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Fear factor: a scoping study of the role of fear in news media management during crises

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Fear factor: a scoping study of the role of fear in news media management during crises

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ABSTRACT

In an era marked by fractured socio-political landscapes and escalating crises, the role of fear in news media management has become increasingly significant. This paper presents a scoping study on the manifestation and impact of fear within news media management processes during crises. The study systematically reviews 18 peer-reviewed articles using Scopus, EBSCOhost, and Web of Science databases to identify key themes and research gaps. Findings highlight the influence of internal and external fear factors on journalists' professional autonomy, mental health, and organisational dynamics. The analysis also addresses manifestations and functions of fear during crises for news media management. The paper calls for expanded research across different media functions and contexts to better support media professionals and enhance news media management practices.

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Introduction

This much we know: media managers have much to be anxious about, even to fear. Our societies are constantly bombarded by technological transformation pressure (e.g. due to Artificial Intelligence, see Newman, 2023) and a series of regional and global crises, from the unprecedented health pandemic caused by COVID-19 to vast economic turmoil, an increasingly acute climate emergency, and even conventional armed conflicts erupting across the globe (World Bank, 2024). The escalation of these crises and their long-term effects shake the very foundations of our societies. This has also led to a fractured media landscape: some media users, desperate for reliable information and a sense of control, turn to traditional news publishers, TV, and radio (Van Aelst et al., 2021). Conversely, some are overwhelmed by the demanding situations and choose to avoid the news altogether (De Bruin et al., 2021). Regardless of the audience's response, the fear induced by these crises permeates every sphere, from the streets to the battlefields to editorial offices.

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What is much more opaque is how these crises and the resulting fears within newsrooms translate into editorial decision-making. This challenging environment of constant crisis, coupled with the specific and wide-ranging changes in newsrooms and boardrooms brought about by technological transformation, shifts in consumer behaviour, and geopolitical turmoil (e.g. Kosterich, 2020; Nel et al., 2020), necessitates re-evaluating the factors influencing editorial decision-making. We propose that fear is a key factor influencing both the work of individual journalists and entire editorial offices and, consequently, news media management. It seems crucial particularly in the context of contemporary crises such as military conflicts, political polarisation and rapid technological change. Fear can stifle creativity, hinder open communication, and lead to risk-averse behaviour, ultimately affecting the quality of work in media companies. As such, fear is not just a personal or isolated challenge but a systemic management issue that leaders must address to foster a healthier, more productive organisational culture.

While existing research on media management recognises the impact of emotions in newsrooms (Milosavljević & Vobič, 2021; Porcu et al., 2022), it primarily focuses on internal production processes. The difficulty in recognising the meaning of fear in the operation of media companies also stems from the ambiguity of the research field of *media management*. This field of study still focuses more strongly on the roles of a publisher or an editor in the press and a general manager in the broadcast, ignoring other levels of management (Albarran, 2018). In light of Albarran's recommendation, we posit that media management "represents enterprises that operate on multiple levels and are not easily identified as a simple concept" (2018, p.11). In addition, we would like to focus explicitly on *news media management* in line with the call for this special issue. Following Høyer (2015), we understand *news media* as newspapers, news magazines, radio, television and internet services.

Studies specifically exploring how fear influences media managers' decisions are scarce, often limited to specific contexts, and typically address other aspects of journalistic work (e.g. Milosavljević & Vobič, 2021; Porcu et al., 2022; Segal, 2011). Currently, research in this area lacks a systematic approach to understand the true impact of fear on media production by both journalists and media managers. Therefore, this paper aims to address this gap by mapping the current state of knowledge in this area, highlighting existing research limitations, and systematising the findings published so far. To gain a comprehensive understanding of this discrepancy, it is necessary to examine the concept of fear in greater depth.

Based on these assumptions, we pose the following research questions:

RQ 1. How does fear manifest and function within the news media management process, encompassing both internal and external dimensions (e.g. newsroom practices, distribution channels, audience engagement)?

RQ 2. What are the dominant theoretical frameworks and methodologies used to study fear in the context of news media management?

RQ 3. What research gaps or limitations exist in the current understanding of the relationship between fear and news media management?

Fear as a phenomenon

Fear is a fundamental survival mechanism that plays a pivotal role in human adaptation and evolution. It is an emotion triggered by the perception of physical and psychological threat, which activates the autonomic nervous system, preparing the body for a fight or flight response (LeDoux, 2014; Öhman & Mineka, 2001). Fear has been studied in a variety of fields, such as psychology, neurology, and evolutionary biology (e.g. Adolphs & Anderson, 2018; Ekman & Cordaro, 2011; Fanselow, 1991; Habib et al., 2015; LeDoux, 2015; Lerner & Keltner, 2001; Levenson, 2011; Lindquist & Barrett, 2008; Mobbs, 2018; Satpute & Lindquist, 2019; Yang et al., 2018). Due to the digital and technological revolution that puts media at the centre of modern societies, sociologists and media and communications researchers are undertaking research to understand the mechanisms of fear and its functions. To properly understand the social functions of fear and its impact on the operation of social groups, it is necessary to start by providing a definition of the concept.

Fear, one of the fundamental emotions, was initially identified and studied primarily within the field of psychology. The APA Dictionary of Psychology defines *fear* as “a basic, intense emotion aroused by the detection of imminent threat, involving an immediate alarm reaction that mobilises the organism by triggering a set of physiological changes” (American Psychological Association [APA], 2018). The same source also distinguishes between fear and anxiety, emphasising that “the former is considered an appropriate short-term response to a present, clearly identifiable threat, whereas the latter is a future-oriented, long-term response focused on a diffuse threat” (APA, 2018). As this distinction is not widely reflected in the news media management (and, broadly, in media studies) research, and this is the first analysis of such a topic, we as non-specialists focused only on the more general term of fear in order to not go into much detail in this regard.

Lang (1978) pointed out that fear is a complex system of responses, incorporating emotions, thoughts, actions, and physiological reactions. On the other hand, Adolphs (2013) argued for a functional concept of fear, which is an emotion “caused by particular patterns of threat-related stimuli, and in turn, causing particular patterns of adaptive behaviours to avoid or cope with that threat” (2013, p. 80). The assumption is that fear is an emotion that allows us to survive a threat and cope with it – which prompts us to attribute a positive function to it.

Meanwhile, Ressler reminds us that group experiences of fear can cause negative consequences, such as adverse political movements, mass hysteria or war: “as a society, fear-based societal movements have been unethical, inhumane, and destructive. Ironically, fear – which exists for our individual survival – may be the strongest emotional driver of risk for our own self-destruction as a species” (in Mobbs et al., 2019, p. 26). This observation leads us to the essence of the paper – namely, to consider whether and how scientific research proves the impact of fear – undoubtedly present among journalists and media managers in crises – on media management.

Fear, as a significant phenomenon in contemporary media, particularly in its role within journalism and social media in shaping public perception and engagement, is recognised (Farhoudinia et al., 2024; Mousoulidou et al., 2024; Silva & Guedes, 2023) and should be further explored by researchers. However, this is beyond the scope of this paper, and will therefore not be further developed here.

Methodological procedure

Having established the pervasiveness of fear within media landscapes and the scarcity of research on its impact on decision-making, this paper now turns to the methodological approach used to investigate this critical gap: a *scoping study* approach.

Scoping studies aim to cover a wide range of literature and identify gaps and innovative approaches (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005; Ehrich et al., 2002). This method is particularly suitable for researching topics that are still underdeveloped or heterogeneous in terms of content (Mays et al., 2001), as is the case with fear in media management research. Unlike systematic literature reviews, scoping studies encompass a broader range of study designs and aim to provide an overview of the field without summarising or critically evaluating individual studies (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005; O'Brien et al., 2016; Pham et al., 2014). The five-stage approach, according to Arksey and O'Malley (2005), represents the initial approach of the scoping study. Various authors have recently adapted and/or further developed the approach (e.g. Anderson et al., 2008; Bragge et al., 2011; Daudt et al., 2013; Levac et al., 2010). But even if these approaches have an exploratory mapping of literature in a field, the iterative process, the inclusion of grey literature and no quality assessment in common (O'Brien et al., 2016), there often seems to be disagreement about the exact procedure. In the spirit of Chrastina (2020), we have therefore decided to follow the original form of Arksey and O'Malley (2005). In the following, we will present our research process along these stages, emphasising the thoroughness and rigour of the scoping study approach.

Stage 1: identifying the research question

The initial stage of the research process involved identifying the research question. This was undertaken as part of the emmaHub 2023 event of the European Media Management Association in an interdisciplinary workshop with twelve scholars and journalists from ten countries (e.g. Ukraine, Poland, UK, Czech Republic, Germany). By the methodology of the "consultation exercise" (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005, p. 28), the influence of fear on news media management was identified based on current media management research and through group discussions with journalists present. After the emmaHub, the research question was further specified in subsequent virtual discussion rounds, and the final working group of five scientists was constituted. Considering the theme of the consultation exercise, it was particularly the topic of media management that was identified as a framework for the analysis with the decision not to focus on the broader and more general topics of fear in journalism and of journalists, as a necessary reduction that both allows for a more in-depth analysis and fills the research gap of a topic that is less often reflected from the organisational level.

Stage 2: identifying relevant studies

In the subsequent stage, sources were identified to search various studies systematically. The decision was to search for relevant literature using four databases (Scopus, Web of Science, Business Source Premier, and Communication & Mass Media Complete). As with Arksey and O'Malley (2005), we discussed our search strings for the databases with

an information officer at the University of Warsaw in advance. Based on this, we formulated our search string across all four databases: “(fear OR anxiety) AND (media OR news) AND manage*”. As we observed in our initial desk research phase, in news media management studies “fear” is the umbrella concept for the mental state of fear and anxiety, therefore we decided to search for both terms. We resolved the issue of “media” and “news” management similarly. Moreover, our search was limited to titles, abstracts, and keywords across the database. We focused on peer-reviewed articles to avoid different quality publications being reviewed, as Arksey and O’Malley (2005) already discussed. In addition, we focused on the social sciences, communication sciences, economics, and management and journals published in English after 2000. After removing all duplicates, a total of $N = 882$ papers were found.

Stage 3: study selection

Due to the broad search terminology deliberately desired in scoping studies (Arksey & O’Malley, 2005), in the next step we selected the relevant literature based on the research questions. Following this initial selection process, $n = 45$ studies were identified as suitable for analysis. In several virtual discussion rounds, we discussed the selection process and our uncertainties, and after these rounds, we arrived at a final sample size of $n = 18$.

The selection steps (see stages 1 to 3) are presented transparently above (see Figure 1), following the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines (Page et al., 2021), to facilitate the replication of the study.

Stage 4: charting the data

In the next step, we “charted” the most critical information from the analysed primary research reports. Therefore, we coded according to the following categories:

- Organisational codes: Name of coder, Database

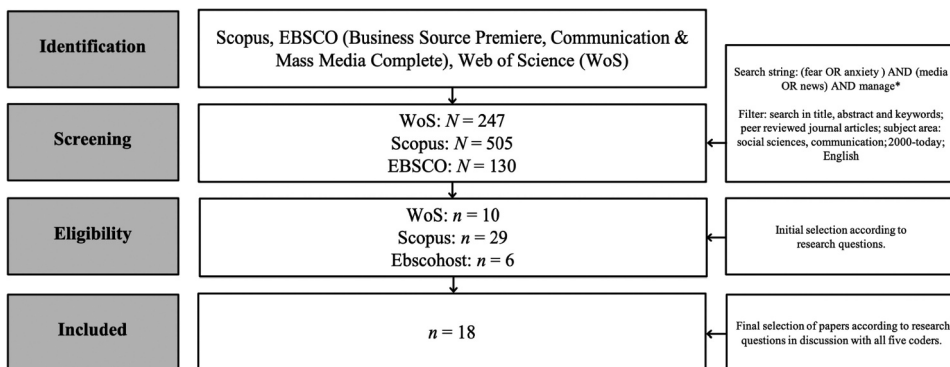


Figure 1. Preferred reporting items for systematic review and meta-analysis (PRISMA) model. *Note.* Own presentation following PRISMA model (Page et al., 2021).

- Descriptive codes according to Arksey and O'Malley (2005): Author, year, title, DOI, URL, keywords, abstracts, location, study location
- Content codes according to Arksey and O'Malley (2005): Aim of the study, study population, intervention type, type of study, methodology, method, outcome measures, important results, limitations, research gaps
- Codes relating to the research question: Manifestation of fear in the news media management process, the function of fear in the news media management process

Two coders coded each paper independently. After an initial pre-test phase and at the end of the coding process, the research group held discussion rounds to review first observations.

Stage 5: collating, summarising, and reporting the results

In the last stage, we collated, summarised, and reported the results. Here, the principle of the scoping study requires researchers to prioritise certain aspects of the literature in the first two aspects (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005). Following an initial review of the descriptive and content codes, our focus was primarily on the categories related to the research questions. Therefore, the manifestations and the function of fear in the news media management process were identified as critical areas for further investigation. Consequently, we discussed and summarised the research gaps collectively.

Findings

Descriptive results

The content-related categories allowed us to identify certain characteristics of our sample (for more on sample description see Table A1, in Appendix). For instance, it is noteworthy that approximately half of all publications were published in the 2020s (e.g. Gruda & Ojo, 2022; Koo, 2024; Milosavljević & Vobič, 2021; Parthasarathi & Srinivas, 2022; Porcu et al., 2022; Rashid & Olofsson, 2021; Wadud, 2022). Furthermore, most of the studies ($n = 12$) are national in scope. Five of these studies focus explicitly on the USA, including Curtin and Maier (2001) and Holton et al. (2023), who concentrate on US journalism. Other national studies focus on Sweden (Rashid & Olofsson, 2021), the Netherlands (Porcu et al., 2022), Mexico (Navarro, 2006), China (Wang & Jiang, 2016), India (Parthasarathi & Srinivas, 2022), and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (Pype, 2013), among others. At the international level, only two publications have been published to date. Milosavljević and Vobič (2021) analyse the organisational structure of automation in the editorial offices of established news institutions in the United Kingdom, Germany, and the USA. Wadud (2022) examines the challenges faced by freelance climate journalists in three South Asian countries (India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh). Only Harris et al. (2016) offer a global study in which they examine the role of gender in the risk assessment of journalists and identify the advantages that a female can have for conflict reporting in Africa, Asia, Central America, Europe, and North America.

A review of study types reveals that there are significantly more empirical studies ($n = 16$) than conceptual ones ($n = 2$). In terms of empirical studies, there is a clear focus on qualitative research, with $n = 13$ studies, only $n = 3$ studies conducting quantitative research, and only one study using mixed methods. A diverse range of qualitative methods is evident, including focus group discussions (Curtin & Maier, 2001), in-depth interviews (e.g. Holton et al., 2023; Koo, 2024), observations (Porcu et al., 2022; Pype, 2013), case studies (Parthasarathi & Srinivas, 2022), critical discourse analysis (Graber, 2003), and commentary analysis (Altheide, 2006). On a quantitative level, we were able to identify three studies: a linguistic-based text analysis (Gruda & Ojo, 2022), a survey (Harris et al., 2016), and a secondary data analysis of the Swedish National Annual Survey (SOM) for the years 2002–2016 (Rashid & Olofsson, 2021). Wang and Jiang (2016) stand out from the other studies in this area due to their innovative mixed-methods approach, which enabled them to analyse new and China-specific stress factors. Furthermore, their findings demonstrate how media change can increase stress and trigger anxiety (Wang & Jiang, 2016).

Qualitative results

Understanding the different dimensions of fear within the news media management is crucial for grasping the complexities that journalists face. This section examines various internal factors within news organisations, which may create an environment filled with anxiety and uncertainty. Additionally, it explores external pressures that heighten stress on journalists. The detailed analysis of functions and manifestations of fear in the news media management process identified in the research sample can be found in Table 1 (see Appendix). By analysing them, one can gain insights into how fear influences journalistic practices and impacts the integrity and effectiveness of news reporting.

Internal factors: inside the organisation

Lack of support network: isolation and marginalisation

One of the significant internal factors contributing to fear within news organisations is the lack of a robust support network, particularly affecting citizen journalists (Luce et al., 2017) or women (Harris et al., 2016). They often operate on the periphery of established media institutions, lacking access to the organisational structures and resources that provide stability and support (Wadud, 2022). This situation leads to feelings of isolation and marginalisation, which – in turn – amplify their fear, making it challenging for them to navigate the risks of reporting, especially during conflicts. The absence of a supportive community within the newsroom means they struggle to overcome fear, being alone against both physical dangers and professional uncertainties.

Vertical fear: top-down communication and mutual fear

The leadership style (Segal, 2011) and the hierarchical nature of many newsrooms may foster an environment of vertical fear, where straightforward (and often aggressive) top-down communication from management is a significant stress factor for staff (Porcu et al., 2022). Journalists, as well as other newsroom workers, may expect confrontational interactions with their supervisors, resulting in a widespread culture of avoidance. This

Table 1. Manifestations and functions of fear factors.

Antecedents of Fears	Nature of Fears	Outcomes of Fears	Levels of Impact	Overlaps and Unique Factors
Internal Antecedents: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Lack of Support Network• Vertical Communication Issues• Freelancer Neglect• Financial Instability• Profit Orientation• Innovation Resistance• Career Path Issues External Antecedents: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Citizen Journalism• Risks• Economic Forces• Political and Economic Pressures• Public Worry• Discourse of Fear• Media Influence• Crisis Journalism• Technology Adaptation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Isolation and Marginalisation• Avoidance and Anticipation• Neglect and Insecurity• Autonomy and Integrity• Resistance and Anxiety• Competence and Confidence• Viability and Sustainability	Internal Outcomes: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reduced Innovation• Poor Communication• Job Insecurity• Compromised Integrity• Career Withdrawal• Lowered Standards• Numeracy Avoidance External Outcomes: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Engagement• Deterrence• Compromised Coverage• Sensationalism• Crisis Response• Technological Anxiety• Global Impact	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Individual Level• Team Level• Functional Level• Business Unit Level• Organisational Level• Industry (Sector) Level	Overlaps: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Financial instability affecting individuals and business units• Anxiety over political and economic pressures impacting both individual and organisational levels. Unique Factors: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Fears unique to freelancers, such as lack of support and job insecurity• Sector-level influences such as political manipulation and discourse of fear.

Note: Own presentation.

fear discourages open dialogue and suppresses the flow of information within the organisation, negatively impacting the quality of news production. Moreover, the vertical fear is bidirectional, with both management and newsroom staff experiencing mutual fear of each other's reactions (Porcu et al., 2022). On the one hand, the management fears protests and criticism from their employees, which can lead to defensive or authoritarian managerial styles. On the other hand, journalists fear revenge or dismissal if they express objection or criticism, resulting in a lack of honest feedback and a general atmosphere of mistrust (Porcu et al., 2022).

In this context, we can also consider different levels of fear impact that concretise our internal/external optics – and distinguish *team level*, with its communication issues and mutual fear between staff and management; *business unit level*, on which fear can manifest itself in connection with financial instability and resource allocation; *organisational level*, with threats of corporatisation and profit orientation; and *sector level* (on the verge of internal/external dichotomy), which brings into play the potential of political manipulation and social control. The interesting thing about this optic is that it allows us to link the different levels by their similarities, for example, to see overlaps in fear factors in the analysed texts when financial instability can affect both individuals and business units, or anxiety over political and economic pressures impact both individual and organisational levels. On the other hand, we can see unique factors that are not shared across levels, such as lack of support and job insecurity which is fear unique to individuals-freelancers, or political manipulation and discourse of fear on the sector level.

Training and equipment: freelancer Neglect

Freelancers, who are an essential part of the modern journalism ecosystem, tend to face neglect regarding training and safety equipment (Wadud, 2022), as media organisations prioritise their staff journalists for these opportunities. This situation creates a significant fear among freelancers, who feel that their safety (Harris et al., 2016) and professional development are not valued as much as their permanently employed colleagues; it not only endangers their physical safety (especially in conflict zones) but also affects their confidence and morale.

Financial instability: fear of budget cuts

Another major source of fear for journalists is financial instability. The looming threat of budget cuts creates a precarious work environment where job security is constantly under threat and the fear of not being able to sustain the livelihood leads to increased anxiety and stress, affecting not only performance but also mental health. Freelancers, lacking the negotiation power of staff journalists, are particularly prone to these pressures (Luce et al., 2017; Wadud, 2022).

Professional autonomy: anxiety over profit orientation and advertiser influence

The corporatisation of news media and the increasing focus on profit margins have generated fear among journalists regarding their professional autonomy and the erosion of professional standards (Koo, 2024), as they worry that the drive for profitability will compromise the integrity of their work, prioritising sensationalism over substantive reporting. While journalists are aware that advertising revenue is crucial for their organisation's survival, the additional fear of advertisers'

influence on news coverage also materialises in the newsroom. Combined, the anxiety over profit orientation and the economic dependence on advertisers can subtly (or overtly) influence editorial decisions, leading to self-censorship or biased reporting to avoid offending major sponsors, undermining journalists' role as impartial information providers and society watchdogs. The fear of compromising journalistic ethics for financial reasons adds another layer of stress for journalists striving to maintain their integrity.

Internal censorship: relaxed reporting standards

Internal censorship often manifests in the form of relaxed reporting standards when influential individuals or organisations are involved. Journalists and freelancers, fearing backlash or repercussions, may self-censor or soften their reporting (Wadud, 2022). This phenomenon is particularly common in environments where there is pressure to maintain favourable relationships with powerful entities, such as the state, the government or military personnel (Graber, 2003; Koo, 2024). The fear of consequences for critical and frank journalism leads to compromised standards and a reluctance to pursue investigative stories that could provoke a strong reaction.

Innovation resistance: fear of change

While innovation in the newsroom is crucial for creativity and adapting to the evolving media landscape, it is often met with resistance due to fear of change (Porcu et al., 2022). Journalists and media professionals worry that embracing new methodologies or technologies might lower the quality of their work or significantly alter their workflow. This fear of change prevents the implementation of innovative practices that could enhance news production and distribution, causing organisations to fall behind in an increasingly digital world.

Career path disadvantages: career impact

The cumulative impact of the aforementioned fears can prompt journalists to reconsider their career path (Pype, 2013) or even leave the profession altogether (Holton et al., 2023). The constant stress, lack of support, financial instability, and erosion of professional autonomy contribute to a sense of disillusionment. As many journalists evaluate the personal and professional costs, they may find the job environment unsustainable, leading to career changes resulting in the loss of experienced and talented individuals.

Numeracy skills: maths anxiety

Lastly, a specific internal factor identified as affecting journalists is maths anxiety (Curtin & Maier, 2001). Many journalists lack confidence in their mathematical competence, leading to a fear of engaging with number- and data-driven stories. This anxiety can limit their ability to effectively interpret and report on statistical information, which is increasingly important in the age of big data and investigative journalism. The fear of making errors in numerical reporting further deters journalists from tackling significant news stories, potentially narrowing the scope of their coverage (Curtin & Maier, 2001).

External factors: outside the organisation

Public journalism experimentation: economic forces

Among the external factors identified in the sample are economic forces, such as fears of consolidation and concentration in the market (Parthasarathi & Srinivas, 2022). They exert considerable pressure on journalistic autonomy and integrity, particularly in the context of public journalism experimentation. The fear of economic influences is driven by the need for news organisations to secure funding and maintain profitability, often at the expense of editorial independence, prioritising stories that attract advertisers and sponsors over those that serve the public interest (Koo, 2024). As the pursuit of revenue becomes intertwined with editorial decisions, it may result in compromises in journalistic standards.

Political and economic pressures: external censorship and public worry

Economic and political pressures often result in external censorship, influencing which topics are covered and how they are presented. Journalists fear repercussions from political entities or economic stakeholders if their reporting is perceived as unfavourable (Koo, 2024; Pype, 2013; Wang & Jiang, 2016). This fear can lead to self-censorship, where journalists avoid certain topics or frame stories in a manner that aligns with the interests of powerful groups (Navarro, 2006; Rashid & Olofsson, 2021). Moreover, news coverage may also be affected by public worry, influenced by terrorism and political campaigns (Navarro, 2006; Rashid & Olofsson, 2021). As fear in news media management serves as a predictor and influencer of the public's emotional reactions (Gruda & Ojo, 2022), journalists must navigate the fine line between informing the public and exacerbating distress (Johnson et al., 2010), which, in turn, creates additional stress for journalists, who must balance ethical reporting with audience expectations and organisational demands.

Discourse of fear: social control

The discourse of fear is often promoted by formal agents of social control, such as governments and security agencies, aligning with popular culture to expand their influence (Altheide, 2006). This serves to control the public perception and maintain order, often at the expense of truth and transparency. Journalists operating within this discourse face the challenge of conformism and self-censorship, or resisting these narratives and maintaining critical independence.

Media influence: campaign manipulation

Another significant external factor is the media's role in manipulating information to influence political outcomes and maintain a climate of fear (Navarro, 2006). Political campaigns and interest groups use the media to propagate fear-driven narratives, shaping public opinion. Journalists, aware of this manipulation, are under pressure to align with these narratives or resist them, striving to provide balanced and objective coverage.

Citizen journalism risks: marginalisation and retribution

Citizen journalists operating outside traditional media protections also face external risks, including marginalisation and retribution. They are particularly vulnerable to various forms of backlash, from social ostracism to physical and legal threats, including

strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs), for their active engagement and exposing sensitive or controversial issues, as they lack the institutional support that might mitigate these dangers (Luce et al., 2017).

Ethnocentric responses: crisis journalism

During crises, journalists' fear and stress can lead to ethnocentric and stereotypical thinking (Johnson et al., 2010). The urgency and high stakes of such reporting often amplify existing biases, resulting in coverage that may reinforce stereotypes and narrow perspectives, undermining the diversity and inclusivity of news reporting. Journalists must navigate their fears and biases while striving to provide comprehensive and fair coverage in high-pressure crises.

Technology adaptation: fear of replacement

The rapid advancement of technology poses a significant external threat to journalists, who fear being replaced by automated systems (Curtin & Maier, 2001; Luce et al., 2017; Milosavljević & Vobič, 2021; Wang & Jiang, 2016). This fear is not unfounded, as artificial intelligence and algorithms increasingly handle tasks traditionally performed by journalists, from data analysis to content generation. The fear of technology replacing human roles leads to resistance against technological integration and innovation in the newsroom.

The qualitative analysis of fear factors in news media management highlights the multifaceted nature of the challenges faced by journalists. Internal factors contribute to a pervasive culture of fear within news organisations, while external ones further compound these fears. In response to this, journalists and media workers employ various coping strategies (Holton et al., 2023). Social protections, such as peer support networks and professional associations, provide a buffer against the isolation and stress experienced by journalists (Porcu et al., 2022). Organisational management can play a crucial role in mitigating fear by fostering a supportive and communicative workplace culture (Milosavljević & Vobič, 2021). Individual self-regulation, including stress management and resilience training, also helps journalists navigate the challenges of their profession. These strategies are essential for maintaining the wellbeing and effectiveness of journalists in an increasingly complex and fear-laden media environment.

Discussion

Fear permeates news media management, shaping the decisions and behaviours of journalists and media leaders through internal and external pressures. Table 1 (see below) categorises the manifestations and functions of fear factors in journalistic environments, outlining internal and external antecedents, the nature of fears, their outcomes, and levels of impact. Internal factors, such as lack of support networks and resistance to innovation, often lead to reduced innovation and job insecurity, while external factors, like political pressures and crisis journalism, influence engagement and coverage quality. The table highlights overlapping concerns, such as financial instability affecting multiple levels, and unique issues, such as freelancers' distinct challenges and sector-specific political manipulation.

Internally, hierarchical communication structures can breed a culture of “vertical fear”, where aggressive top-down management stifles open dialogue and encourages risk aversion (Porcu et al., 2022). This fear discourages journalists from voicing dissenting opinions, potentially leading to self-censorship and compromised journalistic integrity. External factors also fuel fear. Political and economic pressures can lead to a form of “external censorship” (Koo, 2024). Journalists may face repercussions from powerful entities if their reporting is perceived as unfavourable, prompting them to avoid certain topics or frame stories in a particular light (Koo, 2024; Navarro, 2006; Wang & Jiang, 2016). The financial instability plaguing the media industry creates a constant undercurrent of anxiety (Wadud, 2022). Budget cuts and job losses loom large, affecting both staff journalists and freelancers (Graber, 2003; Holton et al., 2023). Freelancers, lacking institutional support and safety nets, face additional challenges in this environment (Wadud, 2022).

Technological advancements like automation and AI further exacerbate anxieties. Journalists fear obsolescence and worry that their roles will be replaced by machines (Milosavljević & Vobič, 2021). This fear of technological displacement adds to existing pressures and fuels resistance towards newsroom innovation (Milosavljević & Vobič, 2021). Although these recent concerns related to technology adaptation were not extensively explored in the scoped literature, they remain crucial for comprehending the evolving media landscape. Future research should investigate these areas to provide a more nuanced perspective on their implications for journalistic practices and organisational decision-making.

Moreover, fear can stifle innovation and creativity (Milosavljević & Vobič, 2021; Porcu et al., 2022). Financial anxieties and job insecurity can make media professionals risk-averse, discouraging them from experimenting with new formats or technologies that could enhance news production and distribution (Segal, 2011). This fear-driven resistance to change hinders adaptation to the evolving media landscape. Furthermore, chronic exposure to high-stress environments and the constant fear of job insecurity can negatively impact mental health and wellbeing (Holton et al., 2023; Wang & Jiang, 2016), leading to burnout and high turnover rates. Addressing these fears through supportive management practices and creating a more stable working environment is critical for retaining talent and ensuring the long-term sustainability of news organisations.

Fear, as every emotion (e.g. happiness, see Bélair-Gagnon et al., 2024), is a double-edged sword. It can serve as both a deterrent and a motivator in news media management. The fear of public backlash and the responsibility to provide accurate information during crises can push journalists to prioritise accuracy and adhere to ethical standards (Graber, 2003; Johnson et al., 2010; Wadud, 2022). High stakes can inspire diligence and a commitment to upholding journalistic integrity (Johnson et al., 2010). Understanding how fear manifests and functions in news media management offers valuable insights into the pressures shaping media operations. By recognising the root causes of fear and implementing strategies to mitigate its negative effects, media leaders can cultivate a more resilient, innovative, and ethically sound news environment.

Our analysis of the collected articles reveals several key research gaps that can be categorised into six main areas (see Figure A1, in the Appendix). The first – at the industry level – concerns the journalism and news media management industry as a whole. Research identifies fear as an important strategic management and emotional

factor (Milosavljević & Vobič, 2021; Porcu et al., 2022), but it is often overlooked at the industry level. A good example is climate change as a crisis. Climate change represents a two-sided pressure on media organisations – content that is relevant to readers and sustainable operations. And yet, climate change as a crisis has only been indirectly addressed in the context of the personal risks faced by freelancers covering this issue in South Asia (Wadud, 2022).

At the second level of analysis, that of the organisational level, it was observed that the majority of research in this field focuses on individuals or groups (Luce et al., 2017; Wadud, 2022), with a paucity of attention paid to the role of fear within the organisational context (Gruda & Ojo, 2022). It thus appears that there is a need for empirical analysis of fear along the value chain and its impact on the entire organisation. Another area where there is a clear need for further research is the impact of fear in crisis contexts. To date, research has focused on analysing fear as a long-term phenomenon, for instance, in the context of political processes (Navarro, 2006; Pype, 2013; Wadud, 2022; Wang & Jiang, 2016). However, in our sample there is a lack of studies that examine fear in the context of sudden crises, such as the Russian war in Ukraine. In particular, in the context of contemporary armed conflicts and their broad social consequences, there is a noticeable gap in research investigating the influence of fear on organisations during sudden, unpredictable, and disruptive crises (Rashid & Olofsson, 2021). Conversely, at the level of the business unit, it is notable that a greater number of studies focus on fear in newsroom practices than in news media management (Curtin & Maier, 2001; Milosavljević & Vobič, 2021; Porcu et al., 2022). It would be beneficial to expand the scope of research to encompass fear in news media management and its consequences at the business unit level. At the team level, initial studies (Holton et al., 2023; Johnson et al., 2010) indicate that fear has an impact on journalists' day-to-day work and mental health. Furthermore, there is a deficiency of focus on the role of media organisations as employers and their obligation to provide support for the mental health of their employees (Holton et al., 2023).

Finally, we observed the dominance of the individual level. Thus, the research is largely focused on individuals (Harris et al., 2016) or specific individual aspects such as precarious working conditions, hate speech, and political influences. It would be beneficial to expand research to explore comprehensive individual experiences of fear across different contexts and situations. We know from existing literature that journalists often face threats and hatred that have a profound impact on their work and wellbeing (Kantola & Harju, 2023; Miller, 2023; Perreault et al., 2022). Last but not least – the functional level – provides evidence that fear is often studied in isolation, for instance, in newsrooms (Milosavljević & Vobič, 2021). Consequently, it would be beneficial to conduct an empirical analysis of fear across different functions within media organisations in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of its broader impact.

Although we tried to be as comprehensive as possible in our study and rigorously followed the established five-stage approach (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005), this study has some limitations. The scoping studies have some general methodological limitations. As authors (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005, p. 30) point out, it does not “appraise the quality of evidence in the primary research reports in any formal sense”, and it does not “address the issues of ‘synthesis’”. Moreover, the limitations of the study may be both the lack of prior research studies on the topic and the large volume of data to be processed. These

obstacles were dealt with by the research team through structured teamwork, clearly defined and discussed steps, and repeated discussions over their implementation. The coding of large amounts of data was solved by dividing the tasks among five coders, with two coders coding each article to ensure the inter-coder reliability. Collective agreement among all coders was ensured by regular consultation of progress, deviations in the coding and emerging uncertainties by the whole team. Other limitations were deliberately chosen given the necessary selection boundaries of the sample: we have limited the search to (1) specific databases (see above in the methodological procedure section); (2) specific fields (social sciences, media studies, communication studies and business and management fields only); (3) specific time frame (2000–2024); (4) specific genre (peer-reviewed articles only); and (5) specific search words (see above) contained in the title, keywords and abstract of the articles. Overall, we have also limited the search to English only, although we are aware that crises and emotional experiences of fear can be local as well, which is why a cross-language analysis could also be interesting. We are also aware that specifying the topic only to media management without the broader context of seeking the relationship between fear and journalism limits our results, this is nevertheless in line with our aim and scope.

Furthermore, the scoping study methodology adopted in this research prioritises synthesising existing literature to map the current state of knowledge and identify gaps, rather than collecting new primary data. Future research could build on our findings by incorporating qualitative methods, such as interviews with media managers, which could offer detailed, context-specific insights into their lived experiences.

Conclusion

This study began by highlighting the constant anxiety and fear media managers face due to global crises. It then identified a gap in research, where fear is typically studied within broader contexts rather than its independent influence. By directly examining fear's role in media management, we found it permeates all levels, impacting decision-making, content production, and journalistic integrity.

Our research underscores the need to address fear as a standalone factor. By systematically analysing existing research, we open the door to a deeper understanding of its direct impact. This work lays the groundwork for future studies exploring fear's influence on journalistic practices and ethics, or more generally on journalism. Ultimately, this knowledge can empower media professionals to navigate an increasingly complex and fear-ridden media landscape.

Building on the research gaps we identified (see [Figure A1](#), in the Appendix), our study also outlines a research agenda for the field. Future work could examine fear across multiple levels – from industry structures to organisational functions and team dynamics – and in relation to sudden crises, technological changes and disruptions, as well as evolving work conditions. Cross-national comparisons and qualitative studies of managers' and journalists' lived experiences would add much-needed depth. Advancing such a research agenda can not only enrich academic knowledge but also help media organisations design strategies that foster resilience, innovation, and ethical responsibility.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Appendix

Table A1. Overview of the sample.

Author	Title	Study location	Aim of the study	Study populations	Methodology	Method	Manifestation of fear in news management process	Function of fear in news management process
Altheide (2006)	The Mass Media, Crime and Terrorism	USA	Examining the cultural and mass communication contexts that have fostered the fear of crime, but also justify illegal state measures to combat crime and now terrorism	not mentioned	qualitative study	textual analysis, commentary analysis	Fear through social control: Public acceptance of illegal actions by the US government in the Iraq War, as well as steps taken to combat terrorism influenced by entertainment media content and media logic about crime and fear.	Fear as a message: The interplay of propaganda and news management (e.g. the military-media complex and the failure of journalism) cultivates a public discussion of fear and symbolically exclude the "other" by framing them as criminals or terrorists. The result is the valorisation of criminal behaviour as necessary and heroic.
Curtin and Maier (2001)	Numbers in the Newsroom: A Qualitative Examination of a Quantitative Challenge	not mentioned	Investigating the perception and use of numbers in the journalistic environment	reporters, researchers, copy editors, and top managers at a 150,000-circulation, chain-owned daily newspaper	qualitative study	focus group discussions	Need for numerical skills: Technological change is making mathematical skills increasingly important for journalists. A lack of training in this area, among other things, reveals a bias and fear of numbers.	Fear leads to dismissive behaviour: Bias and missing competence of journalists about mathematics, which can be influenced by gender differences, leads to fear of numbers and dismissive behaviour towards the topic.

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Table A1. (Continued).

Author	Title	Study location	Aim of the study	Study populations	Methodology	Method	Manifestation of fear in news management process	Function of fear in news management process
Graber (2003)	Styles of Image Management During Crises: Justifying Press Censorship	USA	Analysing the types of appeals used by both supporters and opponents of formal and informal censorship to gain support for their points of view	official pronouncements by members of the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of the U.S. national government and views quoted in news stories and editorials in selected U.S. mass media	qualitative study	critical discourse analysis	Informal censorship: Journalists who express a dissenting opinion are under social pressure as they fear backlash from readers, editors and publishers that could lead to the loss of their jobs. Organisational crises response: Fear as an emotion is automatically transferred from an organisation's crisis response to the public. This transfer happens both consciously and unconsciously and affects the public's emotional state and subsequent reactions.	Fear as a threat to press freedom: Journalists' fear (due to social pressure) supports formal and informal censorship in the press due to social pressure.
Gruda and Ojo (2022)	Is it too late now to say we're sorry? Examining anxiety contagion and crisis communication strategies using machine learning	USA	Investigating the role of perceived emotions and crisis communication strategies through computer-mediated communications in predicting public fear	organisational crisis announcements on social media and the public's responses to these posts	quantitative study	linguistic-based text analysis	Fear as a predictor and influencer: Fear in news management serves as a predictor and influencer of the public's emotional reactions.	Fear as a predictor and influencer: Fear in news management serves as a predictor and influencer of the public's emotional reactions.

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Table A1. (Continued).

Author	Title	Study location	Aim of the study	Study populations	Methodology	Method	Manifestation of fear in news management process	Function of fear in news management process
Harris et al. (2016)	Gender, Risk and Journalism	Africa, Asia, Central America, Europe, North America	Examining the role gender plays in assessing risk for journalists and finding out what advantages being a woman can have for (conflict) reporting	journalists	quantitative study	survey	Fear influences business decisions: Fear manifests itself in the reluctance of media organisations to send female journalists to conflict zones because of concerns for their safety, which are often influenced by gendered perceptions of risk. This can result in women having fewer opportunities to report on high-risk assignments.	Fear as promoter of gender disparity: Although fear can motivate media organisations to improve security, it can also lead to gender discrimination and prevent women from working to their full potential (for example, in crisis zones).
Holton et al. (2023)	"Not Their Fault, but Their Problem": Organizational Responses to the Online Harassment of Journalists	USA	Investigating the impact of online harassment on journalists and how news organisations respond. In particular, it examines how harassment affects the professional and personal wellbeing of journalists and how organisations respond to support the mental health and wellbeing of their employees.	employed journalists, who were actively engaged in social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, or Instagram as part of their professional work	qualitative study	in-depth interviews	Disadvantages of the career path: Due to online harassment, journalists become tired and fearful of continuing to interact with social media users. This can lead to journalists thinking about ways of withdrawing from social media platforms, increasing fear and uncertainty about their jobs.	Fear as a career impact: Journalists may not take up promotions or career opportunities that come with the expectation of being online. Worse still, they may leave the profession.

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Table A1. (Continued).

Author	Title	Study location	Aim of the study	Study populations	Methodology	Method	Manifestation of fear in news management process	Function of fear in news management process
Johnson et al. (2010)	Interjournalistic discourse about African Americans in television news coverage of Hurricane Katrina	USA	Examining how conversations between journalists on the programme show how US television coverage of a racial crisis can reflect a racist ideology	transcripts of news broadcasts made during the second week after the hurricane reached New Orleans (5 September 2005 to 11 September 2005)	qualitative study	critical discourse analysis	Journalists in crisis situations: During e.g. crises, journalists have to walk the fine line between informing the public and stoking fears, which in turn means additional stress for journalists who have to balance ethical reporting with audience expectations and organisational requirements.	Fear as an influence on the mindset of journalists: Fear can lead to ethnocentrism, dichotomous thinking (us-them) and recourse to stereotypes.
Koo (2024)	The Evolution of Self-Censorship in Hong Kong Online Journalism: Influences from Digitalisation and the State	Hong Kong (China)	Analyse the digital evolution of media self-censorship in a unique non-democratic context	legacy newspaper journalists who actively participate in online news-making	qualitative study	in-depth semi-structured interviews	Political pressure: Journalists fear repercussions from political entities or economic stakeholders if their reporting is perceived as unfavourable.	Fear promotes self-censorship: Online journalists avoid sensitive political news for fear of offending external rulers, which can lead to self-censorship.

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Table A1. (Continued).

Author	Title	Study location	Aim of the study	Study populations	Methodology	Method	Manifestation of fear in news management process	Function of fear in news management process
Luce et al. (2017)	Citizen Journalism at The Margins	United Kingdom	Exploring how marginalised groups define their role as citizen journalists and the obstacles they face in developing and embracing this new identity	two UK citizen journalism initiatives anchored within a national homeless organisation and a regional disabled charity	qualitative study	in-depth semi-structured interviews with participants of the workshops and participant observation	Public voice: The citizen journalists were not part of the media's organisational structure and therefore had no support network to fall back on (after completing the training, they were essentially on their own). As a result, it would have been more difficult to overcome feelings of fear, marginalisation and isolation. Journalists' fear of automation: Journalists have fears and hopes about automation, particularly in connection with their work. This leads to a conflict between corporate motives and journalistic values.	Fear as a barrier for minorities' opinions: Feelings of fear and paranoia can be barriers to giving people on the margins of society a public voice. Despite the best efforts of citizen journalists, many vulnerable people are reluctant to speak out against social injustice for fear of reprisals.
Milosavljević and Vobić (2021)	"Our task is to demystify fears": Analysing newsroom management of automation in journalism	United Kingdom, Germany, the US	Analysing how automation is used in the newsrooms of legacy news institutions, and in particular how newsroom management negotiates the innovations of automation in the wider context of the interplay between journalism and technology, news work and forms of news	newsroom staffers who hold both editorial and managerial duties at legacy news institutions	qualitative study	semi-structured in-depth interviews	Fear influences technological change: In technological change, fear promotes a split between corporate and journalistic motives.	

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Table A1. (Continued).

Author	Title	Study location	Aim of the study	Study populations	Methodology	Method	Manifestation of fear in news management process	Function of fear in news management process
Navarro (2006)	Images of the Dirty TV-War: The Hour of Mediocracy	Mexico	Addressing the impact of the civil war on society	not mentioned	conceptual study	conceptual and historical analysis	Fear as a political tool: Fear is fuelled by politicians through the media in order to promote the discourse of fear.	Fear influences elections: The impact of fear during political campaigns and elections through the media coverage.
Parthasarathi and Srinivas (2022)	Labyrinths behind the screen: Ownership and control in TV cable distribution	India	Uncovering the expansion modalities of leading cable distribution companies in different regions of India	two of the three largest cable companies in India: DNL and Hathway Cable	qualitative study	case study (textual analysis and commentary analysis)	Fear due to market situations: An ongoing tendency towards oligopoly manifests itself via fear leading to the desire to introduce more differentiated laws and ex ante protocols.	Fear as a motivator for legal actions: Fear functions both as a result (of consolidation and concentration on the market), as well as a motivator (to demand action, such as ex ante protocols).

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Table A1. (Continued).

Author	Title	Study location	Aim of the study	Study populations	Methodology	Method	Manifestation of fear in news management process	Function of fear in news management process
Porcu et al. (2022)	Trust and Fear in the Newsroom: How Emotions Drive the Exchange of Innovative Ideas	Netherlands	Examining the perception of trust and fear in the editorial team as a driving force in important innovation processes	two national newspaper newsrooms in the Netherlands: NRC Media and Trouw	qualitative study	interviews and non-participant observation	Fear as part of everyday journalistic work: Newsroom workers fear angry and aggressive communication from the top down. Humiliation and verbal abuse have been experienced in everyday working life, among other things, which is why the creative autonomy of employees is restricted. In contrast, management may also fear the newsroom as a whole, as it forces management to slow down transformation processes.	Fear as a barrier: Fear acts as a barrier between journalism and management in media organisations.

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Table A1. (Continued).

Author	Title	Study location	Aim of the study	Study populations	Methodology	Method	Manifestation of fear in news management process	Function of fear in news management process
Pype (2013)	Reciprocity and risk in the work and lives of Kinshasa's TV journalists	Democratic Republic of Congo	Analysing the ways in which relationships between journalists and patrons can develop, how they can evolve and how they affect the production of "news". The article also examines the different types of risks faced by journalists in television Kinshasa and how they respond to them.	TV journalists and politicians	qualitative study	participant observation, interviews	Fear due to dependency: Kinshasa's TV journalists face significant risks and fears in their work and private lives. Risks arise from the political context, patron-client relationships, professional competition, and political rivalry.	Fear as a result of pressure: Journalists' fear arises from dependence on various stakeholders (e.g. politicians) and shareholders (e.g. shareholders (e.g. competition with other journalists) in the news management process.
Rashid and Olofsson (2021)	Worried in Sweden: the effects of terrorism abroad and news media at home on terror-related worry	Sweden	Investigate whether terrorist activities abroad have an impact on concerns about terrorism in Sweden and what influence the news media can have	Swedish National Annual Survey (SOM) for the years 2002–2016	quantitative study	Modelling Generalised Structural Equation of secondary data	Terrorism: Fear is reflected here in the public perception of terrorism and the attitude or concern about it. Media coverage can act as a mediator, with one-off terrorist attacks receiving a great deal of media attention and therefore having a greater impact on public concern than repeated attacks.	Fear influences public worry: Media coverage of terrorism increases public concern and shapes the perception of terrorist threats.

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Table A1. (Continued).

Author	Title	Study location	Aim of the study	Study populations	Methodology	Method	Manifestation of fear in news management process	Function of fear in news management process
Segal (2011)	A Heideggerian Perspective on the Relationship Between Mintzberg's Distinction Between Engaged and Disconnected Management: The Role of Uncertainty in Management	not mentioned	Exploration of the relationship between Mintzberg's concept of the distinction between the committed and the uncommitted manager, Heidegger's notion of authentic and inauthentic being, and Benner and Wrubel's distinction between two forms of attunement to professional practice: an attunement to technique and an attunement to lived experience	not mentioned	conceptual study	not mentioned	Leadership & supervision: Fear as part of the leadership style can strongly influence the actions of employees, e.g. during change. In particular, it can lead to the environment being scanned more actively as a result of fear.	Fearful leadership influences employees' behaviour: Fear as part of the leadership style can influence employees and the organisation.

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Table A1. (Continued).

Author	Title	Study location	Aim of the study	Study populations	Methodology	Method	Manifestation of fear in news management process	Function of fear in news management process
Wadud (2022)	Political and Economic Pressures: Public acceptance of illegal actions by the US government in the Iraq War, as well as steps taken to combat terrorism influenced by entertainment media content and media logic about crime and fear	India, Pakistan, Bangladesh	Exploring the challenges faced by freelance climate journalists in three South Asian countries (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh) and the ways in which they negotiate pay, benefits and security	freelance climate journalists	qualitative study	literature review and in-depth interviews	Precarity in journalism: Precarious work situations for freelance journalists in South Asia lead to all kinds of difficulties (e.g. sexual harassment). Financial instability (including lack of written contracts between freelancers and news organisations) is one of the biggest fears of journalistic freelancers. In South Asia, there are no negotiations (on social benefits, security payments) as freelancers fear that this could affect their ability to get work in the future.	Fears as a result of the work situation: Fear is a consequence of the precarious labour situation for freelance journalists in South Asia.

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Table A1. (Continued).

Author	Title	Study location	Aim of the study	Study populations	Methodology	Method	Manifestation of fear in news management process	Function of fear in news management process
Wang and Jiang (2016)	Greater Work-Related Stress Among Chinese Media Workers in the Context of Media Transformation: Specific Stressors and Coping Strategies	China	Analysing new and China-specific stress factors and showing how media change increases stress and triggers anxiety	Chinese media workers	mixed methods study	survey and in-depth interviews	Stressors: Local stressors (e.g. due to politics) can lead to specific stressors in the daily work of media workers. Here (in the Chinese context), ideological fears due to ideological control and value fears due to changing management influence media workers.	Fear influences coping strategies: Fear functions as a motivator for using coping strategies – on individual, social and organisational levels.

Note: Own presentation.

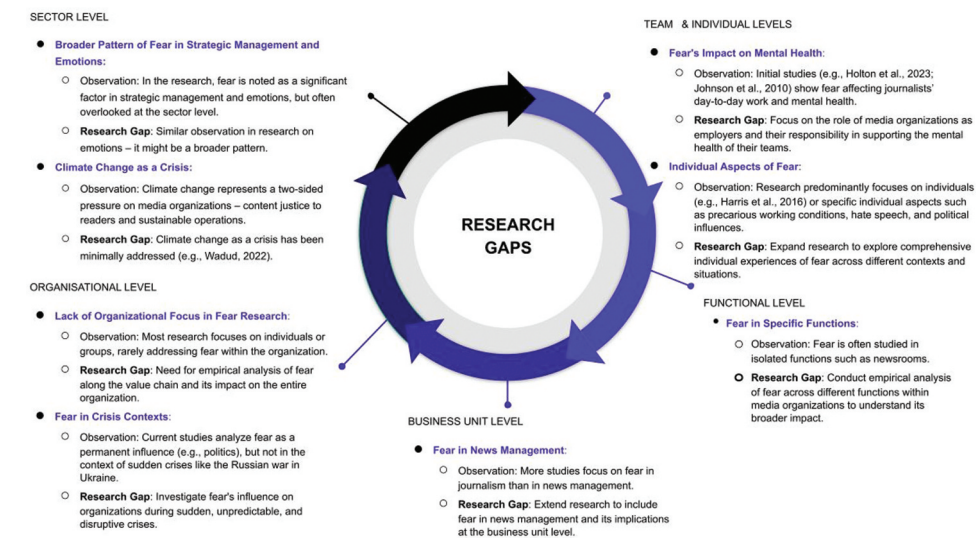


Figure A1. Identified research gaps. Note: Own presentation.