

17. Self-Employment in the News Industry

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Abstract

This chapter highlights the position of freelance or self-employed journalists in the news sector from the pessimistic observation that news organizations tend to push journalists in a freelance status to cope with decreasing revenues and are inspired by neoliberal thoughts.

Many journalism schools are increasingly stressing entrepreneurialism in their programs.¹ A 2018 survey of Belgian journalists showed the need to address entrepreneurialism as it indicated that the majority of young journalists find their way into the news industry as independent or self-employed journalists.²

Like in many other jobs, these junior profiles first need to gain experience and demonstrate their journalistic skills before they can move up the professional ladder. But even if after some time they acquire a stable and valued position in the newsroom, they are not always rewarded with a permanent staff position. In Belgium, self-employed journalists are well represented in all age groups across the journalistic workforce, and their number has increased over the years.³ This is not an isolated finding. Studies in other countries and contexts have documented a sharp increase of freelance journalists in recent years, which has sped up following the 2008 global financial and economic crisis.⁴

As a consequence of this outsourcing of news work and the decentralization of newsrooms, several authors draw attention to the fact that academic research should pay more attention to atypical journalist profiles such as freelancers but also part-time workers, temporary contracts or internships.⁵ Therefore, the aim of this chapter is first, to explain why the working conditions of many freelancers can be precarious. Next, we will see that it is not all doom and gloom and happiness can be found if we follow a less newsroom-centered approach and take into account entrepreneurial efforts in the news industry. Finally, we will map out how the position and happiness of freelancers, entrepreneurial journalists, and other atypical workers in the news industry can be further supported by different stakeholders.

¹ Tim Vos, and Jane Singer, "Media Discourse About Entrepreneurial Journalism: Implications for Journalistic Capital," *Journalism Practice* 10, no. 2 (2016): 143–159.

² Sarah Van Leuven, Bart Vanhaelewyn, and Karin Raeymaeckers, "From One Division of Labor to the Other: The Relation Between Beat Reporting, Freelancing, and Journalistic Autonomy," *Journalism Practice* 15, no. 9 (2021): 1203–1221.

³ Van Leuven, Vanhaelewyn, and Raeymaeckers, "From One Division of Labor to the Other: The Relation Between Beat Reporting, Freelancing, and Journalistic Autonomy," 1203–21.

⁴ Cristian-Ramón Marín-Sanchiz, Miguel Carvajal, and José-Luis González-Esteban, "Survival Strategies in Freelance Journalism: An Empowering Toolkit to Improve Professionals' Working Conditions," *Journalism Practice* (2021): 1–24, DOI:10.1080/17512786.2021.1929414; Maria Norbäck, "Glimpses of Resistance: Entrepreneurial subjectivity and Freelance Journalist Work," *Organization* 28, no. 3 (2021): 426–448; Errol Salamon, "Freelance Journalists and Stringers," in *Wiley: International Encyclopedia of Journalism Studies*, eds. Tim. P. Vos and Folker Hanusch, 2019: 1–9. New Jersey: Wiley-Blackwell. doi:10.1002/9781118841570.iejs0228. 2019; Hanne Vandenberghe, and Leen d'Haenens, "The Netherlands. On Media Concentration and Resilient Freelance Journalists", in *The Media for Democracy Monitor 2021: How Leading News Media Survive Digital Transformation*, eds. Josef Trappel, and Tales Tomaz (Göteborg: Nordicom, 2021), 257–96.

⁵ Mark Deuze, and Tamara Witschge, "Beyond journalism: Theorizing the transformation of journalism," *Journalism* 19, no. 2 (2018): 165–181; Beate Josephi, and Penny O'Donnell, "The Blurring Line between Freelance Journalists and Self-employed Media Workers," *Journalism* 24, no. 1 (2023): 139–156; Norbäck, "Glimpses of Resistance: Entrepreneurial subjectivity and Freelance Journalist Work," 426–48.

Freelancers as Members of the Precariat

Freelancers are “self-employed journalists who take on assignments for several employers.”⁶ Yet, the European Federation of Journalists (EFJ)⁷ called them “forced lancers” because research⁸ showed that many journalists who were laid off during and after the 2008 financial and economic crisis “moved from full-time, secure, and well remunerated work to more precarious forms of employment in and out of journalism, including freelance, contract and part-time.” Media companies do not need to invest in training or benefits for freelancers such as social security and legal support, nor take the risk for periods of reduced activity.⁹ As a result, they can reduce costs and responsibilities and gain more flexibility.¹⁰ The fact that this seems to be a well-considered strategy is demonstrated by the fact that one in three Belgian freelancers in 2018 admitted to work for only one client in the media sector, which is considered bogus self-employment.¹¹

A shift of responsibilities to the individual workers is observed: “*much of the risk previously born by employers is now the responsibility of the individual worker, something Fleming (2017) calls the ‘radical responsabilization’ of employment.*”¹² Studies of precarious work often refer to the hegemonic position of neoliberal economic thought in the globalized society to understand why workers (need to) accept that long-term career possibilities and work-related benefits are replaced with short-term contracts and high demands. Following this argument, “*freelance journalists are molded into ideal neoliberal workers: agile, self-commodifying, and shrewdly working to survive in the marketplace.*”¹³ Freelancers under conditions of fierce competition internalized ideas of “enterprise” in such a way that financial and entrepreneurial considerations dominated their work.¹⁴ Yet, the lack of steady employment and the benefits that come with it can have a detrimental effect on the well-being of independent journalists.¹⁵ When compared to permanent staff, freelancers report lower levels of extrinsic job satisfaction. They are less satisfied with work-related aspects such as job security, income, social status, or promotion prospects.¹⁶ In addition to low

⁶ Emma Walters, Christopher Warren, and Mike Dobbie, *The Changing Nature of Work: A global survey and Case Study of Atypical Work in the Media Industry* (Switzerland: International Federation of Journalists, 2006), 6.

⁷ Andreas Bittner, *Managing Change: Innovation and Trade Unionism in the News Industry* (Brussels: European Federation of Journalists, 2011), 1–32.

⁸ Nicole Cohen, Andrea Hunter, and Penny O'Donnell, "Bearing the Burden of Corporate Restructuring: Job Loss and Precarious Employment in Canadian Journalism," *Journalism Practice* 13, no. 7 (2019): 817–833.

⁹ Salamon, "Freelance Journalists and Stringers", 1–9; Mirjam Gollmitzer, "Precariously Employed Watchdogs? Perceptions of Working Conditions among Freelancers and Interns," *Journalism Practice* 8, no. 6 (2014): 826–841.

¹⁰ Birgit Røe Mathisen, "Entrepreneurs and Idealists - Freelance Journalists at the Intersection of Autonomy and Constraints," *Journalism Practice* 13, no. 8 (2019): 1003–1007.

¹¹ Gerd Nies, and Roberto Pedersini, *Freelance Journalists in the European Media Industry* (Brussels: European Federation of Journalists, 2003), 1–41; Van Leuven, Vanhaelewyn, and Raeymaeckers, "From One Division of Labor to the Other: The Relation Between Beat Reporting, Freelancing, and Journalistic Autonomy," 1203–21.

¹² Norbäck, "Glimpses of Resistance: Entrepreneurial subjectivity and Freelance Journalist Work," 426–48.

¹³ Norbäck, "Glimpses of Resistance: Entrepreneurial subjectivity and Freelance Journalist Work," 426–48.

¹⁴ John Storey, Graeme Salaman, and Kerry Platman, "Living with Enterprise in an Enterprise Economy: Freelance and Contract Workers in the Media," *Human Relations* 58, no. 8 (2005): 1033–1054.

¹⁵ Kathleen Ryan, "The Performative Journalist: Job Satisfaction, Temporary Workers and American Television News," *Journalism* 10, no. 5 (2009): 647–664.

¹⁶ Annelore Deprez, Sarah Van Leuven, Sara De Vuyst, Rebeca De Dobbelaer, and Karin Raeymaeckers, "Het Veranderende Medialandschap en Jobtevredenheid bij Vlaamse Beroepsjournalisten," *Tijdschrift voor Arbeidsvraagstukken* 31, no. 1 (2015), 46–61.

incomes, inability to plan for the long term, a daily struggle to secure future work, and limited access to social protection, they report high levels of stress and burnout problems.¹⁷

Research shows that these precarious working situations vary between different groups of freelancers. First, young journalists are often pushed in freelance positions when they enter the journalistic field as a gateway to a more permanent position in a newsroom after they have demonstrated their value.¹⁸ Second, female journalists with children often choose a freelance position to buy time for their family.¹⁹ Third, a report of the European Federation of Journalists²⁰ raised concern about the many freelance journalists in regional reporting. In Belgium, the proportion of freelancers in the regional beat increased from 22.1 percent in 2013 to 30.6 percent in 2018.²¹

In Belgium, The Flemish Association of Journalists (VVJ) reported that freelancers in the regional beat endure being treated like slaves. In 2022, when hired by a newspaper, they received a remuneration of 5 euro for a short piece up to 125 euro for an in-depth news piece. Freelancers who did exactly the same job with exactly as much effort but in relation to national news coverage in newspapers receive between 110 and 1,200 euro. On top of that, the number of regional beat reporters is decreasing. The remaining journalists need to cover multiple cities or municipalities, creating local news deserts.²²

The situation was aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic starting in 2020 which hit freelance journalists substantially more than journalists with a permanent contract. During the COVID-19 lockdowns, freelancers reported a decrease or, temporarily during the lockdowns, even a complete drop of assignments and income.²³ Australian freelance journalists reported how the pandemic had aggravated their already insecure financial situation, and how they had

¹⁷ Nicole Cohen, "Entrepreneurial Journalism and the Precarious State of Media Work," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 114, no. 3 (2015): 513–533; Deuze, and Witschge, "Beyond journalism: Theorizing the transformation of journalism," 165–81; Norbäck, "Glimpses of Resistance: Entrepreneurial subjectivity and Freelance Journalist Work," 426–48; Penny O'Donnell, Lawrie Zion, and Merryn Sherwood, "Where do Journalists go after Newsroom Job Cuts?" *Journalism Practice* 10, no. 1 (2016): 35–51; Scott Reinardy, "Newspaper Journalism in Crisis: Burnout on the Rise, Eroding Young Journalists' Career Commitment," *Journalism* 12, no. 1 (2011): 33–50.

¹⁸ Kathryn Hayes, and Henry Silke, "Narrowing the Discourse? Growing Precarity in Freelance Journalism and its Effect on the Construction of News Discourse," *Critical Discourse Studies* 16, no. 3 (2019): 363–379; Walters, Warren, and Dobbie, *The Changing Nature of Work: A global survey and Case Study of Atypical Work in the Media Industry*, 6.

¹⁹ Sara De Vuyst, and Karin Raeymaeckers, "Gender as a multi-layered issue in journalism: A multi-method approach to studying barriers sustaining gender inequality in Belgian newsrooms," *European Journal of Women's Studies* 26 no. 1 (2019): 23–38.

²⁰ Bittner, *Managing Change: Innovation and Trade Unionism in the News Industry*, 1–32.

²¹ Van Leuven, Vanhaelewyn, and Raeymaeckers, "From One Division of Labor to the Other: The Relation Between Beat Reporting, Freelancing, and Journalistic Autonomy," 1203–21.

²² Penelope Muse Abernathy, *The Expanding News Desert* (Center for Innovation and Sustainability in Local Media, School of Media and Journalism: University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2018); Michelle Ferrier, Gaurav Sinha and Michael Outrich, "Media Deserts: Monitoring the Changing Media Ecosystem", in *The Communication Crisis in America, And How to Fix It*, eds. Mark Lloyd, and Lewis A. Friedland (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); Rasmus Kleis Nielsen, "The Uncertain Future of Local Journalism", in *Local Journalism: the Decline of Newspapers and the Rise of Digital Media*, ed. Rasmus Kleis Nielsen (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015), 7.

²³ Josephi, and O'Donnell, "The Blurring Line between Freelance Journalists and Self-employed Media Workers," 139–56; Vandenberghe, and d'Haenens, "The Netherlands. On Media Concentration and Resilient Freelance Journalists", 257–96; Sarah Van Leuven, et al. *Corona als kantelpunt in de Vlaamse journalistieke sector* (Gent: Universiteit Gent, 2020).

to resort even more than normally to jobs outside journalism.²⁴ COVID-19 magnified pre-existing disparities among journalists, as freelancers and those associated with small media startups were very concerned about job security and felt a lot of financial stress.²⁵ Moreover, they had to deal individually with stressors such as isolation, working from home, and eroding of work-life boundaries, in contrast to journalists in permanent positions who struggled also but felt sufficiently supported by their news organizations.²⁶

In the next section, we present a different take on the position of self-employed journalists by focusing less on their dependence on media employers. Instead, we celebrate their independence and agency as they are running their own business and can take control of their own professional success, well-being and happiness. Therefore, we turn to the concept of entrepreneurial journalism and what freelancers can learn from these journalist-entrepreneurs,

Between Journalism and Entrepreneurship

Entrepreneurial journalists have increased since the emergence of online news websites and social media which have democratized the means of news production and distribution, and thus lowered the entry barriers to the news market. Journalistic entrepreneurs are defined as “designating stand-alone enterprises that have a journalistic mission yet are dissociated from legacy media.”²⁷ They have connotative links to business and innovation whereas freelancers are associated with “piecemeal journalistic work.”²⁸ Whereas many freelancers are forced or pushed into a self-employed position (marginalization model), entrepreneurial journalists value self-employment as an opportunity for independence, empowerment, autonomy and self-realization instead of a burden (portfolio model).²⁹

Instead of seeing them as two opposing groups who have nothing in common, a middle-way is also possible, as illustrated by talking to freelancers who work for a limited (or even just one) legacy news employer. Even though they are not entrepreneurial journalists in a strict sense, as they do not necessarily aim to start a new, innovative journalistic project, they nonetheless take care of their own business and are really satisfied with their autonomy and self-realization. They may work for a limited number of employers, but they enjoy the feeling of being in charge of their professional lives. Research confirms that freelancers may be less satisfied with job-extrinsic factors such as job security and remuneration, but they are generally more satisfied about job-intrinsic factors such as individual freedom and the multitude of new contacts.³⁰ In addition to the group of entrepreneurs and “forced lancers,” it might be needed to add at least one additional category of “idealists,” referring to freelancers

²⁴ Josephi, and O'Donnell, "The Blurring Line between Freelance Journalists and Self-employed Media Workers," 139–56.

²⁵ Edson C. Tandoc Jr., Lydia Cheng, and Matthew Chew, "Covering COVID: Changes in Work Routines and Journalists' Well-being in Singapore," *Journalism Studies* 23, no. 14 (2022): 1740–1757.

²⁶ Tandoc Jr., Cheng, and Chew, "Covering COVID: Changes in Work Routines and Journalists' Well-being in Singapore," 1740–57.

²⁷ Jane Singer "Entrepreneurial Journalism," in *Handbooks of Communication*, ed. Tim Vos (Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton, 2018), 349.

²⁸ Singer, "Entrepreneurial Journalism," 349–350.

²⁹ Maria Edstrom, and Martina Ladendorf, "Freelance Journalists as a Flexible Workforce in Media Industries," *Journalism Practice* 6, no. 5-6 (2012): 711–721.

³⁰ Deprez, Van Leuven, De Vuyst, De Dobbelaer, and Raeymaeckers, "Het Veranderende Medialandschap en Jobtevredenheid bij Vlaamse Beroepsjournalisten," 46–61.

who “are more driven by the opportunity to work with the kind of journalism they find important, even if it does not always pay well.”³¹

Whether journalists deliberately choose to be self-employed or not, freelancers, much like entrepreneurial journalists, need to have a set of skills and competencies beyond the traditional skills in journalism such as critical thinking or writing such as accounting and budgeting skills to run a business (e.g.³²). Despite the fact that journalism curricula increasingly address entrepreneurialism, it is often still in small or lower ranked courses,³³ and the fact remains that most journalists are not born entrepreneurs. These “journalists-turned-entrepreneurs”³⁴ may struggle to make a realistic assessment about the economic viability and demand for their work.³⁵ Self-employed journalists also need to be better aware of the importance of individualized branding.³⁶ Instead of the traditional approach of presenting oneself as a detached observer and assuming that people will be interested in the quality of their work no matter what, in brand journalism it is important to develop a more audience-facing identity in order to gain a strong reputation and attention for one’s work.³⁷ In order to gain a stronger and more personalized engagement with their audiences, some (especially younger) journalists start to show more of their personality and their own opinion in their work.³⁸ This tendency can also be placed under the umbrella of the emotional turn in journalism.³⁹

Consequently, it is vital that journalism schools make financial, personnel and research management skills central in their programs such as design thinking, product development, community engagement, problem-solving, resilience, or value creation.⁴⁰ Journalism schools should be preparing their students to be able to provide innovative oriented skills such as data literacy and storytelling skills that add value to traditional media organizations.⁴¹ In today's

³¹ Mathisen, "Entrepreneurs and Idealists - Freelance Journalists at the Intersection of Autonomy and Constraints," 1003-10.

³² Marju Himma-Kadakas, and Mirjam Möttus, "Ready to Hire a Freelance Journalist: The Change in Estonian Newsrooms' Willingness to Outsource Journalistic Content Production," *Central European Journal of Communication* 14, no. 28 (2021): 27-43.

³³ Vos, and Singer, "Media Discourse About Entrepreneurial Journalism: Implications for Journalistic Capital," 143-59.

³⁴ Vos, and Singer, "Media Discourse About Entrepreneurial Journalism: Implications for Journalistic Capital," 143-59.

³⁵ Lucia Naldi, and Robert G. Picard, "Let's Start an Online News Site": Opportunities, Resources, Strategy, and Formational Myopia in Startups," *Journal of Media Business Studies* 9, no. 4 (2012): 69-97.

³⁶ Josephi, and O'Donnell, "The Blurring Line between Freelance Journalists and Self-employed Media Workers," 139-56.

³⁷ Avery E. Holton, and Logan Molyneux, "Identity lost? The Personal Impact of Brand Journalism," *Journalism* 18, no. 2 (2017): 195-210.

³⁸ Josephi, and O'Donnell, "The Blurring Line between Freelance Journalists and Self-employed Media Workers," 139-56; Markus Ojala, Mervi Pantti, and Jarkko Kangas, "Professional Role Enactment amid Information Warfare: War Correspondents Tweeting on the Ukraine Conflict," *Journalism* 19, no. 3 (2018): 297-313; Mervi Pantti, "The Personalisation of Conflict Reporting: Visual coverage of the Ukraine Crisis on Twitter," *Digital Journalism* 7, no. 1 (2019): 124-145.

³⁹ Karin Wahl-Jorgensen, "An Emotional Turn in Journalism Studies?" *Digital journalism* 8, no. 2 (2020): 175-194.

⁴⁰ Jeremy Caplan, Rachele Kanigel, and Betty Tsakarestou, "Entrepreneurial journalism: Teaching Innovation and Nurturing an Entrepreneurial Mindset," *Journalism & Mass Communication Educator* 75, no. 1 (2020): 27-32.

⁴¹ David Baines, and Ciara Kennedy, "An Education for Independence: Should Entrepreneurial Skills be an Essential Part of the Journalist's Toolbox?" *Journalism Practice* 4, no. 1 (2010): 97-113; Marcel Broersma, and Jane B. Singer, "Caught between Innovation and Tradition: Young Journalists as Normative Change Agents in

innovative digitally oriented journalistic context, these skills are not or insufficiently present in the newsrooms and therefore outsourced to freelancers.⁴² In the Estonian case, the editors' views on freelancers evolved from unemployed journalists offering journalistic pieces for publication on commission in 2014 to entrepreneurial journalists whom they are keen to cooperate with as they are able to provide highly valued multimedia-rich and/or investigative fact-checked productions in 2019.⁴³

Creating a Supportive Environment for Self-Employed Journalists

In the last part of this chapter, we will focus on how journalists as well as other stakeholders in addition to journalism schools, can improve the happiness and well-being of freelance journalists. A vital strategy for self-employed journalists to cope with work-related stressors and to improve their professional opportunities, is to set up a broad social network to rely on. This implies freelance journalists need to invest in building up resilient relationships both with potential clients such as editors or other employed journalists in news organizations and other freelancers.⁴⁴ Freelancers cooperating instead of competing with each other, creates a supportive community which impacts both well-being and income security.⁴⁵ Swedish freelancers experienced working in shared office space with other freelancers as advantageous on an emotional level by reducing loneliness and bringing order and structure in working days, as well as on a professional level by asking for advice for instance who to interview for an article they are working on or which editors should be contacted first to pitch a specific idea for a story.⁴⁶ Moreover, being part of an office collective generates work as it

the Journalistic Field," *Journalism Practice* 15, no. 6 (2021): 821–838; Himma-Kadakas, and Möttus, "Ready to Hire a Freelance Journalist: The Change in Estonian Newsrooms' Willingness to Outsource Journalistic Content Production," 27–43.

⁴² Rozane De Cock, and Hedwig De Smaele, "Freelancing in Flemish News Media and Entrepreneurial Skills as Pivotal Elements in Job Satisfaction: Perspectives of Masters or Servants?" *Journalism Practice* 10, no.2 (2016): 251–265; Deuze, and Witschge, "Beyond journalism: Theorizing the transformation of journalism," 165–81; Himma-Kadakas, and Möttus, "Ready to Hire a Freelance Journalist: The Change in Estonian Newsrooms' Willingness to Outsource Journalistic Content Production," 27–43; Ragne Kõuts-Klemm, "Data Literacy among Journalists: A skills-assessment Based Approach", *Central European Journal of Communication* 12, no. 24 (2019): 299–315.

⁴³ Himma-Kadakas, and Möttus, "Ready to Hire a Freelance Journalist: The Change in Estonian Newsrooms' Willingness to Outsource Journalistic Content Production," 27–43.

⁴⁴ Himma-Kadakas, and Möttus, "Ready to Hire a Freelance Journalist: The Change in Estonian Newsrooms' Willingness to Outsource Journalistic Content Production," 27–43; Marín-Sanchiz, Carvajal, and Luis González-Esteban, "Survival Strategies in Freelance Journalism: an Empowering Toolkit to Improve Professionals' Working Conditions", 1–24; Norbäck, "Glimpses of Resistance: Entrepreneurial subjectivity and Freelance Journalist Work," 426–48; Maria Norbäck, and Alexander Styhre, "Making it Work in Free Agent Work: The Coping Practices of Swedish Freelance Journalists," *Scandinavian Journal of Management*, 35, no.4 (2019): 1–11.

⁴⁵ Marín-Sanchiz, Carvajal, and Luis González-Esteban, "Survival Strategies in Freelance Journalism: an Empowering Toolkit to Improve Professionals' Working Conditions", 1–24; Johanna Moisander, Claudia Groß, and Kirsi Eräranta, "Mechanisms of Biopower and Neoliberal Governmentality in Precarious Work: Mobilizing the Dependent Self-employed as Independent Business Owners," *Human Relations* 71, no.3 (2018): 375–398; Norbäck, and Styhre, "Making it Work in Free Agent Work: The Coping Practices of Swedish Freelance Journalists," 1–11; Norbäck, "Glimpses of Resistance: Entrepreneurial subjectivity and Freelance Journalist Work," 426–48.

⁴⁶ Norbäck, and Styhre, "Making it Work in Free Agent Work: The Coping Practices of Swedish Freelance Journalists," 1–11; Norbäck, "Glimpses of Resistance: Entrepreneurial subjectivity and Freelance Journalist Work," 426–48.

is possible to set up a team of freelancers to pitch powerful ideas to news organizations or to exchange assignments with other freelancers when the workload is too high.⁴⁷

A next coping strategy includes adaptation to the market.⁴⁸ To make ends meet financially, freelancers have to specialize in defined areas where the competition is lower, and/or produce content directly for clients in the public relations (PR) and advertising sectors. Self-employed journalists are drawn to work for PR and advertising companies who are asking for similar journalistic competencies, but offering higher incomes compared to the journalistic organizations.⁴⁹ The combinations of employment in PR and journalism lead to conflicting roles.⁵⁰ While for journalists it is important to work independently from their social environments in order to be able to act as a watchdog and serve the public interest (communicative mode), PR is driven by commercial goals and wants to create an advantage for private interests (strategic mode).⁵¹ As such, a conflict of interest may appear when a freelance journalist is asked to produce a critical news story about a PR client. Concerns are raised about lower adherence to journalistic standards and role conceptions, as well as about decreased autonomy from commercial interests.⁵² Evidence from Belgium supports these worries as perceived autonomy is highest among political beat reporters (mainly staff employees), and lowest among lifestyle beat reporters (high proportion of freelance journalists).⁵³

Therefore, in Belgium for instance, it is not allowed to combine the status of professional journalist with commercial secondary activities, which makes that freelance journalists need to make the choice between either not be able to make ends meet because of the loss of income from commercial assignments, or accept commercial jobs and relinquish the recognition as a professional journalist. For almost two decades, the VVJ have been advocating for a relaxation to make it possible to combine the status of professional journalist with a commercial side activity, insofar as it does not jeopardize the independence of the journalist. In academia, scholars likewise have been criticizing the normative emphasis on a “wall” or “curtain” between journalists and commercial interests. Contemporary news

⁴⁷ Norbäck, and Styhre, "Making it Work in Free Agent Work: The Coping Practices of Swedish Freelance Journalists," 1–11.

⁴⁸ Norbäck, and Styhre, "Making it Work in Free Agent Work: The Coping Practices of Swedish Freelance Journalists," 1–11.

⁴⁹ Bittner, *Managing Change: Innovation and Trade Unionism in the News Industry*, 1–32; Gollmitzer, "Precariously Employed Watchdogs? Perceptions of Working Conditions among Freelancers and Interns," 826–41; Marín-Sanchiz, Carvajal, and Luis González-Esteban, "Survival Strategies in Freelance Journalism: An Empowering Toolkit to Improve Professionals' Working Conditions", 1–24; Brian Massey, and Cindy Elmore, *Freelancing in journalism* (Oxford, *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Communication*, 2018).

⁵⁰ Himma-Kadakas, and Möttus, "Ready to Hire a Freelance Journalist: The Change in Estonian Newsrooms' Willingness to Outsource Journalistic Content Production," 27–43.

⁵¹ Judith McIntosh White, "The Communicative Action of Journalists and Public Information Officers: Habermas Revisited," *Journalism Practice* 6, no.4 (2012): 563–580; Lee Salter, "The Communicative Structures of Journalism and Public Relations," *Journalism* 6, no.1 (2005): 90–106.

⁵² Bittner, *Managing Change: Innovation and Trade Unionism in the News Industry*, 1–32; Martina Ladendorf, "Ethical Boundary Settings of Freelance Journalists Concerning Information Work", *Nordicom Review* 33, no.1 (2012): 83–98; Thomas Koch, and Magdalena Obermaier, "Blurred Lines: German Freelance Journalists with Secondary Employment in Public Relations", *Public Relations Review* 40, no.3 (2014): 473–482; Martina Ladendorf, "Ethical Boundary Settings of Freelance Journalists Concerning Information Work", *Nordicom Review* 33, no.1 (2012): 83–98.

⁵³ Van Leuven, Vanhaelewyn, and Raeymaeckers, "From One Division of Labor to the Other: The Relation Between Beat Reporting, Freelancing, and Journalistic Autonomy," 1203–21.

industry lacks the financial stability to maintain this dogma and therefore the wall has been replaced with a curtain, which is also exemplified by the development of new hybrid types of PR-journalism such as native advertising or sponsored content.⁵⁴ This is not necessarily problematic if new norms come to the fore such as transparency and integrity.⁵⁵ These boundaries have become “porous and often meaningless, particularly for media users.”⁵⁶

Although a smaller group of freelancers are in a sufficiently strong market position to be able to negotiate solid payment terms for a job or even reject underpaid offers, being part of a collective supportive community increases the chance to negotiate for better fees or contracts.⁵⁷ Instead of focusing on individual solutions or coping mechanisms, measures can be taken to improve the terms and conditions of freelance journalism in a more structural way through unionizing or associating.⁵⁸ In the Swedish context, the journalist union have protested against the so-called “rights-grabbing” contracts in which “publishers are allowed to republish material in all their owned outlets without consent from the journalists or participating parties (such as persons interviewed and portrayed in the material), and without additional remuneration to the producer of the material.”⁵⁹

Self-regulatory bodies such as journalistic unions or media policy and regulation at both national, and most preferable, at the supra-national level, can play a crucial role in setting the scene in the contractual regimes in the journalistic labor market to create better working conditions for self-employed journalists. There is a need for more in-depth studying the impact of employment regimes components on journalists’ precarity. In the most ideal situation, business-to-business agreements ensure low risks for both self-employed journalists and news companies as clients.⁶⁰

Governments can also contribute to creating better working conditions by subsidizing journalism without exerting any influence on the substantive implementation. In Belgium, independent news start-ups condemn the government for disrupting the news market because of the reduced rates for newspaper distribution, resulting in a massive amount of 175 million euro indirect subsidies each year,⁶¹ which leads to the expansion of the already strong media conglomerates like DPG Media and Mediahuis. Instead, the financial means donated by national and international governments to independent non-profit organizations such as

⁵⁴ Mark Coddington, “The Wall Becomes a Curtain: Revisiting Journalism’s News-business Boundary,” in *Boundaries of Journalism. Professionalism, Practices and Participation*, eds., Carlson, Matt, and Seth C. Lewis (New York, NY: Routledge, 2015), 67–82; Josephi, and O’Donnell, “The Blurring Line between Freelance Journalists and Self-employed Media Workers,” 139–56.

⁵⁵ Coddington, “The Wall Becomes a Curtain: Revisiting Journalism’s News-business Boundary,” 67–82.

⁵⁶ Mark Deuze, and Tamara Witschge, *Beyond Journalism* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2020), 11.

⁵⁷ Marín-Sanchiz, Carvajal, and Luis González-Esteban, “Survival Strategies in Freelance Journalism: an Empowering Toolkit to Improve Professionals’ Working Conditions”, 1–24; Norbäck, “Glimpses of Resistance: Entrepreneurial subjectivity and Freelance Journalist Work,” 426–48.

⁵⁸ Marín-Sanchiz, Carvajal, and Luis González-Esteban, “Survival Strategies in Freelance Journalism: an Empowering Toolkit to Improve Professionals’ Working Conditions”, 1–24; Norbäck, and Styhre, “Making it Work in Free Agent Work: The Coping Practices of Swedish Freelance Journalists,” 1–11; Vandenberghe, and d’Haenens, “The Netherlands. On Media Concentration and Resilient Freelance Journalists”, 257–96.

⁵⁹ Norbäck, “Glimpses of Resistance: Entrepreneurial subjectivity and Freelance Journalist Work,” 426–48.

⁶⁰ Himma-Kadakas, and Möttus, “Ready to Hire a Freelance Journalist: The Change in Estonian Newsrooms’ Willingness to Outsource Journalistic Content Production,” 27–43.

⁶¹ Christof Vanschoubroek, “De Politieke Strijd over uw Papieren Krant,” *De Standaard*, October 27, 2022, https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20221026_97563290.

journalismfund.eu (supporting unique or innovative projects of self-employed journalists) remain very limited.

The importance of creating a supportive working environment for freelance journalists, with sufficient safeguards for their happiness and well-being, cannot be underestimated. Especially in a time where big media groups provide more of the same kind of “vanilla flavor” news, self-employed journalists can be the ones adding other flavors to our news diet and stimulating innovation in the sector.