

Wounded habitus and (symbolic) violence. Journalists, media fields and democratic fragility.

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Abstract: *Drawing on Bourdieu's theories of fields and symbolic power, this article analyses threats against Italian journalists as instances of symbolic violence inherent in the media landscape. Harassment is not just an isolated incident; it is a communicative mechanism that delegitimises journalistic authority and weakens professional autonomy.*

The study is based on a qualitative investigation that combined focus groups and photo-elicitation interviews with national and local journalists. The findings show that repeated digital hostility creates a climate of 'ambient intimidation', normalising fear and shaping the professional habitus towards caution, self-regulation and anticipatory compliance.

Visual narratives also reveal symbolic practices of resilience, through which journalists reaffirm their professional identity and sense of collective belonging. This article makes a contribution to the field of media sociology by demonstrating how contemporary struggles over truth, authority and visibility manifest themselves in the form of communicative violence targeting journalists.

Keywords: journalistic field; journalists' safety, online harassment, democracy, Bourdieu; Italy.

Introduction

In recent years, journalist safety has gained prominence in public and academic debates, intertwined with political polarisation, digital disinformation, and renewed European security concerns. Drawing on Bourdieu's sociology of media and symbolic power, this study interprets attacks on journalists not as isolated incidents but as forms of symbolic violence aimed at undermining journalistic authority and altering the balance of power within the field (Bourdieu 1998; 2005; Gerli 2024).

Such violence operates through processes of normalisation and misrecognition, particularly in polarised and digitally mediated environments, where online harassment, hate speech and physical intimidation increasingly overlap (Clark, Grech 2017; Lewis et al. 2020).

These behaviours produce a climate of "ambient intimidation" in which hostility is normalised and internalised as part of professional practice, reshaping the journalistic habitus towards caution, self-regulation, and anticipatory compliance (Lee et al. 2023).

In Italy, investigative journalism faces additional pressures due to hybrid media systems and politicised public discourse. To explore how journalists experience and interpret these threats, this study combines focus groups and photo-elicitation. Integrating these methods, the study contributes to literature on media violence and journalistic professionalism (Pauwels 2015), offering insights into the vulnerability of journalists and their practices of resilience, solidarity, and symbolic resistance.

It further highlights journalism's role in mediating conflict and sustaining democratic communication in an era marked by hostility, fear, and fragmented public discourse.

1. Against journalists?

From the perspective of Bourdieu's field theory, growing hostility towards journalists can be interpreted as a struggle for symbolic capital within the journalistic field (Gerli 2024). Traditionally, journalism derives its authority from its ability to define what counts as relevant, credible and legitimate information.

In contexts characterised by political polarisation and platform-driven disintermediation, this authority is increasingly challenged by political actors, digital counterpublics and algorithmic logics operating according to alternative principles of legitimacy¹.

Attacks on journalists therefore weaken the autonomy of the journalistic field by exposing it to external pressures and reshaping its internal hierarchies. Delegitimisation campaigns, threats and harassment operate not only at the level of individual reporters but also at the level of the field itself, challenging journalism's role as a mediator of public reality.

Symbolic violence affects journalists differently according to their position within

¹ The concept of "digital counterpublics" refers to communicative spaces and communities that develop outside or in opposition to mainstream media and institutions, producing and circulating alternative interpretations of political and social reality. In digital environments, these counterpublics frequently emerge via social media platforms, online communities and participatory media practices, challenging the epistemic authority and legitimacy traditionally associated with professional journalism. Such spaces can encourage oppositional discourse, alternative forms of expertise and a lack of trust in mainstream media institutions, particularly in contexts characterised by political polarisation and platformisation (Fraser 1990; Toepfl, Piwoni 2015).

the journalistic field. While highly visible reporters may benefit from greater institutional protection, they are also more exposed to public attacks. Conversely, local and freelance journalists often experience more personalised forms of intimidation. These unequal conditions shape perceptions of vulnerability and contribute to forms of anticipatory conformity and self-regulation within professional practice.

These differences reflect unequal distributions of symbolic capital, professional visibility and institutional protection within the journalistic field. Fear should therefore be understood as a socially differentiated disposition shaped by field relations and professional hierarchies (Bourdieu 1998; Carlson 2017; Waisbord 2019).

Recent reports by UNESCO, the Council of Europe and Ossigeno per l'Informazione document a growing incidence of threats and intimidation against journalists across Europe (UNESCO, 2023, 2024; Council of Europe, 2025). International scholarship increasingly interprets violence against journalists as a form of strategic and discursive power rather than simply a by-product of digitalisation. Lewis et al. (2020) show how online and offline aggression constitutes a systematic practice aimed at delegitimising the epistemic authority of the media.

As the traditional mediation between reality and public opinion weakens, journalists become more vulnerable to suspicion and public hostility in environments shaped by digital disintermediation (Peña-Fernández et al. 2020).

Such practices generate a chilling effect, encouraging self-censorship and shaping editorial choices, thereby influencing journalistic routines and professional autonomy (Ahmed 2004).

Clark and Grech (2017) link growing hostility towards journalists to the normalisation of aggressive political discourse and conflict-oriented communication, which increasingly frame journalists as legitimate targets of public contestation.

In Italy, these dynamics are reinforced by the historical intertwining of media and politics and by the fragmentation of the contemporary public sphere. Digital disintermediation and personalised information environments have facilitated the

emergence of antagonistic counterpublics that increasingly challenge journalistic legitimacy through identity-based narratives (Peña-Fernández et al. 2020; Bentivegna, Rega 2022; Rega 2025; Buoncompagni 2026a).

According to data from Ossigeno per l'Informazione, more than 500 journalists were subjected to threats, attacks or delegitimisation campaigns in Italy in 2024 alone.

The case of investigative journalist Sigfrido Ranucci illustrates how pressures against investigative journalism operate simultaneously at personal, professional and public levels. The individual journalist becomes the target of psychological and reputational aggression, while the attempt to silence him sends a broader message to the journalistic community, discouraging coverage of politically sensitive issues².

These developments have important implications for democracy. Waisbord (2019) argues that journalism increasingly operates within complex systems of informational power, while Mazzoleni (2020) highlights how political polarisation has weakened the media's capacity to facilitate pluralistic debate. European research further shows that journalists must navigate environments characterised by competing claims to truth, high levels of exposure and growing security concerns (Lewis et al. 2020; Rega 2025). These developments challenge journalism's democratic role and reinforce the need to protect journalists as a condition of media pluralism and democratic communication.

2. Methodological note

This paper adopts an interpretive qualitative research design aimed at investigating how Italian journalists perceive, interpret and represent threats, intimidation and aggression within their professional environment. The methodological approach is consistent with a Bourdieusian sociological perspective, which understands narratives, representations and everyday practices

² On the night between 16 and 17 October 2025, a serious bomb attack targeted Italian journalist Sigfrido Ranucci, presenter of Report, outside his home in Pomezia. The explosion, caused by approximately one kilo of TNT placed under the journalist's car, destroyed two vehicles (including his daughter's) and damaged the house. Fortunately, no one was injured, but investigators described the act as an extremely worrying "quantum leap" in intimidation tactics.

as expressions of dispositions shaped within a structured social field.

From this perspective, journalists' accounts are analysed not merely as individual testimonies but as manifestations of a professional habitus formed within the journalistic field and reshaped by contemporary forms of symbolic violence.

Within a media environment increasingly characterised by polarisation, discursive hostility and declining trust in journalism, this interpretive orientation makes it possible to analyse threats not simply as isolated events but as socially embedded processes affecting professional identities, emotional dispositions and everyday journalistic practices. Following the qualitative traditions outlined by Silverman (2021) and Flick (2018), the study focuses on the meanings participants attribute to their experiences and on the ways in which these experiences are collectively interpreted, negotiated and incorporated into professional routines.

The research was conducted between October 2025 and March 2026 as part of a series of academic and training sessions on journalistic culture and digital transformation for Italian journalists in the Marche region (Italy).

Twenty-six Italian journalists (15 men and 11 women), aged between 37 and 63, participated in the study. The sample included professionals working in national (6), local (16) and freelance media (4). Participants were purposively selected through professional networks and snowball sampling on the basis of their direct or contextual experience with threats and intimidation in the Italian media environment.

Data collection relied on two complementary qualitative methods: focus groups and photo elicitation interviews, employed jointly to capture the discursive, emotional and symbolic dimensions of the phenomenon. The two techniques served different but interrelated analytical purposes. Focus groups were designed to explore the collective construction of meaning within the professional community, allowing participants to discuss shared experiences, negotiate interpretations and reflect on the broader communicative climate surrounding journalism.

Photo elicitation interviews, by contrast, aimed to access the more affective and experiential dimensions of the experience of threat, enabling participants to articulate perceptions and emotions that might remain implicit in purely verbal

discussions.

Four focus groups involving five to seven participants each were conducted using a semi-structured protocol. Discussions explored experiences of threats, perceptions of the communication climate, emotional consequences and coping strategies.

Ten photo-elicitation interviews were also conducted (Harper 2002; Pink 2013). Participants selected three images representing threat, protection/resistance and journalism under attack. The images served as prompts for discussion and were analysed together with interview transcripts as part of a multimodal dataset.

All materials were transcribed and analysed through inductive thematic analysis (Braun, Clarke 2021) using NVivo software. Methodological triangulation enabled the exploration of both collective and emotional dimensions of intimidation, highlighting its implications for professional identity, resilience and democratic communication.

While focus groups highlighted the social construction of fear and the dynamics of professional solidarity, photo elicitation explored the symbolic and emotional dimensions through which journalists interpret experiences of intimidation. Through this methodological triangulation, violence against journalists emerges not only as a question of security or press freedom, but also as a cultural phenomenon affecting professional identity, institutional trust and the quality of democratic life³.

3. Journalists' Voices. Analysis and discussion of the results

As previously mentioned, the following analysis adopts a qualitative approach to examining how Italian journalists experience, interpret and represent threats through discourse, visual perceptions and emotional responses. The research is based on an integrated methodology combining focus groups and photovoice in order to explore the discursive, symbolic and aesthetic dimensions of these

³ The research complied with the ethical guidelines of the Italian Sociological Association (AIS, 2023) and with GDPR regulations. All participants provided informed consent and were guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality. Names, publications and geographical references were replaced by pseudonyms, and all materials were stored in encrypted archives. The use of visual material was authorised individually by each participant.

experiences.

Focus groups conducted with journalists from different editorial and geographical contexts allow the analysis of the collective construction of meaning and shared perceptions of professional vulnerability. Through the presentation of images and screenshots related to digital threats and the media coverage of the Ranucci case, photo elicitation provides insight into the emotional and perceptual dimensions of violence, encouraging reflection on aspects that often remain implicit or difficult to articulate in public discourse

3.1 Focus groups

Analysis of focus groups revealed a pervasive sense of insecurity and delegitimation among contemporary Italian journalists. Rather than being an exceptional event, fear appears to be a constant presence, an ‘emotional background noise’ (Lee et al., 2023), that accompanies their daily reporting work. Participants described a constant tension between the ethical commitment of their profession and an increasing sense of vulnerability.

As two local reporters stated:

The threat no longer comes only from politicians or neighbourhood bosses, but from anyone, from an online comment or a post that goes viral (J, 10).

It’s not physical violence that’s most frightening, but widespread hatred and the knowledge that anything you say could be used against you (J, 24).

These comments align with the framework proposed by Lewis (2020) and Stoll et al. (2019). According to this framework, the transition from physical violence to digital intimidation signifies a structural change in professional risk, with significant implications for the editorial autonomy and psychological well-being of reporters.

The emergence of a climate of normalised hostility is intertwined with the growing political and social polarisation of the European context, particularly in the wake of the resurgence of war in Ukraine and other regional geopolitical crises.

Some participants emphasised that journalists are particularly vulnerable to hate speech and accusations of being internal traitors.

When you talk about war, rights or migration, they accuse you of propaganda. It's as if there's no longer any room for complexity (J, 5).

Sometimes I feel like people aren't responding to what we write, but to an idealised version of ourselves that circulates in their echo chamber. It's like talking to an avatar of yourself that you don't recognize (J, 16)

There are online communities that treat mainstream journalism as a single enemy. They don't distinguish between reporters, outlets or intentions (J, 4).

This perception aligns with the structural fragmentation of the digital public sphere, where algorithmically shaped micro-environments encourage the formation of counterpublics that view journalistic complexity as manipulation and nuance as bias.

For many participants, this meant addressing an audience that was not just sceptical, but part of interpretive communities that are antagonistic towards mainstream journalism and consider it to be inherently untrustworthy.

The emotional burden expressed in the focus groups thus reflects not only individual vulnerability, but also the changing relationship between journalists and an increasingly polarised public.

Törnberg and Chueri (2025) document a systemic deterioration in the quality of Western public discourse. In this environment, toxic political language can legitimise practices of symbolic violence and reduce the capacity of institutions to negotiate.

In this scenario, the journalist becomes a suspect mediator, caught between polarised public opinion and fragmented political power (Meyrowitz 1985).

A recurring theme in the focus groups is professional loneliness.

However, the focus groups also revealed that fear assumes differentiated forms depending on journalists' professional location and degree of exposure within the field. Participants working in national media organisations tended to describe fear primarily in terms of reputational attacks, coordinated online hostility and public delegitimation.

By contrast, local journalists more frequently referred to proximity-based intimidation, including pressure from local political actors, economic elites or socially embedded networks operating within everyday community relations.

Freelance and precarious journalists expressed an additional layer of vulnerability connected to economic insecurity and limited institutional protection. For these participants, fear was often associated not only with direct hostility but also with the risk of professional exclusion, loss of commissions or reputational isolation within fragile labour conditions. In this respect, emotional vulnerability appears closely intertwined with broader asymmetries of professional autonomy and symbolic capital within the journalistic field.

These differences suggest that fear operates through multiple sociological registers: as reputational exposure for highly visible journalists, as relational intimidation for locally embedded reporters, and as economic precariousness for freelance professionals. The internal heterogeneity of these experiences complicates any homogeneous understanding of journalistic vulnerability (Masullo Chen et al. 2020; Lewis et al 2020; Buoncompagni 2026b).

Newsrooms often appear incapable of collectively managing attacks, and institutional support is often perceived as either absent or slow to materialise:

They tell you not to respond, not to fuel hatred, but then you're left alone (J, 13).

Providing information is the only tool of freedom and expression with which to describe reality. Our work as reporters cannot be that of political negotiators, even when something goes wrong. Information is also cutting-edge (J, 8).

However, a form of implicit collective resilience also emerges in the informal support manifested through personal or digital networks:

We write to each other and keep an eye on each other, but you can't show fear in public (J, 17).

This attitude can be interpreted as a form of “silent resistance”, which enables professionals to maintain their symbolic dignity in the absence of institutional protection.

Self-censorship is a direct consequence of this.

Many participants admitted to avoiding certain topics or modifying the tone of their articles:

You don't stop writing, but you learn to write with caution (J, 14).

The problem today is that everything you publish attracts hate comments and makes you feel stalked, both on and off the platforms (J, 21).

Testimonies highlight that self-censorship is not necessarily an act of cowardice, but rather a professional habit. It is a wounded "sense of practicality": journalists learn to navigate digital hatred by anticipating algorithmic and social reactions. Symbolic violence is most effective here because it becomes normalised, transforming into a routine of self-reflective writing that limits the critical function of information before it can even begin.

These practices of caution and selective silence can be seen as a transformation of the journalistic habitus. When faced with persistent hostility, journalists develop an approach oriented towards risk avoidance, tonal moderation, and strategic withdrawal from controversial topics.

Rather than being imposed through formal constraints, these adjustments emerge through repeated exposure to symbolic violence and become part of everyday professional practice.

In this sense, self-censorship is not simply an ethical failure or an individual weakness, but a socially produced adaptation to an increasingly fearful environment.

As Bourdieu suggests, domination is most effective when it operates through the internalisation of limits, shaping what actors perceive as reasonable, acceptable and sayable.

This finding corroborates the research of Blanco-Herrero et al. (2023), which suggests that fear of backlash and delegitimation results in selective reduction of topics covered. This directly impacts information pluralism and consequently the quality of democratic public debate (Gans 2003; Mazzoleni 2020).

Overall, the journalists' accounts paint a picture of a profession riddled with ethical and emotional contradictions. The defence of press freedom coexists with the need for personal survival, and solidarity among colleagues coexists with internal competition. Meanwhile, the public mission coexists with the growing invisibility of those working in communities.

3.2 Photo- elicitation

The second phase of the research employed photo elicitation to delve into the symbolic and emotional significance of journalists' experiences. Following the focus groups, each participant was asked to select or produce a small set of images, contributing to a final selection of 10 representative items analyzed in this study (see Fig 1).

These images could be personal photographs, professional archive material (e.g. newsroom scenes, news events or protests) or photographs found online or on social media that the participants found "emotionally evocative" of their working conditions.

Each journalist presented and commented on their images. This resulted in a guided visual narrative process, with discussion based on the images rather than predefined questions.

As Harper (2002) argues, this approach shifts the focus of the interview from conceptual language to sensory experience, facilitating the emergence of implicit meanings, emotions, and forms of visual memory that are difficult to access through verbal language alone.

Photo elicitation was therefore conceived not as an illustrative exercise, but as a reflexive and relational device capable of revealing the symbolic significance of the relationship between journalists, their bodies and their threatened professional environments.

Three main macro-symbolic themes have repeatedly emerged in the sociological interpretation of images.

The first is the vulnerable body, depicted in images of hands clutching a telephone or screens displaying hate messages. Other images depict physical symptoms such as tremors, dark circles under the eyes, and hunched shoulders, conveying the fatigue and anxiety experienced by individuals working in hostile environments.

One journalist showed a photo of his hand in front of a screen displaying insults that he had received:

These fingers write, but they tremble; the threat enters the body (J, 2-PE_01).

This visual experience corroborates the observations of Ahmed (2004) and Pauwels (2015) on affective economies: fear circulates between bodies, media, and institutions, leaving a tangible imprint on professional gestures.

The visual approach enables us to understand what Bourdieu refers to as bodily hexis: the embodiment of habitus. Images of a repaired microphone or expressions of physical fatigue are not just metaphors; they are tangible evidence of how threat is deposited in the somatisation of fear. Vulnerability of the journalist's body mirrors the vulnerability of the field, with symbolic violence manifesting as a defensive physical posture that visibly signals the end of professional distance and the beginning of a constant state of alertness.

The second symbolic theme is that of the fragmented public sphere.

Many participants chose images of empty streets, silent squares, closed editorial office doors, or views from windows, as if the outside world had become a place to observe from a distance.

These photographs evoke a sense of isolation and exclusion, revealing the liminal nature of the journalistic role “between” observation and participation:

This empty newsroom represents what it feels like to work now, you're physically here, but you're socially nowhere. The public we used to talk to is elsewhere, scattered in different bubbles (J, 10 -PE_02)

I chose a screenshot of a closed Facebook group discussing my article. Hundreds of comments, none of them about what I actually wrote. They were reacting to each other, not to me (J, 4 - PE_07)

This photo of my laptop at night reflects the feeling of working in a 'private public'. The work is public, the risk is public, but the experience is very private and isolating (J, 8 - PE_07)

Such representations also mirror a media landscape characterised by competing publics and counterpublics, in which the presence of journalism in the public arena is no longer guaranteed.

The depictions of empty streets and closed newsrooms by participants symbolise the erosion of the shared civic space in which journalists once worked. Instead, journalists now navigate fragmented communication environments, where alternative discursive communities, often hostile to the press, construct parallel realities (Arcidiacono 2025).

Images therefore represent both physical and symbolic separation: the journalists are both present and estranged, they are observers of a society that no longer recognises them as key figures.

As a correspondent for a regional newspaper noted:

We report on others, but we are no longer among them. We are different (J, 3 - PE_04 / PE_09)

This imagery is relevant to Meyrowitz's (1985) theories, which suggest that the media create 'intermediate situations' in which the observer is simultaneously present and separate, visible and vulnerable.

The third set of images is connected to symbolic resilience. Despite the harshness of their stories, many journalists have depicted their profession using symbols of resistance and continuity, such as notebooks, well-used cameras, pens with broken nibs and microphones covered in plasters.

I kept it to remind myself that, despite everything, we carry on (J, 5 - PE_05).

These images demonstrate the emancipatory nature of visual language. As Pink (2013) emphasises, visual language not only represents experience, but also contributes to its affective reorganisation, transforming trauma into a narrative and vulnerability into a resource.

Overall, photo elicitation allowed us to observe the pre-discursive and relational dimensions of fear, revealing not only what journalists say, but also how they perceive themselves within their professional and social environments.

The image becomes a mediator of awareness and a space for mutual recognition:

We are forced into silence in public, but among our colleagues, there is a lot of whispered encouragement. We remind each other that not everyone out there is an enemy (J, 1 - PE_10).

I took a photo of a pen that had been repaired with tape. It's my way of saying that we are fragile, but we mend ourselves every day (J, 8 - PE_08)

As emerged in several interviews, looking at the images together had a cathartic

and communal value, offering participants the opportunity to process their experience outside the solitude of the newsroom.

The visual representations confirm and expand upon the focus group findings: violence and hate operate not only on an informational or political level but also penetrate the sensitive and symbolic sphere of journalistic work.

This redefines the boundaries between professional identity, the body, and public space.

Rather than being a sign of weakness, vulnerability emerges as a key sociological category through which to understand the contemporary state of journalism in Italy and, more broadly, in democratic systems in crisis (see Fig. 1). By combining discursive and visual data, we can paint a detailed sociological picture: violence against journalists is not just a matter of professional safety, but a political and cultural phenomenon that reflects the ongoing crisis of democratic mediation.

Fear is not just an individual emotion; it takes on a structural and collective dimension:

The hardest part is knowing that hostility is not random. It's systematic and predictable. You can sense when the next wave is approaching (J, 6 - PE_03 / PE_09).

Some days it feels like we live inside a theatre of permanent outrage. The audience wants a villain, and journalists fit the role (J, 5 - PE_01 / PE_04).

At the same time, the study suggests that fear is unevenly distributed across the journalistic field. The forms, intensity and consequences of intimidation vary according to journalists' positions, resources and degrees of institutional protection. Nationally visible journalists appear more exposed to symbolic delegitimation and orchestrated online hostility, whereas local and freelance reporters experience more direct forms of relational pressure and professional insecurity. This differentiated distribution of fear reflects broader inequalities within the field itself and highlights how symbolic violence operates through existing asymmetries of power, visibility and occupational stability.

Recognising this internal differentiation is sociologically relevant because it shows that vulnerability is not merely a generic condition of contemporary

journalism, but a stratified experience shaped by field position and unequal access to symbolic and institutional resources. The images and words of Italian journalists reveal a profession that operates on the margins of public recognition yet still manages to thrive. From this perspective, vulnerability becomes a critical lens through which to observe the country's democratic health.

Fig.1 Visual material collected through photo elicitation

<i>Image Code</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>Source</i>	<i>Symbolic Theme</i>	<i>Narrative Context</i>	<i>Sociological Interpretation</i>
PE_01	Personal photography (smartphone)	Taken by participant	Vulnerable body	Hand holding a phone displaying hate messages	The body as a 'site of inscription' of fear: the threat penetrates the ordinary professional gesture
PE_02	Professional archival photograph	Local newsroom	Fragmented public space	Empty newsroom, lights off, computers on	The newsroom as a 'non-place', symbolizing solitude and relational void in contemporary journalism.
PE_03	Online-sourced image	Web/social media	Vulnerable body	Face behind a mask labeled 'Press'	Visualization of lost identity and the need to hide for safety: the mask as a metaphor of invisibility.
PE_04	Newly produced photograph	Taken by participant	Fragmented public space	Empty Italian square at sunset	Isolation of the journalist from the social environment: distance between observer and observed.
PE_05	Personal archive photograph	News coverage	Vulnerable body / Resilience	Notebook beside a broken phone	Ambivalence between fragility and resistance: writing as a form of agency.
PE_06	Workplace photograph	National newsroom	Symbolic resilience	Broken microphone repaired with tape	Material reappropriation of professional identity: symbol of survival and 'repair'.
PE_07	Self-produced photograph	Domestic setting	Private/public overlap	Laptop on desk at night, dim light	The home as a new boundary of risk: the private sphere invaded by digital hate.
PE_08	Artistic image (open source)	Creative Commons	Symbolic resilience	Broken pen reassembled	Symbolic reworking of trauma, resilience as both aesthetic and ethical gesture.
PE_09	Personal photograph	Public event	Fragmented public space	Journalist observing a protest from behind a barrier	Metaphor of the liminal role: simultaneously inside and outside the social scene, both observer and target.
PE_10	Collective photograph	Taken during editorial meeting	Implicit solidarity	Hands of several colleagues overlapping on a table	Visualization of 'silent resistance': the group as a symbolic resource of cohesion and belonging.

Conclusion

Contemporary journalism operates in an environment of profound uncertainty, marked by eroding institutional mediation, growing digital hostility, and the normalisation of verbal and physical aggression.

In Italy, these trends follow broader European patterns (Clark, Grech 2017; Lewis et al. 2020) while showing unique features, including a hybrid media ecosystem,

weak institutional protection, and ambiguous relations between political actors and the press (Rega 2025).

Focus group participants described a complex interplay of fear, resignation, and resilience, balancing public service with self-protection. Many reported moderating language, avoiding topics, or withdrawing from online debates, reflecting Waisbord's (2019) "opacity of media governance". Threats and hate speech are now perceived as normal components of journalism.

These findings were reinforced by photo elicitation. Images evoked professional vulnerability, while gestures of repair and solidarity signalled ethical resistance. Visual narratives emphasise the physical aspect of professional identity, where "showing" is a political assertion of visibility (Pink 2013; Harper 2023).

Through visual and verbal testimony, journalists articulated experiences of violence while reaffirming professional dignity and collective belonging.

Violence against journalists, online and offline, is not merely an individual security issue but a marker of democratic fragility. In line with Ahmed (2004), fear functions as a disciplinary mechanism, reshaping what can be said and by whom. In polarised digital spaces, counterpublics transform distrust into shared narratives of resistance, normalising symbolic aggression.

Anticipatory self-censorship diminishes diversity and pluralism in the public sphere. Mobilising Bourdieu's concepts of symbolic violence, field, and habitus, the study frames hostility as a structural feature of media-power relations.

Everyday communicative practices reshape professional dispositions, weaken field autonomy, and normalise fear, amplified by platform dynamics and counterpublic mobilisation.

Fragmented institutional responses and informal support networks exacerbate journalists' isolation, particularly locally. Yet spaces of resistance emerge: journalists continue to create meaning and community, sharing experiences as collective negotiation and reaffirmation of professional ethics. Resilience appears as a communicative process rather than a static trait.

Democratically, these dynamics are critical.

Antagonistic media ecosystems undermine journalism's watchdog role and citizens' capacity for informed participation (Mazzoleni 2020). The Italian case

illustrates broader European challenges: restoring trust, mediation, and protection is crucial in systems shaped by disintermediation and emotional polarisation.

Participatory visual methods reveal affective and symbolic layers often missed by textual analysis. Overall, the study underscores the need for renewed sociological and civic engagement with journalism, recognising the emotional labour, ethical complexity, and democratic significance of those informing the public under threat.

Safeguarding journalists is a prerequisite for the survival of democratic discourse.

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