

Resilience as a Structural Condition: Mental Health and Safety Challenges in Watchdog Science Journalism

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Abstract

This article examines resilience and mental health as structural conditions shaping journalists' ability to perform a watchdog role in science-related domains. Based on 12 semi-structured interviews with Romanian investigative journalists, the study shows that watchdog science journalism operates in a fragile environment marked by institutional obstruction, financial precarity, harassment, and emotional strain. These pressures are particularly visible in investigations involving public health, environmental issues, and academic integrity, where journalists must deal with restricted access to information, expert authority, and public hostility. Participants describe burnout, anxiety, moral distress, and difficulties in sustaining long-term investigations without institutional support. Although they rely on coping strategies such as therapy, peer support, digital security practices, and professional networks, these mechanisms offer only partial protection. The article argues that resilience should not be understood only as an individual capacity, but as a structural requirement for sustaining watchdog science journalism. Understanding the conditions that undermine journalists' mental health, safety, and autonomy is essential for assessing the democratic value of their watchdog function.

Keywords

harassment; investigative journalism; mental health; resilience; structural vulnerability; watchdog science journalism

1. Introduction

In recent years, Romanian journalists, particularly in independent media, have increasingly investigated issues involving scientific expertise, including public health, environmental issues, and academic integrity. Journalistic investigations into plagiarism among political and institutional elites have exposed weaknesses

in academic integrity within the Romanian science system (Abbott, 2012) and have become a prominent area of investigative journalism in Romania. One of the cases that brought significant international attention to these issues was the plagiarism scandal involving Romanian Prime Minister Victor Ponta, which was investigated and publicly exposed by journalists and reported by *Nature* in 2012 (Schiermeier, 2012). More broadly, the issue of plagiarized doctoral theses among political elites has since been widely documented in national and international media (Gross, 2024; Lloyd, 2022; Lupu, 2024; Popoveniuc, 2025; “Romanian education minister resigns,” 2022; Stipiuc, 2024). Beyond academic integrity, investigative journalism has increasingly expanded to other domains where scientific expertise intersects with public accountability. The Covid-19 pandemic highlighted the challenges of communicating reliable scientific information in a polarized informational environment (Hart et al., 2020; Mureșan et al., 2021; Mureșan & Sălcudean, 2023; Sălcudean, 2022; Stănescu, 2020). During the pandemic, misinformation about vaccines and medical treatments circulated widely and was associated with vaccine hesitancy and growing distrust in experts and public institutions (Dascălu et al., 2021; Nistor, 2021; Stein, Omata, & Broker, 2021; Stein, Omata, Pachtman Shetty, et al., 2021). At the same time, the crisis exposed and intensified structural limitations in science-related reporting. Environmental controversies have similarly drawn increased media attention in Romania, particularly in relation to sustainability, conservation, and environmental reporting (Sălcudean, 2021; Sălcudean et al., 2024). These are just some examples that illustrate a broader area of journalistic practice focused on questioning institutions and actors operating in science-related fields.

In Romania, there are no media outlets dedicated specifically to watchdog science journalism. Science-related topics are typically covered by investigative journalists working on health, education, environmental issues, or public policy. Specialized science journalism remains limited. In this context, watchdog science journalism tends to emerge when science-related issues become part of broader investigative reporting rather than as a distinct professional specialization. In this article, watchdog science journalism refers to investigative reporting that examines actors and institutions operating in domains where scientific expertise plays a central role. In Romania, investigative journalism has developed as an important watchdog practice, although its capacity has been shaped by economic and institutional constraints (Petre & Jacotă, 2021; Stetka & Örnebring, 2013). In the absence of specialized science journalism, science-related watchdog reporting is often carried out by investigative journalists. Romania’s media landscape includes both traditional media institutions and a growing sector of independent outlets. Investigative journalism operates within a fragmented and relatively small professional ecosystem. Independent media outlets such as *Recorder*, *Snoop*, *Context*, *PressOne*, *Public Record*, *Info Sud-Est*, and *Átlátszó Erdély*, a Hungarian-language investigative outlet, often work with small teams on complex investigations. More broadly, the Romanian investigative media ecosystem is marked by financial fragility, a politically sensitive environment, limited institutional support, and reliance on project-based funding.

Similar dynamics have been documented in several Central and Eastern European media systems where fragile institutional environments limit the capacity of journalism to fully perform its watchdog role (Gerli et al., 2018). These challenges become particularly significant in the context of watchdog science journalism, where journalists investigate actors and institutions that possess significant epistemic authority, including universities, research institutes, public health agencies, and environmental authorities. International literature shows that reporting in science-related domains involves asymmetries of expertise, technical complexity, dependence on expert interpretation, and institutional barriers to accessing scientific information (Goodell, 1979, 1987; Peters, 2022). Recent studies distinguish between science journalism and

watchdog science journalism, arguing that the latter plays a crucial role in public accountability (Nguyen, 2024). Broader scholarship also highlights the epistemic demands of science-related reporting (Fleerackers et al., 2024). For this reason, this article focuses on investigative journalists who engage with science-related topics, rather than on specialized science journalists.

Research on investigative journalism in science-related domains remains limited, as most studies do not address the specific challenges of reporting on science. This gap is important because these challenges affect not only working conditions, but also the sustainability of watchdog journalism in areas where scientific expertise has significant societal consequences. Studies on journalists' mental health indicate high levels of burnout, anxiety, and exposure to trauma, particularly among investigative reporters and journalists covering crises (de Jong & Kotišová, 2025; Newman et al., 2022; Reinardy et al., 2021; "Training for journalists," 2025). Understanding the conditions under which journalists operate is therefore essential not only for assessing individual well-being, but also for understanding how these conditions affect informed public debate. This study examines how resilience, mental health, and professional safety function as structural conditions shaping watchdog science journalism. Based on semi-structured interviews with Romanian investigative journalists who have reported on topics such as public health, environmental issues, and academic integrity, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do investigative journalists evaluate and describe their working conditions when reporting on science-related topics?
2. How do these conditions affect journalists' mental health and their ability to perform a watchdog role?
3. What individual and collective coping mechanisms do journalists use in this context?

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Watchdog Science Journalism

Scholars have devoted significant attention to the roles journalists perform in democratic societies (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2018; Mellado & Lagos, 2014; Wang & Li, 2024). Among these, the watchdog role is widely seen as a core function. It involves monitoring those in power and exposing abuses or institutional failures to ensure public accountability (Miller, 2006; Waisbord, 2002). In studies of journalistic role performance, it is typically contrasted with the loyal-facilitator role, although studies show that these roles often coexist in practice (Mellado & Lagos, 2014; Wang & Li, 2024). Recent research also suggests that the performance of watchdog journalism depends less on levels of press freedom than on organizational and professional conditions (Hamada & Abdel-Salam, 2025).

In practice, the watchdog role is most often enacted through investigative reporting, which focuses on uncovering wrongdoing and holding institutions accountable (de Burgh, 2008; Ettema & Glasser, 1998). Although some studies indicate a decline in watchdog functions during the pandemic (Hallin et al., 2023; Hart et al., 2020), investigative journalism continues to perform this role in domains involving scientific expertise.

Science journalism is commonly defined as the mediation of scientific knowledge for the public (Secko et al., 2013), but it can also involve scrutinizing how scientific institutions operate. Watchdog science journalism

refers to investigative reporting in domains where scientific authority plays a central role, such as public health, environmental governance, or academia (Nguyen, 2024). This form of journalism requires engaging with specialized knowledge, interpreting complex data, and evaluating competing claims, often under conditions of epistemic asymmetry (Fleerackers et al., 2024; Peters, 2022). The Covid-19 pandemic further highlighted this function, as journalists were required not only to communicate scientific information but also to verify medical claims and challenge misinformation (Hart et al., 2020).

2.2. Structural Constraints, Risk, and Resilience

Research on science and investigative journalism highlights several constraints that affect journalists' ability to perform watchdog reporting. Because institutions play a central role in mediating access to science-related information (Peters, 2022), restrictions in transparency can become a significant obstacle for watchdog reporting. Access to official information may be slow or obstructed, while freedom-of-information legislation is not always applied consistently. Science-related fields are also shaped by political and economic interests, which can generate additional pressure on journalists investigating institutional failures or conflicts of interest (Waisbord, 2002).

These dynamics can be understood within a broader science communication ecosystem, in which journalists, scientists, policymakers, and media organizations interact under conditions shaped by institutional transparency, power relations, and resource distribution (Fischer et al., 2025). In the Romanian context, these pressures are intensified by the fragmentation of the media system, the financial fragility of independent outlets, and sometimes limited institutional support for investigative journalism, particularly in science-related domains.

These structural constraints are accompanied by growing levels of harassment and professional risk. International organizations document increasing levels of online hostility, coordinated attacks, and strategic lawsuits targeting investigative journalists, particularly when reporting on polarized topics (International Press Institute, 2026; UNESCO, 2024). In this context, journalists' psychological strain can be understood as an outcome of systemic pressures operating within the broader science communication ecosystem. In science-related investigations, such pressures may be reinforced by the epistemic authority of institutions, which can limit access to information and shape interactions with sources.

The cumulative effects of these pressures can have significant psychological consequences. Journalists exposed to sustained professional stress may experience burnout, anxiety, or emotional exhaustion (Newman et al., 2022; Reinardy et al., 2021). Recent scholarship emphasizes that resilience in journalism should not be understood solely as an individual psychological capacity but also as a collective process shaped by organizational resources, professional networks, and institutional contexts (Herrera Damas & Valero-Pastor, 2026; Relly & Waisbord, 2022).

3. Data and Method

This study is based on 12 semi-structured interviews with Romanian investigative journalists who have reported on topics involving scientific expertise, including health, environment, education, and academic integrity. Participants work in independent local and national newsrooms, as well as generalist media

organizations, typically in small teams without dedicated science desks, where such investigations are integrated into broader reporting agendas. The sample includes journalists from different organizations and career stages (five women, seven men, aged 26–65). Some have experience in larger media organizations. All participants have backgrounds in journalism or related fields, and some reported additional training in science-related topics.

Participants were selected based on their investigative reporting experience in science-related areas. Relevant cases were identified through published investigations and the author's knowledge of the Romanian journalism field. Additional participants were identified through recommendations from journalists and other media professionals, resulting in a limited snowball component. Mental health was not a selection criterion. Interviews were conducted between September 2025 and February 2026, online or in person, and lasted approximately 90 minutes. All participants were anonymized (J1–J12) and required to sign an informed consent form prior to participation. The interview guide covered four areas: structural constraints, professional risk, psychological impact, and coping mechanisms. Interviews were open-ended, allowing participants to describe their experiences in detail. The sample size reflects the relatively small professional community of investigative journalists working on science-related topics in Romania and was sufficient to identify recurring themes relevant to the research questions. The full interview guide is included in the Supplementary File.

3.1. Data Analysis

The interview data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021). The analysis was conducted by the author through an iterative process involving repeated reading of the transcripts and the identification of patterns relevant to the research questions. Coding was conducted manually and combined deductive and inductive approaches. Initial thematic areas were derived from the interview guide, while additional codes were developed from the data. The final analytical structure was organized around four thematic areas: structural constraints and institutional pressures; harassment and professional risk; psychological impact and mental health; and coping mechanisms and structural resilience.

4. Structural Constraints and Institutional Pressures

4.1. Barriers to Information and Expertise

Participants described a professional environment that was, at times, marked by administrative opacity, institutional pressure, and limited resources when investigating science-related topics. Although some variation emerged across reporting contexts and organizational settings, no consistent differences were identified across participants' accounts. A recurring theme across the interviews was restricted access to public information, particularly in relation to health and other science-related fields. Journalists reported repeated experiences in which institutions ignored formal requests, delayed responses, or provided incomplete data, even in situations regulated by law. One participant described repeated difficulties in accessing public-interest information, noting that legal action was sometimes necessary to obtain essential data. As J4 put it, "Even basic information, such as fire safety in hospitals, is difficult to obtain. After the pandemic, this tendency toward secrecy has become even stronger."

Several participants described legal action as a strategy sometimes used to obtain public-interest information in science-related fields such as healthcare. J1 noted that institutions sometimes stopped responding once an investigation was about to be published, while J12 emphasized that access-to-information rights were often restricted in practice. Participants also pointed out that limited time, resources, and legal support could prevent journalists from pursuing formal complaints. Similar difficulties were reported in relation to academic and research institutions, including unanswered requests, refusals to provide data, and the use of data protection arguments to limit disclosure. J2 described a case in which multiple newsrooms submitted the same request to a university without receiving a response. Taken together, these experiences point to forms of institutional opacity that may constrain the watchdog role of journalism.

These constraints were particularly visible in participants' accounts, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic, when journalists described covering complex medical issues while struggling to obtain verified information. Some participants reported difficulties accessing hospitals, reflecting asymmetries of expertise between journalists and scientific actors. Similar challenges were described in education, environmental reporting, and local administration, including inconsistent data and prolonged legal disputes. In response, journalists described relying on informal networks, whistleblowers, and alternative sources when official channels proved insufficient. As J4 suggested, identifying individuals with relevant internal knowledge sometimes became necessary. Science reporting also requires translating technical complexity and building trust with experts, which participants described as particularly challenging in the absence of prior relationships.

Some participants reported difficulties finding experts willing to speak on record, particularly when investigations involved sensitive topics. J5 described the difficulty of working on environmental issues where reliable public data were scarce. Participants also pointed out that, even when experts were available, their perspectives could reflect institutional or professional interests, which made verification more difficult. As J7 noted:

You have to be careful how you choose your experts. When dealing with medical literature, before publishing a story after speaking with a doctor, I still go back and verify the terminology and the information, even if I have the recording.

4.2. Institutional Pressure and Structural Politicization

The above-referenced institutional opacity was closely tied, in participants' accounts, to another structural issue: the perceived politicization and centralization of public institutions. Interviewees, particularly those reporting on healthcare and public policy, described systems in which important decisions were often made by politically appointed actors. This, in their view, contributed to information asymmetries and shaped journalists' interactions with institutions. Participants also suggested that the authority associated with scientific and public institutions could make decision-making processes less transparent and more difficult to scrutinize:

Highly centralized decisions are usually made by politically appointed individuals....Politicization is in the DNA of the system....It has not undergone any major reform for more than 50 years. (J10)

Participants also highlighted the importance of whistleblowers in investigations involving the healthcare system. According to J7, potential sources are often members of professional communities such as doctors, pharmacists, or researchers who remain motivated by professional ideals despite working within demanding and politically influenced institutional environments. This highlights the need to access specialized knowledge and navigate asymmetries of expertise that are characteristic of watchdog science journalism. Journalists maintained they often had to map institutional power structures and identify the actors, interests, and decision-making chains involved in complex policy areas. Investigations addressing sensitive topics—such as public health policies, environmental governance, or the use of European funds—could trigger defensive responses from institutions. In these contexts, the combination of institutional pressure and scientific complexity made verification more difficult and increased the risks associated with challenging official narratives. Journalists described situations in which local authorities refused dialogue, avoided requests for information, or adopted antagonistic attitudes towards the press. Some participants also described more indirect forms of institutional pressure, including tax investigations initiated shortly after the publication of sensitive reporting (J4).

Participants also referred to recent episodes illustrating the broader vulnerability of watchdog journalism in Romania, including the widely reported targeting of journalist Emilia Șercan (Dixon, 2022; Șercan, 2022) and legislative changes affecting plagiarism oversight (Costiniuc, 2018). These accounts suggest that institutional pressure can shape both access to information and journalists' ability to sustain watchdog reporting in domains where scientific expertise meets public accountability.

4.3. Financial Precarity and Structural Constraints in Newsrooms

Regardless of the institutions they investigate, many participants pointed to the financial fragility of newsrooms as a structural issue affecting the ability to conduct complex investigations in domains involving scientific knowledge. Although exceptions do exist, they remain relatively rare within the Romanian media landscape, where many investigative outlets operate under significant financial constraints. Another aspect raised by participants concerned the availability of political funding for parts of the Romanian media system, which some journalists perceived as a source of professional vulnerability. J2 highlights the dilemmas created by funding derived from public money allocated to political parties:

There are also money-related dilemmas, in the sense that there are publications who accept funds from political parties and say it's fine. I don't agree with that...you leave a lot of room for your publication to be attacked.

J2 further explains the symmetrical risk of political attacks when media outlets depend on funding from a political party:

If I take money from the Social Democratic Party...the National Liberal Party might attack me when I write about the National Liberal Party, and vice versa. It's a very grey area, which is somehow allowed by legislation.

Participants also described pressure from audience members who financially support certain publications. J12 mentioned reactions from supporters following investigations targeting political actors: "We paid you

and now we won't give you another cent"; "I cancelled my subscription to you." J2 described these funding models as a source of professional vulnerability: "It's very clear that legislation allows money from political parties, which is public money, to reach the press." In contrast, several participants described editorial grants, reader donations, and direct public support as preferable alternatives for independent journalism, while also acknowledging their limitations. As J12 noted, "We believe that one of the solutions is to move toward grants and reader donations. Although even this can sometimes come back as backlash."

J5 described the financial pressures affecting watchdog science journalism:

These international grants are disappearing....We are in a situation where we no longer have the guarantee that we can pay journalists' salaries.

In smaller newsrooms, limited resources translate into reduced time for documentation, a lack of funds for travel or expert consultation, as well as the need for journalists to perform multiple roles simultaneously. Financial precarity also affects journalists' ability to focus exclusively on investigative work. Participants described the constant need to secure funding, write grant applications, and organize fundraising campaigns while simultaneously conducting investigations. One journalist explained that financial concerns remained a constant background pressure in everyday work:

When I work as a journalist, I'm always thinking about budgets, grant applications, fundraising campaigns—everything related to money. I've never had the luxury of focusing 100% on the story I'm working on, because I have this constant thought in the background: money, money, money. (J5)

J11 summarizes this constraint: "The problem is resources...you need time, money, and access." J1 also mentions the lack of resources needed to develop environmental investigations alongside major political stories, which can become professionally frustrating—another consequence of structural financial precarity. J12 additionally refers to the importance of the Romanian 3.5% tax redirection mechanism, which allows taxpayers to allocate 3.5% of their income tax to non-profit organizations, including NGO-based media outlets, while emphasizing the political vulnerability of this funding pillar: "We are convinced that politicians cannot wait to abolish it." For some journalists, grants function primarily as a means of diversification rather than survival: "We apply for grants mainly to diversify our sources of income...in case one of our funding pillars disappears" (J12). Financial precarity operates not merely as an economic constraint, but also as a structural condition shaping the sustainability of watchdog science journalism.

5. Harassment, Attacks, and Professional Risk

Harassment and professional risk emerged as recurring themes in interviews with journalists investigating sensitive topics, including corruption involving public health, or other science-related institutions. Although not all participants reported direct harassment, their accounts point to a broader sense of professional vulnerability when confronting actors with significant political, economic, or institutional power. These risks can be intensified by the authority of the institutions involved and the sensitivity of the topics under scrutiny. For some participants, vulnerability also emerged through everyday field interactions, particularly in reporting on sensitive health issues or local institutional matters. Journalists described hostile encounters, refusals to cooperate, and tense conversations with institutional actors, especially during medical crises

or politically sensitive investigations. These situations did not always involve explicit threats, but they contributed to a broader sense of professional vulnerability. In science-related investigations, such conditions can restrict access to expert sources, complicate verification, and make sensitive reporting more difficult.

Newsroom fragmentation also emerged as a structural vulnerability. As J3 explained, “The fragmentation of the press is a reflection of what we are experiencing now...we are no longer part of a team, we no longer have a mentor or a protector.” Participants reported several forms of intimidation. One of the clearest examples involved physical risks encountered during investigations. J2 described instances where journalists were being followed during fieldwork, as well as a situation where a newsroom car was vandalized during a health investigation. Such episodes illustrate that physical risk remains present. Legal pressure is another significant form of intimidation. J1 described receiving legal threats after publishing an environmental investigation: “They sent an entire file to the newsroom threatening to sue me....I received notifications claiming that I was lying in the article....A city hall sued me.” These situations resemble dynamics commonly associated with SLAPP lawsuits (Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation), which are often used to intimidate journalists and drain newsroom resources (Kerševan & Poler, 2024; Ross, 2026). Preparing a legal defense can require several weeks of work and legal costs, which may significantly affect small investigative newsrooms. In the absence of anti-SLAPP protections, journalists remain vulnerable to disproportionate legal pressure—a topic also documented in Romania by media monitoring organizations such as Media Freedom Rapid Response (2026). Some participants described relying on external legal protection mechanisms to mitigate such risks. J4 mentioned joining the international initiative Reporters’ Shield, a subscription-based service that provides financial and legal assistance in defamation cases. These mechanisms are particularly important for smaller newsrooms that lack the resources to retain legal counsel independently.

Beyond lawsuits, some participants described other forms of institutional pressure following the publication of investigations. Even when pressure did not take the form of lawsuits or explicit threats, participants described a persistent climate of institutional tension that could discourage cooperation and limit access to expert sources.

5.1. Online Harassment

Participants also described negative reactions, public pressure, and, in some cases, targeted criticism following the publication of investigative materials. J11 referred to pressure exerted by audiences after publishing a controversial interview on a health topic: “People really want their current beliefs to be confirmed.” This reflects the tensions surrounding highly polarized topics, particularly those involving scientific issues such as vaccines, unvalidated treatments, or pandemic-related reporting. In these contexts, journalists must navigate not only institutional constraints but also competing knowledge claims and strong pre-existing public beliefs. Some participants also reported hostile responses from members of the scientific community. Although these reactions did not always take the shape of direct intimidation, they sometimes involved dismissive or aggressive comments directed at journalists’ work, particularly on social media platforms. One participant described such interactions as occasionally becoming confrontational:

We do receive reactions from the scientific community—from researchers—and sometimes these reactions are quite toxic. We get Facebook comments saying things like: “What you did is nonsense; it’s not like that—I know better.” (J5)

These interactions reflect tensions between journalistic and scientific forms of authority, where expertise is contested and journalists' interpretations may be challenged by actors claiming superior knowledge. Online reactions and public pressure can become an additional source of vulnerability for journalists covering scientific or health-related topics, where debates are often shaped by strong pre-existing beliefs.

5.2. Personal Safety

Although not all participants reported explicit harassment, even those who had not been directly intimidated described precautionary practices as part of their professional routine. These included avoiding certain paths or locations, communicating cautiously with sources, limiting personal exposure, adopting protective practices when handling sensitive sources, and monitoring daily routines to detect potential surveillance. These practices indicate that risk management has become embedded in everyday journalistic routines, reflecting the normalization of precautionary behavior in investigative reporting environments. Even when harassment is not explicit, journalists describe a professional environment in which precaution, risk assessment, and defensive strategies become part of everyday practice. Such conditions contribute to a broader climate of professional vulnerability, which, in turn, has implications for journalists' psychological well-being and their capacity to sustain long-term investigative work in science-related domains.

J2 explains how journalists adjust their behavior to mitigate potential risks while conducting investigations: "You never go alone on the field....You evaluate the risks."

6. Psychological Impact and Mental Health

The interviews show that watchdog journalism in areas involving scientific expertise carries a significant emotional burden. This psychological impact is closely linked to the structural conditions described in previous sections, including institutional opacity, financial precarity, and professional risk. Participants describe a constant state of pressure characterized by anxiety, exhaustion, cognitive overload, and moral stress. This psychological impact stems not only from harassment and institutional hostility, but also from the responsibility of communicating accurate information in sensitive and often polarized contexts. J3 speaks openly about chronic anxiety: "I've been in therapy for 10 years, because of anxiety....After I finish an investigation, there is a kind of post-partum anxiety....The worst thing for me is when my private life is attacked." For some participants, the pressure affected sleep. As one journalist recalled, "I couldn't even sleep because I kept thinking something had happened and I had missed it" (J8). At the same time, J3 emphasizes that mental health remains an under-discussed issue within the profession: "Journalists' mental health is a taboo topic...but it is crucial." These reflections illustrate how sustained professional pressures may translate into long-term psychological strain for journalists who report on science topics.

Some journalists work on topics that involve direct exposure to dramatic situations, including hospital scenes, tragedies, or severe social problems. Such experiences suggest that reporting on medical crises involves not only gathering information but also confronting human suffering, which may leave lasting emotional scars. J9 described the same experiences while reporting from hospitals, indicating that repeated exposure to distressing situations can generate significant emotional strain. Several participants also refer to the epistemic responsibility associated with reporting on complex scientific issues: "We also make mistakes, but we are accountable for them" (J11). Journalists describe anxiety related to verifying data, the possibility

of being challenged publicly, and the consequences of publishing sensitive investigations in highly polarized informational environments. Medical and health reporting was described as requiring both rigorous verification and emotional resilience. As J9 noted, beyond documentation, “you also need nerves,” especially when covering high-impact situations. Exhaustion was described as resulting from several interconnected factors: the fast pace of investigative work, small newsroom teams, institutional pressure, limited resources, and the moral responsibility associated with covering sensitive issues. When reporting on science, this burden can be intensified by the need for prolonged verification processes and engagement with specialized expertise. Long investigations may further increase this strain, as legal procedures and access-to-information requests can take years to resolve. As J5 explains:

The idea is not to expect immediate results, because nothing happens in the short term. You need the resilience to continue working over the long run...sometimes a process like this can take three, four, even five years before you obtain something.

Work overload also contributes to psychological pressure. As J1 notes, “It’s not normal for us to work on three or four topics simultaneously, but sometimes that’s what we do.” J11 describes emotional saturation after covering pandemic-related stories, including persistent fatigue and limited recovery time between assignments. Despite these pressures, participants report limited institutional support. Emotional consequences of investigative journalism are often managed individually rather than through formal newsroom mechanisms. Journalists describe difficulties discussing investigations with family members, who do not always understand the nature of their work, the absence of institutional counselling structures, and the tendency to internalize professional stress. Some participants therefore argue that psychological counselling should become a routine component of journalistic work, particularly in professions exposed to sustained pressure. As J5 explains:

Just as construction workers need helmets and protective boots, journalists working under intense psychological pressure should have access to counselling and therapy.

Although occasional training sessions addressing burnout or mental health exist, participants consider them insufficient compared to the scale of the problem. Only one participant (J5) reported working in a newsroom that provides psychological counselling and applies structured support practices. Participants said that media managers sometimes perceive journalists’ mental health as an organizational vulnerability, making newsrooms reluctant to address it. As J3 noted, “It doesn’t cost much, but it’s an investment that can save a life—or completely change someone.”

7. Coping Mechanisms and the Need for Structural Resilience

Journalists described both general coping strategies and practices specific to investigative journalism. While some strategies relate to managing stress more broadly, others are directly connected to the demands of watchdog journalism. The interviews show that journalists rely on a combination of personal, professional, and collective strategies to cope with the pressures associated with their work. However, resilience mechanisms remain predominantly individual, while institutional support is described as rare or limited. Participants repeatedly emphasize that emotional, psychological, and operational safety depends largely on personal resources and solidarity among colleagues. One of the most frequently mentioned coping

mechanisms is rigorous fact-checking. In this context, verification practices are not only a professional norm but also a coping mechanism specific to watchdog journalism, as they reduce uncertainty and potential legal risk. As J1 explains, “The best solution for these feelings of anxiety is to fact-check everything thoroughly....If you don’t have evidence for a sentence, you remove it from the text. When you are sued, you know you did your job properly.” In this way, verification practices become a key component of watchdog science journalism, as they contribute to reducing professional anxiety.

Participants also describe individual coping strategies aimed at maintaining emotional balance. Some participants emphasized the role of physical activity in coping with stress, noting that “yoga, sports, long walks, volleyball, and training” help them manage pressure. J12, for example, explains, “I prefer to say that I’m addicted to going to the gym or running.” Others mention the importance of mental breaks between demanding investigations. Some journalists describe activities requiring intense concentration to disconnect from professional pressure. For J2, riding a motorcycle functions as a form of embodied focus: “When you ride a motorcycle, you cannot really think about anything else. You must be fully focused on driving, on the motorcycle, on your body.” Some participants described reconnecting with nature as a coping mechanism. As J6 noted, moving out of the city and experiencing a quieter, less polluted environment helped them “breathe well again.”

Beyond individual coping strategies, professional solidarity emerges as an important form of collective resilience. Journalists describe relying on colleagues for editorial feedback, source sharing, and ethical discussions during investigations. Working in teams also helps reduce safety risks during field reporting. These forms of collaboration are particularly important in watchdog science journalism, where investigations often require the sharing of expertise and verification of complex information. International investigative networks are another important source of support. Several journalists also mentioned initiatives organized by NGOs as useful forms of support:

We were 13 journalists, a therapist came, and we did some exercises. We all started talking and began to realize that we are similar. The meeting lasted for three and a half hours, it was something extraordinary. The therapist was telling us some basic things, and we recognized ourselves in them. (J3)

Participants mention collaborations with organizations such as the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP), which provide access to professional networks, investigative databases, and psychological support. As J6 explains, “OCCRP works with a network of European therapists; the first 10 sessions are pro bono.” Such transnational infrastructures offer resources that are often unavailable within local newsroom environments. Overall, the interviews suggest that resilience in watchdog science journalism is largely sustained through informal professional networks and individual coping strategies rather than institutional support structures. While journalists develop various mechanisms to manage pressure—including rigorous verification, professional collaboration, and personal routines—participants repeatedly emphasize the need for stronger structural protection, including legal safeguards, psychological support, and clearer professional recognition.

7.1. The Absence of Institutional Resilience Infrastructure

A recurring theme across the interviews was the absence of formal mechanisms to support journalists facing professional pressure. Participants mentioned limited access to psychological counselling, legal support, and professional training, often relying instead on self-learning or improvisation. Journalists also pointed to the absence of a clearer professional framework for journalism. J11 argued that the lack of clear standards creates ambiguity around professional roles and weakens institutional protection: “There is a need to regulate the status of journalists....At the moment, if you ask anyone...they won’t be able to tell you what a journalist is.” Participants suggested that this institutional uncertainty may also undermine professional credibility and complicate interactions with public institutions.

This is particularly relevant in watchdog science journalism, where investigations require sustained engagement with complex expertise and long reporting processes. Participants also highlighted the role of public perceptions. While some audiences recognize the effort involved in investigative reporting on science topics, others interpret it through conspiratorial narratives or political bias. Such perceptions add to professional and psychological pressure and point to the need for stronger media literacy.

This institutional ambiguity reinforces the idea that resilience cannot be understood solely at an individual level. As J3 states, “Journalists’ mental health...influences the entire evolution of the free press.” Across the interviews, resilience appeared to rely largely on informal practices. Journalists relied on peer support, teamwork, and precautionary practices rather than on institutional protection. As J2 notes, “There are risks. But we protect each other.” While these strategies help manage pressure, participants emphasize that structural support—legal protection, stable funding, access to expertise, and psychological services—remains limited.

Interviewees also describe moments of professional doubt, especially when certain topics, such as environmental reporting, are marginalized in favor of more visible political issues. As J1 explains, “In the past months I’ve had serious doubts about myself and my place in journalism....Working in a very small newsroom, topics tend to be prioritized...environmental topics are not considered as important as political ones.”

8. Discussion

The findings suggest that resilience in watchdog science journalism is not only an individual capacity. Instead, it is shaped by institutional, economic, and political conditions. These conditions appear to affect journalists’ ability to perform a watchdog role in domains where scientific expertise has significant societal consequences. In Romania, investigative journalists working on science-related topics operate in a context marked by restricted access to information, institutional opacity and pressure, and financial precarity. While these challenges are not unique to this field, science-related reporting adds further complexity. Unlike other forms of investigative journalism, watchdog science journalism often requires sustained engagement with specialized expertise and the interpretation of complex technical information (Nguyen, 2024; Peters, 2022). Verification may depend not only on documentary evidence and sources, but also on the ability to assess competing expert claims and navigate institutional forms of scientific authority. A recurring issue across interviews concerns limited access to public information. Participants described delayed or ignored requests and incomplete data, pointing to forms of institutional opacity that may undermine the practical

implementation of transparency legislation. Journalists described cases in which litigation became necessary to obtain information. Legal pressure represented another constraint, with journalists reporting lawsuits, threats, and other forms of pressure that could delay or disrupt ongoing work. These findings align with recent Romanian research showing that verbal and psychological harassment remain common professional risks for journalists (Vasilendiuc et al., 2026). At the same time, fragile funding models and dependence on grants shape which investigations can be pursued and sustained. The study also highlights the epistemic demands of science-related reporting. This reflects broader scholarship showing that science reporting involves technical complexity and clear asymmetries of expertise (Fleerackers et al., 2024; Goodell, 1987; Peters, 2022). Challenging actors whose authority is grounded in scientific knowledge can be particularly difficult. Journalists reporting on science topics must translate complex information while evaluating competing expert claims, often without specialized training or institutional support. This aligns with research showing elevated burnout, emotional exhaustion, and mental health strain among journalists working under sustained pressure, particularly in crisis and investigative contexts (Newman et al., 2022; Reinardy et al., 2021; “Training for journalists,” 2025).

Participants reported that these challenges were particularly pronounced, especially when reporting on sensitive issues such as public health. This strain is closely linked to working conditions: Institutional hostility, financial instability, and public pressure contribute to a professional environment in which stress becomes routine. While journalists rely on individual coping strategies (therapy, physical exercise, or peer support), these offer only partial protection. Participants emphasized that broader institutional support mattered more. This supports scholarship that frames resilience not simply as an individual trait, but as a condition shaped by organizational and structural contexts (Herrera Damas & Valero-Pastor, 2026; Newman et al., 2022; Relly & Waisbord, 2022). Sustaining watchdog science journalism depends on access to legal protection, stable funding, reliable access to information, professional training, and psychological support within newsrooms.

9. Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations. Firstly, the study is based on a relatively small sample size and focuses on a single national context. The results should be interpreted as context-specific rather than broadly representative of watchdog science journalism in other media systems. Secondly, the study relies on self-reported data, which may be influenced by participants’ perceptions. Thirdly, in the absence of specialized science journalism, the sample includes only investigative journalists working on complex, high-risk topics, which may emphasize higher levels of pressure and vulnerability. Future research could explore how different professional backgrounds shape reporting practices in science-related domains. Comparative studies across different media systems could further examine how structural conditions shape journalists’ capacity to perform a watchdog role in science-related domains, while also investigating variations between beats such as health, environment, and academia. In addition, further research could analyze the role of professional training, newsroom cultures, transnational collaborations, and institutional support mechanisms in strengthening structural resilience in watchdog science journalism.

10. Conclusion

This study provides qualitative evidence on the working conditions of investigative journalists covering science-related topics in Romania, with a specific focus on watchdog science journalism. In the Romanian

context, this remains an underexplored area, particularly in relation to resilience, mental health, professional safety, and the conditions required to sustain this type of reporting. The findings show that resilience in watchdog science journalism should not be understood only as an individual capacity, but also as something shaped by newsroom resources, legal protections, institutional transparency, access to expertise, and professional support (Herrera Damas & Valero-Pastor, 2026; Relly & Waisbord, 2022). These issues are increasingly relevant in a media environment marked by political pressure, economic instability, public hostility, and growing informational complexity (Newman et al., 2022; UNESCO, 2024). By focusing on watchdog reporting in domains where scientific expertise plays a central role, the study also raises broader questions about the sustainability of investigative journalism as a profession. Strengthening watchdog science journalism requires not only individual coping strategies, but also legal protection, psychological support, professional safety training, and stronger professional support networks.

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Conflict of Interests

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Data Availability

The data are not publicly available due to confidentiality agreements with the participants.

LLMs Disclosure

ChatGPT was used to assist with language editing of the manuscript. The author reviewed and takes full responsibility for the final content.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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