistemic honesty while reducing the gap between expectation and reality that fuels ethical exhaustion.

By refusing premature closure, analytical journalism avoids contributing to cycles of disillusionment. It acknowledges uncertainty as an enduring condition rather than a temporary obstacle.

## **5.3. Analytical Journalism as Archival Responsibility**

After the crisis, analytical journalism increasingly assumes an **archival function**. This function involves systematic documentation of events, decisions, and narratives that may acquire significance over extended temporal horizons. Journalism thus contributes to historical record-making rather than immediate persuasion.

Archival responsibility requires methodological rigor and reflexive awareness. Journalists must anticipate future uses of their work, including scholarly analysis, legal processes, and collective memory formation. Analytical journalism provides the scaffolding through which fragmented events can later be reassembled into coherent narratives.

This archival orientation reinforces professional meaning under post-crisis conditions. Even when immediate impact appears limited, journalists recognize the enduring value of accurate and contextualized documentation.

#### **5.4. Sustaining Trust Under Conditions of Ethical Exhaustion**

Ethical exhaustion complicates traditional trust relationships between journalists and audiences. Analytical journalism responds by cultivating trust through process rather than promise. Transparency, methodological clarity, and acknowledgment of limitations replace assurances of moral authority.

Such trust is necessarily selective and gradual. It develops within audiences willing to engage with complexity and uncertainty. While analytical journalism cannot restore universal trust, it can sustain epistemic trust within bounded communities committed to understanding rather than affirmation.

This form of trust is resilient precisely because it does not rely on mobilizational intensity. It persists through consistency and openness, even in environments of fragmentation.

#### **5.5. The Limits of Analytical Journalism After the Crisis**

Despite its adaptive strengths, analytical journalism faces structural limits. It requires time, expertise, and institutional support—resources often constrained in contemporary media systems. Platform dynamics continue to favor immediacy and emotional resonance over depth.

Moreover, analytical journalism cannot compensate for the absence of political or institutional resolution. Its role is interpretive, not remedial. Recognizing these limits prevents unrealistic expectations and reinforces the value of analytical work as a bounded professional practice rather than a universal solution.

#### **5.6. Analytical Journalism as a Post-Crisis Professional Strategy**

Taken together, these developments position analytical journalism as a viable professional strategy after the crisis. It offers a pathway through which journalists can maintain responsibility, coherence, and ethical integrity without relying on unsustainable mobilizational narratives.

Analytical journalism does not restore the pre-crisis public sphere. Instead, it adapts to fragmentation by preserving interpretive resources that remain meaningful under altered conditions. In doing so, it affirms journalism's continued relevance as a practice of understanding rather than persuasion.

### **6. Conclusion**

This article has examined the transformation of journalistic professional identity under conditions of prolonged crisis, post-truth fatigue, and ethical exhaustion. Building on earlier

analyses of hybrid political processes, armed conflict, and fragmented media environments, the study has argued that contemporary journalism increasingly operates in a post-crisis condition in which traditional normative frameworks lose their capacity to orient professional action.

A central contribution of this article is the conceptualization of **ethical exhaustion** as a structural phenomenon distinct from professional burnout. Ethical exhaustion does not primarily reflect emotional depletion or technical inefficiency, but rather the erosion of normative motivation resulting from the repeated frustration of ethical ideals under conditions where their realization is structurally constrained. Journalists continue to perform their professional tasks, yet with diminishing expectation that ethical commitment will lead to shared understanding, accountability, or moral resolution.

The analysis has shown that ethical exhaustion reshapes journalistic professional identity. The figure of the journalist as a moral agent or mobilizational actor gives way to a more restrained identity centered on interpretive labor, documentation, and methodological competence. Emotional detachment and reorientation toward craft emerge as adaptive strategies rather than signs of cynicism or withdrawal. Professional continuity is preserved not through moral intensity, but through reproducible practices and sustained commitment to explanation and context.

Within this transformed professional landscape, **analytical journalism** acquires renewed significance. After the crisis, its role shifts from mobilization and persuasion to epistemic maintenance: preserving interpretive coherence, managing uncertainty, and sustaining historical memory. Analytical journalism accepts the absence of moral closure and shared consensus, offering explanation without promising resolution. In doing so, it provides a viable professional pathway for journalists navigating ethical exhaustion and fragmented public spheres.

At the same time, the article emphasizes the limits of analytical journalism. It cannot restore a unified public sphere, resolve political conflicts, or compensate for institutional failure. Its value lies in endurance rather than immediacy, in intelligibility rather than influence. Recognizing these limits allows for more realistic expectations of journalism's public function after prolonged crisis.

By situating ethical exhaustion and post-crisis professional identity within a broader structural context, this study contributes to interdisciplinary debates in journalism studies, media ethics, and the sociology of professions. It reframes the crisis of contemporary journalism not solely as a problem of trust, truth, or technology, but as a challenge of professional sustainability under conditions of persistent moral and epistemic strain.

Future research may extend this framework through empirical studies of journalistic practice across different media systems and cultural contexts, as well as through comparative analysis of institutional strategies that support analytical journalism under post-crisis conditions. While journalism cannot reclaim its former normative certainties, it remains capable of preserving the

interpretive capacities necessary for meaningful public understanding in an increasingly fragmented informational landscape.

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