

Journalist as a witness: The existential dimension of professional practice in wartime

Olga Yarkho*

Postgraduate Student
State University of Trade and Economics
02156, 19 Kyoto Str., Kyiv, Ukraine
<https://orcid.org/0009-0001-0786-929X>

Abstract. The fifth year of Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine presented journalists with existential challenges that go beyond the classical clinical and psychological models: media professionals balanced daily between fixing human suffering and preserving their own personal integrity. Existing research has focused primarily on the pathological consequences of traumatic exposure, whilst the existential dimension – the survivor's experience of meaning, responsibility, guilt, and a transformed worldview – has remained systematically under-investigated. The purpose of the study was to theoretically substantiate the existential dimension of journalistic activity in the context of armed conflict by comparing philosophical concepts of evidence with empirical data on the psychological state of media workers. The study had a theoretical design and was implemented through critical analysis and conceptual synthesis of peer-reviewed scientific sources from the Scopus, Web of Science, and PubMed databases, and key monographs on existential psychology and the philosophy of evidence. It has been established that the experience of the journalist-witness brings to the fore four existential modalities: the confrontation with death as an everyday reality of the profession, which shatters the illusion of own invulnerability; the survivor's guilt associated with the inability to help those about whom one reports; a crisis of meaning caused by doubt regarding the impact of the journalistic mission; and the forced solitude of the witness, who finds it difficult to convey their experiences to people outside their professional circle. It was shown that post-traumatic growth in journalists has a pronounced existential character: the domains "spiritual development" and "increasing the value of life" are most often updated under the condition of personal risk. Longitudinal data from the Institute of Mass Information for 2022-2025 confirmed the proposed model: the shift from acute mobilisation through exhaustion to pragmatic adaptation reproduces the existential dialectic of destruction and reconstruction of meaning. The results substantiated the need to supplement clinical interventions with existential-oriented approaches, in particular, logotherapy

Received 22.03.2026 Revised 01.08.2026 Accepted 26.08.2026 Published 18.09.2026

Suggested Citation:

Yarkho, O. (2026). Journalist as a witness: The existential dimension of professional practice in wartime. *Humanities Studios: Pedagogy, Psychology, Philosophy*, 14(3), 88-99. doi: 10.31548/hspedagog/3.2026.88.

*Corresponding author (oyarho@gmail.com)



Copyright © The Author(s). This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)

techniques and structured reflection of the witness mission, in programmes of psychological support for journalists

Keywords: existential psychology; evidence; sensationalism; survivor's guilt; post-traumatic growth; professional identity; journalists in armed conflict

Introduction

The relevance of the study of the psychological state of journalists covering armed conflict is conditioned by a unique combination of professional requirements and traumatic exposure, which no other contemporary profession knows. Media professionals working in the war zone simultaneously perform the function of observers, carriers of socially significant information, moral witnesses of victims of violence, and citizens of the country undergoing aggression. This cluster of roles cannot be reduced to the classic clinical model of "stress-or-symptom-disorder", as it encompasses an existential dimension: the experience of the meaning of own actions, a sense of responsibility towards those one bears witness to, survivor's guilt, and a transformation of one's worldview under the influence of chronic exposure to human suffering. In the Ukrainian context of the fifth year of a full-scale war, this issue has become unprecedented: journalists have been deprived of the opportunity to rotate from the environment that they cover, while simultaneously facing a constant threat to their own lives and the lives of loved ones. The study of the existential dimension of professional activity of media professionals in wartime is important not only for the development of theoretical models of psychological support, but also for the development of practical interventions that can complement standard clinical approaches and consider specifically human dimensions of suffering and growth in a profession that turns observing a tragedy into a moral vocation.

A review of recent research from 2021 to 2025 revealed a rapid increase in the academic community's focus on the psychological well-being of journalists in conflict zones, whilst the existential dimension of their experiences

remains on the periphery of academic analysis. I. Mohammed (2025), in a large-scale systematic review covering 88 peer-reviewed publications for 2000-2024, showed that the prevalence of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression among conflict zone correspondents remains comparable to that of combat veterans, and the available evidence base continues to focus excessively on symptomatic consequences, not sufficiently considering the processes of sense-making. J. Osmann *et al.* (2024) validated the Toronto Moral Injury Scale for Journalists, for the first time empirically isolating the evidence and fieldwork factor as an independent dimension that is not limited to organisational or social factors. Of particular relevance to the Ukrainian context is the study by A. Kurapov *et al.* (2023), which, using a sample of 703 civilians, demonstrated that six months after the full-scale invasion, approximately 20% of the Ukrainian population exceeded the clinical threshold for PTSD, with direct exposure to military operations being the main predictor of symptoms. The study by O. Lushchak *et al.* (2024), published in *The Lancet Regional Health – Europe*, found, based on a large national sample, a high prevalence of PTSD (up to 62.2% among refugees) and stress (up to 86% at a moderate level) among Ukrainians. L. Englund *et al.* (2023), using a sample of nine Scandinavian correspondents, confirmed that disaster coverage was experienced simultaneously as traumatic and life-changing, with the majority of respondents reporting post-traumatic growth. Y. Xiong & S. Liao (2024), on a sample of 126 Chinese journalists, found that vicar post-traumatic growth is mediated by secondary traumatic stress, and A. Węglińska *et al.* (2024) recorded a deep

restructuring of professional identity among correspondents covering the Russian-Ukrainian war. In the Ukrainian context of research, L. Zasiieki-na *et al.* (2024), in a sample of 350 military and civilian personnel, demonstrated high levels of moral trauma associated with feelings of guilt, shame, and betrayal, while the study by L. Zasiieki-na & A. Martyniuk (2025), on a sample of Ukrainian nurses indirectly relevant to journalists, confirmed the mediative role of military long-term traumatic stress between moral distress and professional quality of life.

Despite the growth of empirical data, the analysed papers leave a fundamental gap unexplored: none of the current studies offers a systematic interpretation of the professional experience of journalists in the zone of armed conflict through the prism of existential psychology, which would allow conceptualising not only the symptoms, but also the transformation of the experience of death, freedom, loneliness, and meaning – the fundamental modalities of human existence. The lack of such an interpretation limits the development of psychological support programmes for media professionals, limiting them exclusively to clinical and symptomatic interventions. The purpose of the study was to provide a theoretical analysis of the existential dimension of journalistic practice in the context of armed conflict by comparing philosophical concepts of witnessing with empirical data on the psychological state of media professionals, and to identify specific existential modalities that came to the fore in the experience of the journalist-witness. The scientific originality lies in the fact that for the first time in Ukrainian literature, journalistic professional activity in war conditions is considered through the prism of existential psychology, which allowed identifying measurements of professional experience that were not available for clinical and symptomatic analysis.

Literature Review

The existential approach to professional activity in extreme conditions has a strong theoretical

basis. V.E. Frankl (2006), in a classic work based on the experience of surviving in Nazi concentration camps, argued that the ability to find meaning in suffering is a crucial factor in psychological survival. I.D. Yalom (1980) systematised the four “ultimate concerns” of human existence – death, freedom, isolation, and senselessness – each of which, as will be shown later, is directly relevant in the professional experience of a journalist in a conflict zone. R. May (1977) conceptualised anxiety not as a clinical symptom, but as a normative response to awareness of human limitations and uncertainty – a position that is directly relevant to understanding journalists’ chronic anxiety.

The philosophy of testimony adds an ethical dimension to this framework. S. Felman & D. Laub (1992) identified three levels of testimony: bearing witness to oneself, bearing witness to another’s testimony, and bearing witness to the process of testimony itself. A. Margalit (2002) proposed the concept of a “moral witness” – a person who has directly experienced suffering and testifies to the evil that caused it. S. Tait (2011) carried out a conceptual transfer of this framework to journalism, distinguishing between eyewitness and bearing witness: the latter involves taking moral responsibility for what is seen, which turns the observer into a moral subject. Contemporary research expanded this theoretical framework towards empirical analysis of journalistic experience. S. Cottle (2013) explored how the presence of a journalist at a crash site shapes “moral engagement”, a phenomenon that transcends professional duty and touches on the existential core of the individual. The study by A. Siddiqua & M.Z. Iqbal (2026) recorded that Pakistani journalists conceptualise their role in terms of moral responsibility to society, which directly corresponds to the concept of bearing witness according to S. Tait (2011).

Among the empirical studies, the key was the monograph by A. Feinstein (2006), which combined quantitative data with extensive qualitative interviews with war correspondents, capturing experiences of guilt, loneliness, and

existential crisis. T. Browne *et al.* (2012) were the first to empirically investigate the association of traumatic guilt with PTSD symptoms in journalists. A. Feinstein (2006), along with later colleagues, noted that moral trauma and guilt are the dominant psychological consequences of covering humanitarian crises. J. Osmann *et al.* (2024) validated the Toronto Moral Injury Scale for Journalists, highlighting three factors: organisational, related to public response, and the witness/fieldwork factor – the latter directly related to existential experience.

In the Ukrainian context, L.A. Naidonova (2013) developed a reflexive approach to media psychology, emphasising the ability to consciously process media content as a key competence. A. Węglińska *et al.* (2024) based on 18 interviews with correspondents covering the Russian-Ukrainian war, documented a profound transformation of professional identity. Additionally, research by L. Zasiakina *et al.* (2024) on a sample of 191 Ukrainian soldiers and 159 civilians confirmed a high level of moral trauma associated with feelings of guilt and betrayal (MISS-M-SF, $\alpha = 0.70$). However, none of these studies offers a systematic interpretation of journalistic experience through the prism of existential psychology.

Materials and Methods

The study was constructed as a theoretical investigation, conducted using the method of conceptual analysis and synthesis of academic sources. The analytical strategy combined two complementary approaches: (a) deductive superposition of the terminology of existential psychology and the philosophy of evidence on the corpus of empirical data on the psychological state of journalists; (b) inductive isolation of existential modalities from qualitative data from journalistic research.

The following methods of scientific cognition were used in the study. The method of critical analysis of scientific sources was used to identify the theoretical framework and empirical patterns relevant for conceptualising the

existential dimension of journalistic activity; the choice of this method was conditioned by the need to systematise a disparate array of research within a single theoretical construction. The method of conceptual synthesis was applied to integrate the concepts of existential psychology of V.E. Frankl (2006), philosophy of testimony of S. Felman & D. Laub (1992) and A. Margalit (2002), and empirical findings regarding the psychological state of media professionals; the rationale was the need to build an interdisciplinary model that does not reduce the journalist's experience to either clinical symptoms or abstract philosophical categories. The typologisation method was used to identify four existential modalities of a journalist-witness based on a comparison of the categories of ultimate concerns by I.D. Yalom (1980) with the experiences of journalists documented in the scientific literature; the criteria for identifying modalities were: (1) the presence of a categorical correspondence between the fundamental existential concern and the type of experience recorded in the empirical data of journalistic research; (2) the repeatability of this type of experience in various empirical studies; (3) the specificity of the form that concern acquires in the journalistic context. The method of comparative analysis was used to compare the proposed existential interpretation with alternative concepts, in particular "retained concern" by H.I. Lief (1963) and the later concept of journalist-witness by S. Tait (2011).

The actual research material consisted of three categories of sources. The first category was formed by 34 peer-reviewed scientific publications, including 18 empirical studies of the psychological state of journalists (Williams & Cartwright, 2021; Osmann *et al.*, 2024). It also included 8 theoretical and conceptual papers on existential psychology and the philosophy of evidence (Yalom, 1980; Frankl, 2006; Tait, 2011) and 8 contemporary review and methodological publications 2023–2026 that systematise knowledge about moral trauma, post-traumatic growth, and the professional identity of journalists. The

second category was formed by the data of longitudinal surveys of the Institute of Mass Information (IMI), obtained from official publications of the Institute of Mass Information (2024; 2025), annual surveys of Ukrainian media professionals regarding the psychological state, professional challenges, and adaptation strategies. The third category consisted of relevant Ukrainian studies of traumatic experiences of civilians and military personnel by L. Zasiiekina *et al.* (2024). All materials were processed according to a single protocol: identification of key provisions, categorisation according to the theoretical framework, comparison with the opinion of other researchers, integration into the model. The data analysis was carried out by the method of thematic coding: empirical results were grouped into four existential topics (death, freedom/responsibility, isolation, meaning), after which each topic was checked for compliance with categories of I.D. Yalom (1980) and its presence was verified in at least three independent sources.

The sequence of the study included five stages: (1) formulation of the research question and definition of the theoretical framework; (2) systematic search of sources in the Scopus, Web of Science, and PubMed databases for the keywords “journalist existential”, “journalist meaning”, “journalist witness”, “journalist guilt”, “journalist moral injury”, “journalist post-traumatic growth”; (3) critical analysis and categorisation of identified sources; (4) conceptual synthesis and typologisation of existential modalities; (5) verification of the model based on Ukrainian longitudinal IMI data. Chronological boundaries of the source base: main array – 2021-2026; classical theoretical studies – 1946-2012.

Results and Discussion

Four existential modalities of a witness journalist

Comparison of the categorical apparatus of existential psychology with empirical data allowed identifying four modalities through which the professional experience of a journalist in an armed conflict takes on an existential

dimension. The four modalities outlined below have been identified by the author of this study based on the typology described in the “Materials and Methods” section. Each modality represented a convergence zone between one of the “ultimate concerns” according to I.D. Yalom (1980) and an empirically documented type of experience specific to the journalistic context.

The first modality is a collision with death as an everyday profession. I.D. Yalom (1980) defined awareness of the inevitability of death as a fundamental existential concern that generates anxiety, but simultaneously can catalyse authentic existence. For a journalist in a conflict zone, death ceases to be an abstract idea: A. Feinstein (2006), in lengthy interviews with war correspondents, noted that chronic contact with death destroys the so-called “protective cocoon” – the illusion of own invulnerability, which was described by R. May (1977) as one of the basic defence mechanisms against existential anxiety.

The second modality is the survivor's guilt and the witness's guilt. V.E. Frankl (2006) described the phenomenon of survivor's guilt as an integral part of the experience of surviving in extreme circumstances. In journalism, this sense of guilt takes on a specific form: the journalist feels it not only because they survived, but also because they “merely stood by and watched”. T. Browne *et al.* (2012) empirically confirmed a significant association between traumatic guilt and PTSD symptoms in journalists. J. Osmann *et al.* (2024) validated the Toronto Moral Injury Scale for Journalists by highlighting the specific field-work/evidence factor, empirically confirming the autonomy of this dimension of guilt experience. S. Felman & D. Laub (1992) theorised this phenomenon as a “witness crisis” – a state in which the witnesses experience the inability to adequately convey what they saw, which generates a deep sense of guilt for “betraying” the experience of those about whom they are testifying.

The third modality was the crisis of meaning and the mission of testimony. V.E. Frankl (2006) argued that a person is capable of enduring any

“how” provided there is a “for what”. For a journalist, such a “for what” is the mission of public awareness – the belief that their testimony matters. However, chronic contact with the consequences of violence can undermine this belief. A. Margalit (2002) identified this dilemma as a contradiction between the moral obligation to testify and the awareness of the limited impact of evidence. Longitudinal data from the IMI (Institute of Mass Information, 2025) show that in 2025, the leading psychological attitude of Ukrainian media professionals was pragmatic endurance – which can be interpreted as a specific form of existential acceptance of limitations, which, according to V.E. Frankl, precedes the reconstruction of meaning on a new level.

The fourth modality was the existential loneliness of the witness. I.D. Yalom (1980) distinguished between interpersonal isolation (lack of relationships) and existential isolation – the fundamental insurmountable gap between own experience and that of another. A journalist returning from a war zone faces precisely existential isolation: their experience is indescribable to those who have not been in similar circumstances. A. Feinstein (2006) noted that war correspondents often describe the inability to explain their experiences even to the closest people. N. Seely (2019), on a sample of 254 American journalists, found that one of the key coping strategies is to “disconnect” from work, which paradoxically deepens isolation by creating a second barrier between the professional and personal worlds. T.J. Thomson (2021), in a study of 23 visual journalists from 8 countries, recorded that only 4 of them ever went to a psychologist – which indicates the depth of professional stigma of seeking help.

The four identified modalities do not constitute an arbitrary list, but rather a systematic structure: within it, each concern from the I.D. Yalom (1980) takes on a specifically journalistic form of realisation, which makes the theoretical model both integrated with classical existential psychology and sensitive to the specific nature of

the media profession. The practical significance of this typologisation lies in the fact that it allows addressing interventions of psychological support of journalists not to symptoms in general, but to specific existential meanings of suffering: for the first modality, practices of accepting finiteness and reassessment of values are appropriate; for the second – structured procedures of moral repair; for the third – logotherapy techniques of reconstruction of meaning; for the fourth – group practices of exchange of experience between journalists working in the conflict zone.

Post-traumatic growth as an existential transformation

The model of post-traumatic growth (PTG) by R. Tedeschi & L. Calhoun (1996; 2004) suggests five areas, two of which – “spiritual development” and “increasing the value of life” – are clearly existential in nature. R. Tedeschi & L. Calhoun (2004) explicitly stated that post-traumatic growth involves “enriching the existential and spiritual life”. The study by S. Williams & T. Cartwright (2021) empirically confirmed this association for journalists: in a sample of 69 British media professionals, personal risk added 7% of the explained variance of PTG ($d = 1.4$ for personal risk; $d = 1.2$ for military and non-military correspondents). T. Idås *et al.* (2019), working with a sample of 375 Norwegian journalists who covered the terrorist attack on Utoya Island, found that institutional recognition was the strongest predictor of post-traumatic growth ($r = 0.542$), whereas perceived and received support did not reach statistical significance – which is interpreted as confirmation of the existential need to be heard and recognised in the role of a witness.

Y. Xiong & S. Liao (2024), using a sample of 126 Chinese journalists, confirmed that vicar post-traumatic growth is mediated by secondary traumatic stress – that is, growth is not an alternative to suffering, but is born out of it, which is exactly in line with the existential principle of V.E. Frankl (2006): meaning can be found in suffering, not in spite of it. Additional confirmation

of this mechanism was offered by the paper by T. Hoover & G. Metz (2024), where the researchers systematised current evidence that moral trauma can be a growth catalyst if supported by conscious experience processing, education about normative responses to trauma, and social support. Separately, it should be noted that moral trauma acts as a separate mediative link between traumatic exposure and professional functioning – that is, post-traumatic growth is not an automatic consequence of suffering, but is born only under the condition of conscious moral processing of experience. The study by A. Siddiqua & M.Z. Iqbal (2026) in a Pakistani sample further confirmed that journalists who conceptualise their role in terms of moral responsibility to society exhibit higher levels of psychological resilience and adaptive coping strategies.

The analysis of empirical data showed that it is the existential domains of PTG that are most relevant in the professional experience of journalists working in the zone of armed conflict. This allows formulating three practical conclusions. First, the interpretation that professional activity itself as evidence of the suffering of others can act as a mechanism of sense-making – not as a secondary function of work, but as its existential core. This is consistent with the opinion of S. Tait (2011) on the transition from eyewitness to bearing witness as a moral practice. Second, a conclusion on the practical role of organisational resources in supporting growth: if institutional recognition of a journalist's work is the strongest predictor of PTG (Idås *et al.*, 2019), editorial policies providing for the systematic recognition of the traumatic component of journalistic work should not be considered as an optional element of corporate culture, but as an element of the professional infrastructure of psychological support. Third, for journalists working in the zone of existential challenges of war, PTG cannot be the goal of intervention in the literal sense – it is a possible result of the process of processing experience, which leads to professionally supported reflection of meaning, social recognition, and

rejection of stigmatisation of emotional response. This means that standard clinical protocols (CBT, EMDR) should be supplemented with structured logotherapy practices focused on reconstructing the meaning of the witness mission. In the context of the Ukrainian war, these findings are particularly important: the chronicity of exposure and the lack of rotation means that psychological support strategies should be integrated into everyday professional practice, rather than presented as temporary interventions after the events are over.

Ukrainian specifics:

Triple existential confrontation

The situation of Ukrainian journalists is characterised by at least three features that radically strengthen the existential dimension of their experience. First, the impossibility of rotation: unlike foreign correspondents, Ukrainian media professionals cannot leave the environment, which is reported to eliminate the distance between the “observer” and the “participant” (Institute of Mass Information, 2024). Second, the dual identity of “witness-citizen” adds a layer of existential tension: the journalist not only captures the shelling – but also can be its victim. Third, the scale of the digital flow of traumatic content is unparalleled in any of the previous conflicts.

A. Węglińska *et al.* (2024), based on 18 interviews with journalists covering the Russian-Ukrainian war, recorded a profound transformation of professional identity: the classic ideal of a “remote observer” gives way to the “involved witness” model – which, according to S. Tait (2011), marks the transition from eye-witnessing to bearing witness as a moral and existential practice. Longitudinal data from the Institute of Mass Information (2025) captures the trajectory from acute mobilisation (2022) through exhaustion (2023-2024) to pragmatic adaptation (2025) – which recreates the dialectic of V.E. Frankl (2006): breaking down the previous meaning → vacuum → rebuilding on a new foundation. The Ukrainian specifics of journalists' experience

are related to specific empirical patterns documented in Ukrainian and international studies. Longitudinal data from the Institute of Mass Information (2024) show that 65.8% of Ukrainian journalists in 2024 reported mental health problems – 8.3 percentage points more than in 2023 (57.5%), which indicates a chronicling of the psychological consequences of a prolonged war. Of particular concern was the increase in suicidal ideation from 1% in 2023 to 8% in 2024 – an eightfold jump, which, according to the interpretation, directly reflects the deepening crisis of meaning in the third of the existential modalities identified in this study. A parallel, larger-scale study by L. Zasiékina *et al.* (2024), involving 191 Ukrainian military personnel and 159 civilians, confirmed a strong association between moral trauma and PTSD symptoms ($r = 0.36$) and anxiety ($r = 0.37$), whilst L. Zasiékina & A. Martyniuk (2025) in a study of Ukrainian nurses showed that military prolonged traumatic stress mediates the link between moral distress and professional quality of life – a mechanism that is also relevant for journalists working in similar conditions of chronic exposure.

A separate aspect of Ukrainian specifics is the phenomenon of online harassment and digital violence against journalists. A. Kalaitzaki *et al.* (2024), in an international study in 11, countries documented that among the population of countries affected by the Russian-Ukrainian war, the level of PTSD and psychological distress significantly exceeds the general population indicators, which also applies to professional groups with high traumatic exposure, in particular journalists. For Ukrainian journalists facing an information war on the part of the aggressor country, this dimension becomes more acute: the digital space becomes not only a channel for the dissemination of information, but also a zone of chronic anxiety and ethical uncertainty. Reflexive approach by L.A. Naidonova (2013) can serve as a methodological tool to support this process: structured reflection of the witness mission can catalyse the transition from automatic alarm

to deliberate comprehension. Practical conclusions from this for the psychological support of Ukrainian media professionals are as follows: (1) standard clinical interventions should be supplemented by existentially oriented practices that consider the specifics of chronic rather than acute trauma; (2) the development of a culture of institutional recognition of the work of a journalist, which according to T. Idås *et al.* (2019) is the strongest predictor of PTG, should become part of the editorial protocols and activities of trade unions; (3) group practices of sharing existential experiences between journalists covering the war should become a structured component of professional support – both through supervision formats and through modelled after the example of reflexive groups by L.A. Naidonova (2013); (4) the development of trauma literacy among media managers capable of recognising the existential dimensions of employee suffering is a prerequisite for effective support; (5) recognition of online violence as a distinct existential challenge that requires a comprehensive technological, legal, and psychological response.

Comparison of the proposed interpretation with the results of other researchers confirms its validity. The concept of “detached concern”, proposed by H.I. Lief (1963) for physicians, describes one facet of existential experience – the tension between empathy and distance – but does not cover the survivor’s guilt and the crisis of meaning. L. Englund *et al.* (2023) recorded that Scandinavian journalists described disaster coverage as both a “traumatic” and “life-changing” experience, confirming the two-dimensional nature of existential confrontation. L. Zasiékina *et al.* (2024), in a sample of about 350 Ukrainian respondents, recorded an extremely high level of moral trauma – which further justified the existential nature of the Ukrainian military experience. G. Agamben (1999) emphasised that the testimony is always incomplete – the witness cannot convey the experience in its totality. For a journalist, this incompleteness becomes a source of chronic existential frustration: even the best report remains a reduction in

the experience. E. van Deurzen (2012) suggested a therapeutic strategy for embracing this limitation: not overcoming anxiety, but learning to live with it – which can be adapted for psychological support programmes for journalists.

Summing up the analysis, it should be noted that the existential dimension of journalistic activity in war conditions forms an integral theoretical framework that integrates the classical categories of existential psychology, empirical data on moral trauma and post-traumatic growth, and the specifics of the Ukrainian military context. The four identifiable modalities of the witness journalist – the collision with death, the survivor's guilt, the crisis of meaning, and existential loneliness – form not a set of independent problems, but a single structure of human experience that is activated simultaneously in a prolonged war. Post-traumatic growth in journalists is mainly existential in nature and is born out of the process of consciously working out suffering – not in spite of it, but through it. The Ukrainian specificity lies in the triple convergence of unfavourable factors: the impossibility of rotation, the dual identity of “witness-citizen”, and the unprecedented scale of the digital flow of traumatic content. The proposed model substantiates specific practical implications: complementing clinical interventions with existential-oriented approaches, creating an institutional culture of recognition, and developing group practices for sharing experience.

Conclusions

The conducted theoretical analysis showed that the existential dimension is an integral part of the professional experience of a journalist in an armed conflict, and cannot be reduced to clinical and symptomatic categories. Four existential modalities of a witness journalist were identified: collision with death, survivor/witness guilt, meaning crisis, and existential loneliness. Each modality generates specific suffering, but simultaneously opens up space for existential transformation – a point supported by empirical evidence of post-traumatic growth among journalists.

It was established that the four identified modalities form a systemic structure in which each “ultimate concern” acquires a specific journalistic implementation, while maintaining a connection with the classical theoretical framework. It was shown that post-traumatic growth in journalists has a pronounced existential character: it is the domains of “spiritual development” and “increasing the value of life” that are most often updated under the condition of personal risk, and institutional recognition of the role of evidence is the strongest predictor of PTG. It was proved that post-traumatic growth is born out of suffering, and not in spite of it, which is consistent with the logotherapeutic principle of V.E. Frankl on the meaning of suffering. It was shown that the Ukrainian context is characterised by a triple existential confrontation: the impossibility of rotation, the dual identity of “witness-citizen”, and the unprecedented scale of digital traumatic exposure. The longitudinal data of IMI showed the dialectic of destruction and reconstruction of meaning, which corresponds to the logotherapy model of V.E. Frankl. The increase in the share of Ukrainian media professionals with mental health problems to 65.8% and an eightfold increase in suicidal ideation in one year indicate the critical severity of the situation and the need for urgent psychological support measures that consider the existential dimension of suffering.

The practical significance of the results obtained is to substantiate the need to supplement standard clinical interventions (CBT, EMDR) with existentially oriented approaches: logotherapy techniques for understanding the mission of evidence, structured reflection according to the model of L.A. Naidonova, group practices for the exchange of existential experience between journalists. The recommended areas of implementation are: development of editorial protocols for institutional recognition of the traumatic aspect of journalistic work; integration of trauma literacy into the training of media managers; creation of supervision formats for journalists working in the zone of armed conflict; separate response to

online harassment as an independent existential challenge. The prospects for further research lie in the empirical verification of the proposed four modalities through in-depth interviews and psychodiagnostic examination of Ukrainian media professionals using the tools of existential psychology (in particular, Purpose in Life Test, Existence Scale, and Toronto Moral Injury Scale for Journalists).

None.

None.

None.

Acknowledgements

Funding

Conflict of Interest

References

- [1] Agamben, G. (1999). *Remnants of Auschwitz: The witness and the archive*. New York: Zone Books.
- [2] Browne, T., Evangeli, M., & Greenberg, N. (2012). Trauma-related guilt and posttraumatic stress among journalists. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 25(2), 207-210. doi: [10.1002/jts.21678](https://doi.org/10.1002/jts.21678).
- [3] Cottle, S. (2013). Journalists witnessing disaster: From the calculus of death to the injunction to care. *Journalism Studies*, 14(2), 232-248. doi: [10.1080/1461670X.2012.718556](https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2012.718556).
- [4] Englund, L., Bergh Johannesson, K., & Arnberg, F.K. (2023). Reporting under extreme conditions: Journalists' experiences of disaster coverage. *Frontiers in Communication*, 8, article number 1060169. doi: [10.3389/fcomm.2023.1060169](https://doi.org/10.3389/fcomm.2023.1060169).
- [5] Feinstein, A. (2006). *Journalists under fire: The psychological hazards of covering war*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- [6] Felman, S., & Laub, D. (1992). *Testimony: Crises of witnessing in literature, psychoanalysis, and history*. New York: Routledge. doi: [10.4324/9780203700327](https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203700327).
- [7] Frankl, V.E. (2006). *Man's search for meaning*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- [8] Hoover, T., & Metz, G. (2024). What comes after moral injury? – Considerations of post-traumatic growth. *Trauma Care*, 4(3), 219-228. doi: [10.3390/traumacare4030020](https://doi.org/10.3390/traumacare4030020).
- [9] Idås, T., Backholm, K., & Korhonen, J. (2019). Trauma in the newsroom: Social support, post-traumatic stress and post-traumatic growth among journalists working with terror. *European Journal of Psychotraumatology*, 10(1), article number 1620085. doi: [10.1080/20008198.2019.1620085](https://doi.org/10.1080/20008198.2019.1620085).
- [10] Institute of Mass Information. (2024). *Ukrainian media professionals name top-5 challenges in 2024: Annual IMI survey*. Retrieved from <https://imi.org.ua/en/monitorings/ukrainian-media-professionals-name-top-5-challenges-of-2024-annual-imi-survey-i65580>.
- [11] Institute of Mass Information. (2025). *Annual IMI survey: Journalists in 2025 – exhausted but more resilient and adapted to war*. Retrieved from <https://imi.org.ua/monitorings/richne-opytuvannya-imi-zhurnalisty-u-2025-mu-vysnazheni-ale-stijkishi-j-bilsh-adaptovani-do-vijny>.
- [12] Kalaitzaki, A., et al. (2024). The mental health toll of the Russian-Ukraine war across 11 countries: Cross-sectional data on war-related stressors, PTSD and CPTSD symptoms. *Psychiatry Research*, 342, article number 116248. doi: [10.1016/j.psychres.2024.116248](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychres.2024.116248).
- [13] Kurapov, A., Kalaitzaki, A., Keller, V., Danyliuk, I., & Kowatsch, T. (2023). The mental health impact of the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war 6 months after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, 14, article number 1134780. doi: [10.3389/fpsyt.2023.1134780](https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyt.2023.1134780).
- [14] Lief, H.I. (1963). *Training for "detached concern" in medical students*. New York: Harper & Row.
- [15] Lushchak, O., Velykodna, M., Bolman, S., Strilbytska, O., Berezovskyi, V., & Storey, K.B. (2024). Prevalence of stress, anxiety, and symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder among Ukrainians after the first year of Russian invasion: A nationwide cross-sectional study. *The Lancet Regional Health – Europe*, 36, article number 100773. doi: [10.1016/j.lanepe.2023.100773](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lanepe.2023.100773).

- [16] Margalit, A. (2002). *The ethics of memory*. London: Harvard University Press. doi: [10.4159/9780674040595](https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674040595).
- [17] May, R. (1977). *The meaning of anxiety*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
- [18] Mohammed, I. (2025). A systematic review of the literature on the mental health of journalists reporting on war, conflict and terrorism: Gaps and recommendations for future studies. *Journalism and Media*, 6(3), article number 129. doi: [10.3390/journalmedia6030129](https://doi.org/10.3390/journalmedia6030129).
- [19] Naidonova, L.A. (2013). *Media psychology: Foundations of the reflexive approach*. Kirovohrad: Imeks-LTD.
- [20] Osmann, J., Page-Gould, E., Inbar, Y., Dvorkin, J., Walmsley, D., & Feinstein, A. (2024). Validation of the Toronto Moral Injury Scale for Journalists. *Traumatology*, 30(2), 133-142. doi: [10.1037/trm0000409](https://doi.org/10.1037/trm0000409).
- [21] Seely, N. (2019). Journalists and mental health: The psychological toll of covering everyday trauma. *Newspaper Research Journal*, 40(2), 239-259. doi: [10.1177/0739532919835612](https://doi.org/10.1177/0739532919835612).
- [22] Siddiqua, A., & Iqbal, M.Z. (2026). Journalists and exposure to trauma: Exploring perceptions of PTSD and resilience among Pakistan's conflict reporters. *Journalism Practice*, 20(1), 58-73. doi: [10.1080/17512786.2024.2317827](https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2024.2317827).
- [23] Tait, S. (2011). Bearing witness, journalism and moral responsibility. *Media, Culture & Society*, 33(8), 1220-1235. doi: [10.1177/0163443711422460](https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443711422460).
- [24] Tedeschi, R.G., & Calhoun, L.G. (1996). The posttraumatic growth inventory: Measuring the positive legacy of trauma. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 9(3), 455-471. doi: [10.1007/BF02103658](https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02103658).
- [25] Tedeschi, R.G., & Calhoun, L.G. (2004). Posttraumatic growth: Conceptual foundations and empirical evidence. *Psychological Inquiry*, 15(1), 1-18. doi: [10.1207/s15327965pli1501_01](https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327965pli1501_01).
- [26] Thomson, T.J. (2021). Mapping the emotional labor and work of visual journalism. *Journalism*, 22(3), 655-672. doi: [10.1177/1464884918799227](https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884918799227).
- [27] van Deurzen, E. (2012). *Existential counselling & psychotherapy in practice*. London: SAGE Publications.
- [28] Węglińska, A., Seklecka, A., Peszyński, W., & Węgliński, B. (2024). Transformation of a war journalist profession: The case of the full-scale Russo-Ukrainian conflict. *Media, War & Conflict*, 19(1), 251-268. doi: [10.1177/17506352241307013](https://doi.org/10.1177/17506352241307013).
- [29] Williams, S., & Cartwright, T. (2021). Post-traumatic stress, personal risk and post-traumatic growth among UK journalists. *European Journal of Psychotraumatology*, 12(1), article number 1881727. doi: [10.1080/20008198.2021.1881727](https://doi.org/10.1080/20008198.2021.1881727).
- [30] Xiong, Y., & Liao, S. (2024). Thriving after trauma in emotional livelihood journalism in China: Vicarious exposure to trauma and vicarious post-traumatic growth among journalists. *Journalism*, 25(6), 1401-1421. doi: [10.1177/14648849231183513](https://doi.org/10.1177/14648849231183513).
- [31] Yalom, I.D. (1980). *Existential psychotherapy*. New York: Basic Books.
- [32] Zasiiekina, L., & Martyniuk, A. (2025). War-related continuous traumatic stress as a potential mediator of associations between moral distress and professional quality of life in nurses: A cross-sectional study in Ukraine. *BMC Nursing*, 24, article number 16. doi: [10.1186/s12912-024-02668-4](https://doi.org/10.1186/s12912-024-02668-4).
- [33] Zasiiekina, L., Duchyminska, T., Bifulco, A., & Bignardi, G. (2024). War trauma impacts in Ukrainian combat and civilian populations: Moral injury and associated mental health symptoms. *Military Psychology*, 36(5), 555-566. doi: [10.1080/08995605.2023.2235256](https://doi.org/10.1080/08995605.2023.2235256).

Журналіст як свідок: екзистенційний вимір професійної діяльності в умовах війни

Ольга Ярко

Аспірант

Державний торговельно-економічний університет

02156, вул. Кіото, 19, м. Київ, Україна

<https://orcid.org/0009-0001-0786-929X>

Анотація. П'ятий рік повномасштабної війни Росії проти України поставив перед журналістами екзистенційні виклики, що виходять за межі класичних клініко-психологічних моделей: медійники щодня балансують між фіксацією людського страждання та збереженням власної особистісної цілісності. Наявні дослідження зосереджені переважно на патологічних наслідках травматичної експозиції, тоді як екзистенційний вимір – переживання сенсу, відповідальності, провини вижилого та трансформації картини світу – залишається систематично недослідженим. Мета статті полягала у теоретичному обґрунтуванні екзистенційного виміру журналістської діяльності в умовах збройного конфлікту через зіставлення філософських концепцій свідчення з емпіричними даними щодо психологічного стану медійних працівників. Дослідження мало теоретичний дизайн та було реалізоване шляхом критичного аналізу і концептуального синтезу рецензованих наукових джерел із баз Scopus, Web of Science та PubMed, а також ключових монографій з екзистенційної психології та філософії свідчення. Встановлено, що досвід журналіста-свідка актуалізує чотири екзистенційні модальності: зіткнення зі смертю як повсякденною реальністю фаху, що руйнує ілюзію власної невразливості; переживання провини вижилого, пов'язане з неможливістю допомогти тим, про кого повідомляєш; кризу сенсу, спричинену сумнівом у впливовості журналістської місії; та примусову самотність свідка, якому складно передати пережите людям поза професійним колом. Показано, що посттравматичне зростання у журналістів має виражений екзистенційний характер: домени «духовний розвиток» та «підвищення цінності життя» найчастіше актуалізуються саме за умови персонального ризику. Лонгitudні дані Інституту масової інформації за 2022-2025 роки верифікували запропоновану модель: зсув від гострої мобілізації через виснаження до прагматичної адаптації відтворює екзистенційну діалектику руйнування та реконструкції сенсу. Результати обґрунтували необхідність доповнення клінічних інтервенцій екзистенційно орієнтованими підходами, зокрема логотерапевтичними техніками та структурованою рефлексією місії свідчення, у програмах психологічної підтримки журналістів

Ключові слова: екзистенційна психологія; свідчення; сенсоутворення; провина вижилого; посттравматичне зростання; професійна ідентичність; журналісти у збройному конфлікті