



Moral injury in journalists during armed conflict: Content and mechanisms

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◆ **Abstract.** Within the scope of this study, moral injury is defined as a concept describing psychological suffering caused not by fear for one's own life, but by the violation of fundamental moral beliefs and expectations. For journalists, moral injury is of particular significance, as their work is consistently bound up with ethical dilemmas that admit no clear-cut resolution: whether to document suffering or render assistance, whether to publish disturbing content or prevent audience retraumatisation, whether to expose sources or safeguard their safety. For Ukrainian journalists working in conditions of full-scale war, these dilemmas take on an existential character: the dual identity of professional observer and citizen of a country under armed attack creates an additional layer of moral conflict. The aim of the article was to conduct a theoretical analysis of the phenomenon of moral injury as a construct distinct from post-traumatic stress disorder, and to establish its relevance to journalism, particularly within the context of Ukrainian wartime experience. The study employed a theoretical design grounded in systematic analysis and synthesis of peer-reviewed scholarly sources from the Web of Science and Scopus databases. The classical moral injury model of B. Litz and the Toronto Moral Injury Scale for Journalists were analysed, along with empirical studies of moral injury among media professionals and longitudinal survey data from the Institute of Mass Information (2022-2025). It was established that moral injury differs fundamentally from post-traumatic stress disorder in terms of aetiology (violation of moral beliefs rather than life threat), emotional profile (guilt, shame, and anger rather than fear and hyperarousal), and formative mechanisms. Three categories of potentially morally injurious events specific to journalism were identified: the witness-helper dilemma, the truth-versus-protection conflict, and organisational betrayal. The validated Toronto Moral Injury Scale for Journalists provides the first standardised diagnostic instrument. The data demonstrated that access to psychological support is associated with lower moral injury scores

◆ **Keywords:** media activity; anxiety; adaptation; post-traumatic stress disorder; mental health

◆ Introduction

The conditions of protracted armed conflict substantially transform journalists' professional activity, intensifying psychological pressures and complicating ethical decision-making. Against this backdrop, the study of moral injury as a specific form of psychological suffering – one that remains insufficiently examined within the media environment – becomes particularly pressing. The psychological vulnerability of journalists engaged in covering armed conflicts is a subject of growing scholarly attention. I. Mohammed (2025), in a systematic review of 52 studies conducted between 2000 and 2024, confirmed the high prevalence

of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety among conflict reporters, whilst also documenting critical methodological heterogeneity in the existing data. In particular, differences in sampling, measurement instruments, and research time horizons complicate the comparability of findings and limit the scope for generalisation. G. Tyson & J. Wild (2021), having examined 120 British media professionals during the COVID-19 pandemic, found that 30% of journalists who systematically covered the pandemic exceeded the clinical threshold for PTSD as measured by the PTSD Checklist for Diagnostic and

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Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (PCL-5) – three times the rate among colleagues not engaged with this subject matter. S. Williams & T. Cartwright (2021), in a sample of 69 British journalists, identified a paradoxical coexistence of PTSD and post-traumatic growth: war correspondents demonstrated simultaneously the highest stress scores and the highest levels of personal growth.

Yet even within the negative dimension, there remains a substantial gap. The overwhelming majority of studies concentrate on fear-conditioned responses, whilst a growing body of evidence indicates that journalists encounter a qualitatively distinct type of psychological suffering – moral injury. N.A. Hall *et al.* (2022), having systematised data on moral injury across various professional contexts, confirmed that moral injury has independent pathways of influence on mental health, cannot be subsumed under PTSD, and requires separate diagnostic and therapeutic approaches. In adjacent fields – most notably military psychology – the phenomenon of moral injury has been studied considerably more thoroughly, yielding theoretical models, measurement instruments, and intervention approaches that have so far only been partially adapted for civilian professional groups. B.T. Litz & H.E. Walker (2025), in a summary review of the state of the science, documented a growth of over 4,000% in publications on this subject, with research since 2021 actively expanding to civilian professional groups: healthcare workers, police officers, emergency responders, and journalists. S.A. Houle *et al.* (2024), having conducted a systematic review and content analysis of existing moral injury scales, identified 13 different instruments across 104 studies, underscoring the critical need for population-specific measurement tools. Further development led to the creation of the Toronto Moral Injury Scale for Journalists (TMIS-J) – the first standardised instrument for identifying moral injury specifically within the media context (Osman *et al.*, 2024).

In Ukraine, these issues take on particular urgency. At the same time, data from IMI's annual survey... (2025) reveal a parallel process: many media professionals report the gradual development of adaptive strategies without any loss of professional capacity, whilst close social networks (the family, above all) increasingly function as a psychological anchor. For Ukrainian journalists, moral tensions are compounded by a dual role: they must simultaneously maintain professional impartiality whilst remaining citizens of a state resisting armed aggression. L. Zasiakina *et al.* (2023), having studied 1,249 Ukrainian civilians, recorded an extremely high prevalence of severe PTSD and moral injury, thereby establishing the context in which media professionals operate – a context in which they are at once researchers and those personally affected by the events of war.

Despite the growing scholarly interest in the psychological condition of media professionals, systematic analysis of moral injury as a construct distinct from PTSD in the journalistic context remains fragmented. Most reviews conflate moral injury with other negative outcomes, failing to

differentiate its unique aetiology and clinical presentation. This creates a risk of misdiagnosis and ineffective interventions, given that standard PTSD treatment protocols (notably prolonged exposure) may prove counterproductive in the case of moral injury, where the central problem is not fear but guilt and shame. The article aimed to provide a theoretical conceptualisation of moral injury as an independent construct distinct from PTSD, and to determine its significance for media activity, particularly within the context of Ukrainian wartime experience.

◆ Materials and Methods

The study employed a theoretical design and was conducted in the form of a critical literature review aimed at a comprehensive examination of the phenomenon of moral injury in journalism. The source base comprised peer-reviewed scholarly publications indexed in the international databases Web of Science, Scopus, and PubMed, as well as academic monographs, institutional analytical reports, and validated psychometric instruments. Among the key works that formed the theoretical foundation were the studies of I.L. McCann & L.A. Pearlman (1990), C.L.M. Keyes (2002), and N. Seely (2019). A systematic literature search was conducted using the keywords “moral injury in journalists”, “moral distress in media professionals”, “trauma associated with ethical dilemmas in journalism”, and “potentially morally injurious events in journalism”, covering the period from 2009 to 2026. The lower chronological boundary was determined by the seminal publication of B.T. Litz *et al.* (2009), which first formalised the construct of moral injury as an independent phenomenon. Additionally, foundational sources from adjacent disciplines were analysed: military psychology (moral injury in combatants), the psychology of helping professions (secondary traumatic stress, vicarious traumatisation), and media psychology (reflexive processing of traumatic content).

The inclusion criteria for sources were clearly defined: (a) the presence of empirical data or a developed theoretical model of moral injury; (b) direct or indirect relevance to the journalistic profession or related professions; (c) publication in a peer-reviewed outlet or a recognised institutional body; (d) availability of the text in English or Ukrainian. Sources in Russian were excluded owing to their potential ideological bias and limited relevance in the context of contemporary Ukrainian media practices. Additionally, non-academic materials (blogs, social media posts) were not considered, with the exception of official reports from authoritative monitoring organisations, specifically IMI survey: 58% of Ukrainian journalists... (2024) and IMI's annual survey... (2025). The analytical procedure comprised three sequential stages. The first stage entailed a comparative analysis of moral injury and post-traumatic stress disorder as distinct constructs, along the criteria of aetiology, emotional profile, formative mechanisms, and diagnostic features. The second stage involved the systematisation of empirical data on moral injury in journalists: the typology of potentially morally injurious events (PMIEs),

their prevalence, their relationship with other psychological outcomes, and existing measurement instruments. The third stage was devoted to an analysis of the Ukrainian context through the lens of the moral injury framework, drawing on the work of L.A. Naidonova (2013) and S. Arefnia (2025). This methodology allowed for a comprehensive examination of the specific characteristics of moral injury within the journalistic environment, the identification of conceptual gaps in existing research, and the establishment of a theoretical foundation for further empirical inquiry within the Ukrainian media landscape.

◆ Results and Discussion

Moral injury and PTSD are distinct, albeit correlationally related, constructs. B.T. Litz *et al.* (2009) defined moral injury as persistent suffering arising from perpetrating, failing to prevent, or witnessing acts that transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectations. The key distinction lies in the trigger: PTSD develops in response to a threat to life or physical integrity (Criterion A per American

Psychiatric Association (1994)), whereas moral injury develops in response to the violation of moral standards. The emotional picture also differs substantially. PTSD is characterised by fear, hyperarousal, intrusive recollections, and avoidance behaviour – the classical manifestations of a stress response. Moral injury, by contrast, presents through experiences of guilt, shame, anger, disgust, and bitter disillusionment – emotions signalling a conflict with the individual's core value system (Griffin *et al.*, 2019). This distinction is clinically decisive precisely in the context of journalism: an examination by A. Feinstein *et al.* (2018) of 80 media professionals engaged in covering the European migration crisis found that classical PTSD indicators were at low levels, whilst markers of moral injury and associated feelings of guilt proved clinically significant. This finding calls into question the sufficiency of standard PTSD screening tools for correctly identifying the primary source of psychological suffering in media workers. A systematised comparison of the two constructs is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Comparative characteristics of moral injury and PTSD

Comparison parameter	PTSD	Moral injury
Aetiological trigger	Threat to life or physical integrity	Violation of deeply held moral beliefs and expectations
Emotional profile	Fear, hyperarousal, intrusive recollections, avoidance behaviour	Guilt, shame, anger, disgust, disillusionment
Central mechanism	Fear conditioning; disruption of threat processing	Conflict with the individual's core value system; erosion of moral self-perception
Diagnostic instrument	PCL-5, IES-R (general)	TMIS-J (journalism-specific)
Effective interventions	Cognitive-behavioural therapy, EMDR, prolonged exposure	Adaptive Disclosure; moral repair strategy
Role of avoidance	Avoidance is a key predictor of symptoms	Guilt and shame are not amenable to avoidance strategies

Note: IES-R – Impact of Event Scale – Revised; EMDR – Eye Movement Desensitisation and Reprocessing

Source: developed by the author on the basis of data from B.T. Litz *et al.* (2009), R.J. Smith *et al.* (2018), B.J. Griffin *et al.* (2019)

Analysis of Table 1 demonstrates the qualitative dissimilarity of the two constructs: whereas PTSD develops primarily as a response to a threat to physical survival and is characterised by fear and hyperarousal, moral injury arises from a profound disruption of the individual's moral and value sphere, resulting in a predominance of guilt, shame, and erosion of moral self-perception. This distinction determines a different symptom trajectory, resistance to avoidance strategies, and the necessity of applying specialised therapeutic approaches oriented towards moral repair rather than fear desensitisation alone. J. Osmann *et al.* (2024), in developing the TMIS-J, conducted three focus groups with 39 journalists, identifying 15 PMIEs specific to media activity. Subsequent validation on a sample of 159 journalists confirmed the scale's three-factor structure with internal consistency coefficients ranging from satisfactory to excellent (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.86$). On the basis of the literature analysis, journalistic PMIEs can be systematised into three categories. The first category is the witness-helper dilemma: a journalist witnesses suffering and must choose between documenting the event (professional duty) and providing assistance (moral duty). The study of the migration crisis by A. Feinstein *et al.* (2018) demonstrated

that feelings of guilt over insufficient personal assistance to refugees, and shame regarding observed behaviour of others, were the most prevalent morally injurious responses. The second category is the truth-versus-protection conflict: a journalist is obliged to report the truth, yet is aware that publication may cause harm – to sources, victims, or their own audience. In conditions of wartime Ukraine, this conflict is sharpened by the need to balance the public's right to information against security constraints. The third category is organisational betrayal: a media professional sustains moral injury when their editorial body violates professional standards or withholds support. S. Dubberley *et al.* (2015), having analysed the experiences of 209 specialists in visual content verification, documented the prevalence of a corporate “tough it out or leave” norm – an organisational standard that effectively legitimises managerial emotional indifference.

The TMIS-J, presented by J. Osmann *et al.* (2024), is the first standardised instrument for detecting moral injury specifically within the media context. The initial pool of 15 items was reduced to 9 final items following exploratory factor analysis. These 9 items are rated on a five-point Likert scale (from 0 = “none” to 4 = “severe”), and the

scale has a three-factor structure. Convergent validity was confirmed by significant correlations with measures of depression (BDI-II), anxiety (BAI), and PTSD (PCL-5), demonstrating the relationship of moral injury with other psychological outcomes without the constructs being identical. The Moral Injury Events Scale (MIES) served as the point of departure for the development of the TMIS-J. Discriminant validity was confirmed by the absence of significant correlations with marital status and educational level. Empirical data from the aforementioned J. Osmann *et al.* (2021) confirmed that access to organisational psychological support is associated with lower scores of depression, PTSD, and moral injury. This finding has fundamental practical significance: journalist support programmes must address moral injury as a distinct intervention target.

Within the Ukrainian context, the need for a comprehensive analysis of moral injury through the lens of the full-scale war experience becomes acutely pressing. Monitoring conducted by the Institute of Mass Information over the period 2022-2025 provides grounds for interpreting the Ukrainian situation in terms of moral injury. According to IMI survey: 58% of Ukrainian journalists... (2024), the majority of media workers report a negative trajectory in their own psycho-emotional state under the influence of wartime circumstances. In parallel, a significant proportion of respondents record the development of individual adaptation strategies without loss of professional capacity, with close family networks consistently maintaining their role as the principal stabilising resource (IMI's annual survey..., 2025). For Ukrainian journalists, at least four specific sources of moral injury can be identified that have no analogues in the international literature. First, the dual-loyalty dilemma: as a citizen, the journalist feels a moral obligation to contribute to the country's defence, whilst professional standards require balanced coverage. Second, witnessing the deaths of colleagues and sources – a direct moral blow that far exceeds in intensity the indirect contact with trauma. R.J. Smith *et al.* (2018) demonstrated that avoidance is the key predictor of PTSD among media professionals; however, unlike PTSD, moral injury does not yield to avoidance – guilt and shame persist regardless of contact with the stressor. Third, the necessity of transmitting images of destruction and human casualties to inform the international community – despite an awareness that this very content retraumatizes Ukrainian audiences. The so-called “witness fatigue” – a gradual erosion of the capacity to respond emotionally to human suffering, which the journalist themselves perceives as moral degradation rather than an adaptive protective mechanism – constitutes an additional source of injury. Research by K. Backholm & K. Björkqvist (2010) on a sample of 503 Finnish reporters further demonstrated that a personal history of trauma amplifies vulnerability to professional stressors – a fact of critical weight for Ukrainian media professionals who are themselves among the victims of the war.

Moral injury does not function in isolation, but rather in complex interaction with other psychological consequences

of professional activity. C.L.M. Keyes (2002), drawing on empirical data, substantiated a dual-continuum model of mental health, according to which positive functioning and psychopathology constitute separate, though related, dimensions. In terms of moral injury, this means that a journalist may simultaneously experience a profound value conflict and maintain meaningful professional functioning. T. Idås *et al.* (2019), having studied 375 Norwegian media professionals who worked during the Utøya terrorist attack, empirically confirmed this two-dimensionality: social support simultaneously reduced PTSD symptoms and catalysed post-traumatic growth. The Professional Quality of Life Scale (ProQOL), which B.H. Stamm (2010) developed on the basis of C.R. Figley's (1995) theory of compassion fatigue, complemented this view through the concept of compassion satisfaction – a positive experience generated by a sense of professional participation in a socially significant mission. In the journalistic context, an awareness of the importance of one's own work may serve as a buffer against moral injury, partially neutralising the pain of unavoidable ethical compromises. L.A. Naidonova (2013), having developed a reflexive approach in media psychology, proposed a theoretical foundation for understanding how deliberate engagement with morally laden content can counteract the destructive impact of moral injury. S. Arefnia (2025), in a sample of Ukrainian internally displaced women, confirmed that resilience is the strongest predictor of subjective well-being ($\beta = 0.693$; $R^2 = 0.70$), with the protective effect of this resource intensifying as stress load increases – affording grounds to hypothesise an analogous pattern among media professionals. K.M. Connor & J.R.T. Davidson (2003) developed the resilience scale (CD-RISC), which allows for a quantitative assessment of an individual's capacity to withstand stress – a resource that, in the context of journalists' moral injury, requires separate empirical investigation. On the basis of the theoretical analysis, a number of applied recommendations are formulated, aimed at the prevention and mitigation of the consequences of moral injury among journalists:

- 1) to introduce regular screening for moral injury using the validated TMIS-J instrument as a mandatory element of journalist psychological support programmes. This will enable the early identification of morally injured workers and their timely referral to specialist assistance;

- 2) to clearly differentiate therapeutic interventions for moral injury and PTSD. Standard PTSD treatment protocols, including prolonged exposure therapy, may be ineffective or even counterproductive in addressing moral injury, as they may intensify feelings of guilt and shame. Priority should instead be given to approaches oriented towards moral repair (Adaptive Disclosure and similar methods);

- 3) to foster within editorial offices and media organisations a culture of acknowledgement and open support, which will serve as an important organisational buffer against moral injury. Regular recognition of the ethical dilemmas faced by journalists, and normalisation of discussion

around moral conflicts, substantially reduce feelings of isolation and self-blame.

Access to timely and professional psychological assistance is one of the most significant moderators of the development and severity of moral injury within the journalistic environment. At the same time, it must be emphasised that the available data reveal a substantial discrepancy between the need for such support and its actual availability: most media organisations still lack institutionalised protocols for addressing moral injury, leaving journalists to confront feelings of guilt and shame in isolation. The findings demonstrated that moral injury is a construct distinct from PTSD, with its own aetiology, emotional profile, and formative mechanisms, and holds direct relevance for journalism. This position is consistent with that of B.J. Griffin *et al.* (2019), whose analysis of 116 studies on moral injury confirmed its independent clinical status within the military psychology context, whilst the data of J.M. Currier *et al.* (2015) extended this conclusion to journalism. Comparison of the present study's findings with those of other research teams reveals both significant points of convergence and important conceptual divergences. This analysis develops the finding of N. Seely (2019) regarding the dose-dependent relationship between the intensity of traumatic exposure and psychological outcomes in 254 American media professionals, adding a substantive qualification: in the case of moral injury, what is determinative is not the number of contacts with the stressor, but rather its moral and ethical weight. A. Henderson *et al.* (2025) established a mutually reinforcing effect of personal and professional traumatisation. The present study confirmed that, in the case of moral injury, this interaction may be even more pronounced, given that moral convictions are rooted precisely in biographical experience. S.E. Hobfoll's (1989) conservation of resources theory predicted a cascading depletion of resources under chronic stress. In accordance with the present findings, moral injury may function as a specific trigger for such a cascade, steadily undermining the individual's value foundation.

In turn, the data of T.J. Usset *et al.* (2020) on the TMIS-J demonstrated convergence with PTSD and depression scores, which is consistent with the conclusion that moral injury is correlationally, but not identically, related to other disorders. V. Williamson *et al.* (2018), having conducted a meta-analytic assessment of the relationship between moral injury and mental health in occupational contexts ($k = 13$, $N = 6,373$), also established statistically significant associations with PTSD, depression, and suicidal ideation, with journalists among the populations studied. Comparison with the military context in C. Adams (2018) revealed both common features (guilt and shame as central emotions) and substantial differences: unlike combatants, journalists are not direct participants in violence; however, their injury arises from the inability or impossibility of acting in accordance with moral convictions in the position of witness. Thus, this study expanded the understanding of journalists' moral injury as a psychological construct

distinct from PTSD, systematising the relevant scholarly evidence within the Ukrainian context.

◆ Conclusions

The theoretical analysis conducted demonstrated that moral injury is a construct distinct from PTSD, with an independent aetiology (violation of moral beliefs rather than a threat to life), emotional profile (guilt, shame, and anger rather than fear and hyperarousal), and formative mechanisms. Moral injury holds particular significance for journalism through three categories of PMIEs: the witness-helper dilemma, the truth-versus-protection conflict, and organisational betrayal. It is underscored that the TMIS-J provides the first validated diagnostic instrument, and that the scale's three-factor structure (organisational-managerial, public reaction, and witnessing) directly reflects the specific character of journalistic moral dilemmas. Four additional sources of moral injury, specific to the wartime context and to the dual identity of Ukrainian journalists, were identified: the loyalty dilemma (observer versus citizen), witnessing the deaths of colleagues, the necessity of transmitting traumatic content to international audiences, and "witness fatigue" as a subjective experience of moral degradation. These factors determine a higher risk of moral traumatisation compared with peacetime media contexts. The findings underscored the pressing need to transition from generic PTSD-oriented programmes towards specialised interventions that take account of the moral dimension of journalists' suffering. The introduction of screening using the TMIS-J, the development of an organisational culture of acknowledgement, and the availability of professional psychological assistance are the key practical measures for preserving the mental health of media professionals. Thus, the study expanded the theoretical understanding of moral injury in journalism, confirmed its particular significance in wartime conditions, and proposed a conceptual foundation for the creation of effective psychological support systems in conditions of full-scale war. Future research should provide for the translation and cross-cultural adaptation of the TMIS-J for the Ukrainian media community, as well as its empirical validation on a representative sample of journalists and other media professionals. This will allow for an assessment of the instrument's psychometric characteristics in the national context, verification of its convergent and discriminant validity, and an examination of the specific character of moral injury among professionals working in zones of armed conflict.

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Моральна травма журналістів в умовах збройного конфлікту: зміст і механізми

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♦ **Анотація.** В межах цього дослідження моральну травму визначено як поняття, що описує психологічне страждання, спричинене не страхом за власне життя, а порушенням базових моральних переконань і очікувань. Для журналістів моральна травма має особливе значення, адже їхня діяльність постійно пов'язана з етичними дилемами без однозначного вибору: фіксувати страждання чи допомагати, публікувати шокуючий контент чи запобігати ретравматизації аудиторії, розкривати джерела чи захищати їхню безпеку. Для українських журналістів, які працюють в умовах повномасштабної війни, ці дилеми набувають екзистенційного характеру: подвійна ідентичність – професійного спостерігача та громадянина країни, що обороняється, – створює додатковий шар морального конфлікту. Метою статті було здійснити теоретичний аналіз феномену моральної травми як окремого від посттравматичного стресового розладу конструкту та обґрунтувати його релевантність для журналістики, зокрема в контексті українського воєнного досвіду. Дослідження мало теоретичний дизайн і ґрунтувалося на систематичному аналізі та синтезі рецензованих наукових джерел із баз даних Web of Science та Scopus. Проаналізовано класичну модель моральної травми Б. Ліца і Торонтську шкалу моральної травми для журналістів, емпіричні дослідження моральної травми серед медійників та дані лонгітюдних опитувань Інституту масової інформації (2022-2025 роки). Встановлено, що моральна травма принципово відрізняється від посттравматичного стресового розладу за етіологією (порушення моральних переконань замість загрози для життя), емоційним профілем (провина, сором, гнів замість страху та гіперзбудження) та механізмами формування. Ідентифіковано три категорії потенційно морально травмуючих подій, специфічних для журналістики: дилеми «свідок – допомагач», конфлікт між правдою та захистом, організаційне зрадництво. Валідована Торонтська шкала моральної травми для журналістів забезпечує перший стандартизований інструмент діагностики. Дані засвідчили, що доступ до психологічної підтримки асоціюється з нижчими показниками моральної травми

♦ **Ключові слова:** медійна діяльність; тривожність; адаптація; посттравматичний стресовий розлад; ментальне здоров'я