

## The Future of Journalistic Work: Its Changing Nature and Implications

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## **Contents**

Introduction.....	4
Understanding the Challenges .....	6
Work and Ideology of Journalism in a Multimedia World .....	13
The Work of Journalists .....	16
The Labour of Journalists .....	18
Journalistic Identity .....	19
Responding to Change: The Role of Stakeholders.....	20
Conclusions and Implications.....	21
Bibliography .....	22
About the Author .....	26
Participants in the Workshop .....	27

## Introduction

This report is the result of an exploratory research project, 'The Future of Journalistic Work', conducted by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (RISJ) in conjunction with the Green Templeton College Future of Work Programme. The project was funded by the Green Templeton College Academic Initiatives Fund. It explored how entrepreneurial journalism is changing the work of journalism, its norms and practices, the organisation and direction of journalistic labour, perceptions of journalists' identity, work and life boundaries, and the implications of these changes for career and financial planning, expected rewards, and career paths of journalists.

Understanding these issues is necessary because the nature of journalistic work and employment is undergoing a significant shift. Technological, social, and economic changes have significantly altered the economics and business models of news organisations. This has led news companies to reduce their journalistic staffs and journalists no longer have the expectation that they will be employed full-time by such organisations throughout their careers.

Concurrently, the internet and digital media have created conditions that have led to the emergence of a new type of work arrangement — entrepreneurial journalism. This differs from 'freelance' journalism, in which journalists sold their labour to multiple news organisations on a contract rather than employment basis. The new entrepreneurial form of labour involves journalists establishing their own small and medium enterprises (SMEs) to produce content, establishing their own distribution mechanisms through websites and blogs, and syndicating their content to other firms. It is based on establishing small-scale journalism enterprises that support one or a small co-operative of journalists and provide coverage of local communities or specific topics.

The challenges faced by the news media in an increasingly digital age are well known. Spurred by the entrance of new media players, falls in advertising revenue, and declining share values, much attention has been paid to questions of media plurality, business models, and the future of public service broadcasters (PSBs). However, beyond the immediate issue of redundancies, relatively little work has been done to examine the impact these changes have had on the profession of journalism and on individual journalists themselves.

This report is designed to open discussion of the issue by clarifying the debate on the changing nature of journalistic work as well as placing these changes in a wider and deeper context. I want to outline the issues, their implications, and set an agenda for future research in the area of journalism studies. Changes in journalism practice and employment raise issues about the implications for the journalistic profession, as institutional employment diminishes or ends, how work changes as integrated firms are replaced by co-operative production forms of labour, and how professions reconstruct identity after a transformation from employment to entrepreneurship. The first part of the report intends to lay out the basis for the analysis of the shifts emerging in journalistic work and employment. In the second part I apply this knowledge specifically to the profession of journalism. The main questions in the first part are, what is the difference between work and labour? Which co-operative production forms of labour can be used by journalists? What characterises professions and how do professions change or keep their common identity while moving from institutional to self-

employment? How similar are employed and self-employed professionals and does the SME sector and the self-employed actually create more jobs than big firms? In the second part of the report, I then apply the more general research of the first part to the work of journalists to analyse the work and labour, ideology and identity of journalism in a multimedia world.

This report is the result of a research project on 'The Future of Journalistic Work', for which a workshop was held at the University of Oxford in March 2014. It is based on the current academic debate about the future of journalistic work and its underlying economic, social, and business conditions. The research is designed to contextualise some of the main issues and developments in the journalistic field within broader changes affecting work and labour more generally. The groundwork for this report was extensive literature research, talks with researchers in the field, and a workshop which brought together leading academics in media studies, business, management, and economics, and independent journalists and representatives of journalistic labour organisations to discuss the implications of these changes.

The report's aim is to raise issues rather than to provide developed answers about the future of journalistic work. It lays out questions that need to be considered and addressed by researchers, journalists, and the news industry in helping journalism continue its transformation in the digital age. To date little research and debate addressing such questions has been carried out and this report is an initial step in this process.

## Understanding the Challenges

### *The Difference between Work and Labour*

Considering the future of journalism, and any craft, trade, or profession, requires understanding a fundamental difference between work and labour, even though both words have inaccurately been used interchangeably in many different contexts, mostly as 'employment of any kind'. Work is understood here as physical or creative effort that produces a deliverable product or accomplishes a task. Labour on the other hand, conceptualised as 'wage labour', is the delivery of services/work by an individual for payment. Hence, a worker sells their labour and an employer buys it (Steinfeld 2009). To put it simply, work is the execution of a task and labour is the selling of this work.

Marx (1975) defined labour as 'making things' and as a 'formative' activity. In his earlier works, he describes it as a process of 'objectification' – work that creates a certain material product. This definition has been frequently criticised (Arendt 1998; Benton 1989; Habermas 1985) since many kinds of work do not seem to fit this definition of labour. New 'immaterial' forms of labour (service sector, educational sector, science, etc.) have developed in post-industrial market economies and societies, which require an essential correction of Marx's definition, his critics argue (Hardt and Negri 2000). Others state that services only differ from material products in the sense that they are immaterial – both can be classified as paid-for human activities (Marshall 1920). However, most theories of labour are based on industrial activities even though the 'modes of production' have dramatically changed. In a new concept of labour, which includes 'informational services', labour is not to be seen any more as an input, but as a relational or interactive learning process (Bandt 1999).<sup>1</sup>

Marcuse (1973) argued that the attempt to find an essential definition of the concept of labour appears pointless since there is an implicit agreement in economic theory to avoid such a definitional concept and to regard labour only as economic activity. The common concept labour 'has received such an indeterminate content through its ordinary uses that it is hardly possible to unequivocally demarcate it' (Marcuse 1973: 9). Auden (1970) states that labour is a job that the individual finds no personal interest in, while work is a job that the individual finds enjoyment in. Hyde (2009) defines work and labour exactly the other way around. He argues that work is what we do 'by the hour' and for money. Labour, on the other hand, is what we do voluntarily – it could be writing a book or raising a child – and is not necessarily related to monetary compensation.

Most theoretical accounts describe work as something that is performed by an individual and labour as the variable that can be monetarily measured and traded between employer and employee. In the 20th century, journalism in most countries developed in a fashion where the work of journalists and journalistic labour went hand-in-hand as most journalists were salaried employees of news organisations. The 21st century, however, is beginning to show evidence of a decoupling of 'acts of journalism' (work) and journalistic employment (labour).

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<sup>1</sup> For a more substantial discussion of Marx's concept of labour and its criticism, see Sayers (2007).



### *Diminishing Institutional Employment*

The reduction in employment of journalists during the past decade cannot be comprehended in isolation as large-scale institutional employment is diminishing in society as a whole. Economic structural change is always accompanied by structural change of the affected professions. Often entire professions and trades are at risk of shrinking dramatically or even disappearing. This does not necessarily mean high unemployment rates since states can absorb negative unemployment effects with a generational break. That is to say, older employees retire and the next generation of employees are educated in different fields to find work elsewhere. In recent years, however, occupational retraining has played a larger role when it comes to major changes in the need for certain professions (Grünert and Lutz 1994). But what if structural change leads to diminishing institutional employment in specific sectors? If an entire profession is affected by social, technological, and economic structural change, and this leads to employees not having the opportunity to find work in other corporations, employees will face situations in which their options are limited. They can become unemployed, change their professions, or use what Schumpeter (1942) called 'creative destruction' and establish new small businesses, co-operatives, become self-employed, or engage in entrepreneurship, as has been observed in industries such as construction, IT and journalism (Winch 1998).

Large corporations tend to encourage employees to follow established processes. Small and medium enterprises (SMEs), on the other hand, typically encourage employees to take risks and innovate to find new ways of increasing efficiency. As SMEs grow into larger firms, they also tend to build up processes designed to reduce risk and set guidelines to keep employees focused on their more specific roles and tasks. When firms disintegrate and become smaller, on the other hand, they tend to become less hierarchical and less organised again. They will often need to change their organisational structures. Hence, new SMEs, disintegrated or newly founded, will be less organised and hierarchical than large corporations. Additionally, the change from large institutional employment to the establishment of many SMEs within a profession leads to a loss of infrastructure within the firms and the overall profession. However, smaller firms can be more efficient in decision-making and communicating since they do not need several layers of management and can rely on flatter organisational structures. As companies' staff sizes shrink, the remaining staff's responsibilities and scope of work increase (Padoan *et al.* 2010).

### *Cooperative Production Forms of Labour*

Changes in economic conditions of enterprises tend to produce changes in the way labour is organised and the news industry appears to be following this pattern. Cooperative production forms of labour can enable entrepreneurial journalists to surmount the difficulties of the transition from institutional employment into new types of employment.

The loss of infrastructure (Lu and Beamish 2001) and economies of scale (the low production volume of SMEs leads to higher costs compared to large corporations) (Bridge *et al.* 1998) of small firms can be overcome by the introduction of co-operative production forms of labour (Keeble and Wilkinson 1999). In particular, regional clusters of SMEs can be an effective

tool to join SME forces and to use the strengths and knowledge of all firms within the cluster.

Outsourcing – the contracting out of a business process to a third-party – has long been seen as the solution to many management problems of SMEs. It gives SMEs the opportunities to get professional help without having to provide services in-house. To maintain the lean operations of integrated firms, co-operative production forms must make use of outsourcing and partnerships (Ogburn 1995). Contracting can be both domestic and foreign (Hira and Hira 2005). Logistics and distribution, for example, are often not taken care of in-house but delegated to a third-party contractor. Contractors can be statutory employees or independent contractors. Independent contractors work for the firm on a regular basis similar to employees. They are however considered self-employed for tax purposes. Independent contractors, on the other hand, generally seek out work from a variety of clients. They are paid on a project-by-project basis.

Cooperative production forms include partnerships, co-operatives, and collaborations between corporations. Collaborations and partnerships with professionals, locally or internationally, can save costs and increase the chances of viability for diminishing industries (Contractor 1990; Contractor and Lorange 1988). Cooperative efforts are also often introduced to broaden the scope of the product to be offered to customers. However, their implementation is somewhat more complicated than partnerships or collaborations. The legal form ‘co-ops’ is used to build community wealth not ownership wealth. These co-operative firms are fundamentally different from other business organisations since they are neither investor-owned companies nor NGOs. However, some scholars argue that the actual differences between co-operatives and corporations are not very large (Hansmann 1999). Co-operatives can be owned by their consumers or the people who work at the co-operative (employees/workers) and give small organisations the opportunity to cut costs and reduce lay-offs. The members (owners) establish a co-operative to get a service, source of supplies, market for goods, or performance of specific occupations, but not a financial compensation on their investment. They benefit in two ways from the co-operative: first, from having the services available, in proportion to the use they make of them; second, earnings are allocated to members based on the amount of business they do with the co-operative (Frederick 1997). Co-operatives exist to help individuals provide services for themselves in nearly all segments of the economy and can be helpful to maintain employment for its members.<sup>2</sup>

Generally, employees in diminishing industries have chances to use alternative forms of labour to sustain their jobs. Yet they face multiple legal, organisational, and infrastructural challenges. In the 20th century, the paradigmatic form of news organisation was the big corporation (whether private or public) that employed journalists. Large news organisations are part of the future of journalistic work too, but other organisational forms are likely to play relatively larger roles (Anderson et al. 2012).

### *Professions – Expert Labour Controlling Knowledge, Skills and Tasks*

Although there is no common agreement about whether journalism is a craft, trade, or profession, many aspects of journalistic work and labour are conducted within the norms of professions.

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<sup>2</sup> For work on the economic impact of cooperatives, see Deller et al. (2009).



Professions are defined as divisions of expert labour – in particular, specialised occupations that are characterised by intensive training or experience that leads to a professional degree or license. They are exclusive occupational groups applying somewhat abstract knowledge to particular cases. The most important aspect of professions is the control of knowledge, skills, and work tasks (Abbott 1988). Professions mostly have professional associations, institutionalised training, licensing, work autonomy, colleague control, codes of ethics, and high standards of professional and intellectual excellence in place (Larson 1979). The traditional professions are medicine, law, the military, the clergy, and university teaching. More recently, accountants, architects, IT specialists, engineers, teachers, technicians, writers, social workers, and others have also been categorised as professions.

Larson (1979) and Freidson (1988) argued that professionals wanted to protect themselves from markets and that professions were not simply a positive force to raise ethical standards, but also a selfish group driven by self-interest, creating guilds in order to control their working conditions, pay, and status. Abbott (1988) transformed the study of professions by arguing that professions did not function independently, but existed within a broader 'system' of competition. He stated that professions were always in competition with each other as they sought to position themselves strategically in the market. They would try to control valuable sectors by analysing market demand based on geographic location or particular types of skills that were needed in an area. Professions can be expected to fight over occupational niches and strive for constant expansion of their sector in order to grow. The often problematic, but also intimate, relations journalists have with public relations professionals can be seen as an example of this.

Professions have special competence in bodies of knowledge linked to central needs and values of the social system; they are devoted to the service of the public. The characteristics of professions vary but there is general scholarly agreement about the broad scope of it. The distinctiveness of professions appears to be based on three dimensions: a cognitive dimension, centred on the body of knowledge, techniques, and training; a normative dimension, focusing on the service orientation of professionals and their distinctive ethics; and an evaluative dimension, centred on comparisons of professions and other occupations, while underscoring the profession's attributes of autonomy and prestige (Larson 1979).<sup>3</sup>

Members of professions are usually bound by some sense of identity, which is experienced as shared expertise. Occupations become communities whose members share a permanent affiliation, an identity, personal commitment, interests, and loyalties. These communities are recognised by professional associations, professional schools, and self-administered codes of ethics. It is not clear how much community and identity would exist without these institutional supports.<sup>4</sup>

The characteristic position of professionals is institutional employment, not self-employment as is often wrongly assumed (Freidson 1988). The vast majority of new and traditional professions have typically been employed rather than self-employed. Furthermore, many professionals who were traditionally self-employed are now moving into employment as well.

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<sup>3</sup> For further literature on the profession of journalism, see Aldridge and Evetts (2003).

<sup>4</sup> For further research on the role of professions and identities, see Davies (2002); for identities in the sector of 'knowledge-intensive companies' see Alvesson (2001) and for identities of the making professions, see Woyseth and Michl (2001).

Lawyers, physicians, dentists, and architects have continuously organised themselves in co-operatives and corporations. However, members of traditionally employed professions such as social work and journalism are finding new opportunities for self-employment.

### *Employed vs. Self-Employed Professionals – More Similar than Expected*

As labour arrangements change, the question arises whether journalists operating independently, rather than as employees of journalistic enterprises, will have different work processes and behaviour than their employed counterparts.

It is often argued that employees have a smaller degree of independence and capacity to control their own work and the 'labour process', while professional employees exercise supervisory and policy-making functions due to their specific knowledge. The corporation relies on the skills of the professionals. That does not mean that they have the power to allocate the resources of the corporation (management). Yet they possess technical autonomy or the right to use discretion and judgement in the performance of their work. Within limits, employed professionals must be able to select the work they do and decide how to do it. These limits are set by decisions by the employer or the management. Hence, they possess a distinct measure of freedom and independence that conventional employees lack. Employed professionals are more independent than conventional employees. However, they do not have control over the organisation they are working for and must do their work in circumstances that are shaped by the structure and resources of their employer.

The argument that the mere fact of self-employment allows greater control over one's work does not seem to have been proven empirically. Studies of the self-employed have shown that it is hard to prove a consistent higher degree of freedom, independence, and capacity to control one's own work (Freidson 1988). Since self-employment needs to produce decent profits in order to make a living, they are still driven by market demands. They are therefore often less independent than expected (Bridenbaugh 2012; Duman 1979; Heinz et Laumann 1982). Carlin called this phenomenon the 'illusion of independence' (1962: 184). In a market economy, one's labour is a commodity whether one sells it to an employer or to a customer. It is rare that one's labour or goods are so valuable as to make consumers supplicants and therefore guarantee one's independence. Self-employment is often rather a 'last chance' instead of a move 'upward' into self-employment. Hence, those who are self-employed are limited by constraints through income and financial needs (due to the lack of an assured regular income), the overall economy and demand, taxation, and state regulation.

We can conclude that employed and self-employed professionals are very similar to each other. The former are more independent and the latter are more restricted than often assumed. The institutions that support the position of the professions in the political economy are the corporations for the employed and the associations for the self-employed. Professions are organisations or corporate bodies with institutions that protect them in the political economy. Their organisation as professions and their sheltering institutions make a significant contribution to their members, whether or not they are employed. Corporations can shelter the employed from organisational forces, and institutional devices can shelter the self-employed from potentially threatening market forces. The features of different forms of

professional work need to be kept in mind as forms of journalistic employment shift from salaried labour for large corporations to a more diverse range of forms of employment, including full-time positions, freelance labour, and self-employment for a broad variety of organisations, including new forms of small start-ups, small- and mid-sized enterprises, and larger corporations.

### *Self-Employment and Job Creation of Self-Employed and SMEs*

As self-employment in journalism rises, understanding self-employment and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) becomes crucial for journalists. Self-employment is often inherited from parents, even though this has rarely been the case in journalism. The total number of self-employed individuals in a country fluctuates depending on the job market and GDP growth. On the one hand, self-employment declines if there is an increase in the number of jobs on the market. On the other hand, a rise in GDP leads to better economic sentiment for entrepreneurship.<sup>5</sup> The number of self-employed Americans is currently at an all-time low (2013). The percentage of self-employed Americans dropped from 25 per cent to only 7 per cent of its workforce between 1950 and 2013.<sup>6</sup> Britain however, has more people working for themselves than ever before (2014), with 14 per cent of its workforce being self-employed.<sup>7</sup>

What do the self-employed worry about that those in other forms of employment may not need to worry about? A poll among entrepreneurs has shown that the self-employed are worried about risk, entrepreneurial failure, falling behind the innovation curve, losing their reputation, losing their team or partners, opportunity cost, losing a steady income, the need to take care of family, retirement planning, insurance, etc. (last two were previously taken care of by employer), long-term customer demand, and tax issues. Self-employment often lacks the tax advantages of incorporation, involves liability (which can be overcome by establishing a legal 'partnership'), and creates worries about having to go back to work for someone else (Bayrasli 2011).

Do small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and the self-employed create the most jobs in today's economies? The economies of scale theory, which dates back to Adam Smith (1937), states that with the increase of production volume, the cost per unit of output declines. The economic consequence is that large firms have lower costs of production due to higher quantity, which leads to long-run growth and job creation in the economy. Small firms on the other hand, have higher costs, lower profits, and low growth, and are responsible for marginal job creation. In 1979, Birch's study on the 'Job Generation Process' changed the prevailing view. The longitudinal study analysing job creation at the firm level, which included 12 million records, found that most new jobs were created by small firms, not by giant corporations. 60 per cent of all jobs in the US were found to be generated by firms that had 20 employees or less. However, recent studies show that gross job creation (only including new jobs, no subtraction) and destruction rates tend to decline with firm size but there is no relationship between net job

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<sup>5</sup> For further literature on the relationship between self-employment and unemployment, see Thurik et al. (2008).

<sup>6</sup> US Bureau of Labor Statistics ([www.bls.gov](http://www.bls.gov)); US Census Bureau ([www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov)); accessed Apr. 2014.

<sup>7</sup> Office for National Statistics ([www.statistics.gov.uk](http://www.statistics.gov.uk)); Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development ([www.cipd.co.uk](http://www.cipd.co.uk)); accessed Apr. 2014.

creation (firm growth) and firm size. Large plants and firms account for most newly created (and newly destroyed) manufacturing jobs (Davis et al. 1996; Strotmann 2002; Wagner 1995, 2002, 2003). These recent studies support Gibrat's law of proportionate growth. Hence, job creation by large firms will be greater than that of small firms, since the former have a larger employment base at the start of any time period (Bridge et al. 2009). Thus, a great number of new SMEs would be needed to employ the number of journalists that are no longer employed in large corporations.

## Work and Ideology of Journalism in a Multimedia World

Moving on from more general observations about professions and the shift to entrepreneurship, I now want to focus on the profession of journalism. The recent convergence process of combining print, photographic, and video journalism brings challenges to all departmentalised news organisations. It threatens a news culture that prefers individual expert systems over teamwork and knowledge-sharing (Singer 2004). New media technologies challenge one of the most fundamental 'truths' in journalism: that the professional journalist is the one who determines what the public knows about the world (Fulton 1996; Singer 1998). Mastering newsgathering and storytelling techniques in all media formats ('multi-skilling'), as well as integrating digital network technologies and a new producer-consumer relationship have become the biggest challenges of journalism in recent years (Bardoel and Deuze 2001; Pavlik et al. 2001; Yau and Al-Hawamdeh 2001). Many journalists have had to acquire new skills, a form of 'upskilling' of the profession as journalists master more and more formats. Simultaneously, however, there are concerns that greater time pressures and reduced editorial resources have led to 'deskilling' in other areas of more traditional journalistic expertise and professional practice in terms of background research, fact checking, and reporting based on multiple, independent sources. The development is not unidirectional and the same across the occupation, nor is even homogeneous within individual news organisations. Instead it seems broadly in line with previous findings from economic sociology, where researchers have found no across-the-board upskilling or deskilling within or across professions, but a marked tendency towards the polarisation of skills from the 1980s onwards (Gallie 1991).

Journalists have an occupational ideology (a system of beliefs about what 'real journalism' is) with claims to an exclusive role and status in society, which keeps together their professional identity (Deuze 2005). Conceptualising journalism as an ideology primarily means understanding journalism in terms of how journalists give meaning to their work. Journalists identify themselves more easily with the profession of journalism than with their employer (Russo 1998). The norms embraced by journalists around the world show considerable variation (Hallin and Mancini 2012; Hanitzsch 2011). The ideal-typical values of the journalistic ideology, however, are the following:

- *public service*: journalists provide a public service (as watchdogs or 'newshounds', active collectors and disseminators of information);
- *objectivity*: journalists are impartial, neutral, objective, fair, and (thus) credible;
- *autonomy*: journalists must be autonomous, free, and independent in their work;
- *immediacy*: journalists have a sense of immediacy, actuality, and speed (inherent in the concept of 'news'); and
- *ethics*: journalists have a sense of ethics, validity, and legitimacy (Golding and Elliott 1979; Merritt 1995; Kovach and Rosenstiel 2007; Deuze 2005).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> For further studies concerned with the work and labour of journalists, see Bardoel (1996); Bealor Hines (2001); Boczkowski (2004); Deuze (2008); Donsbach and Klett (1993); Elliott (1988); Nordenstreng and Topuz (1989); Pavlik (1999).

Multimedia is heavily influencing the journalistic ideology. Top-down journalism is contrasted with bottom-up journalism (e.g. more inclusion of social network content etc.). Professional objectivity stands in contrast to inclusiveness. Journalistic autonomy has become collaborative in its implications, not solitary (with colleagues and a potential worldwide audience that interacts with each other), and immediacy has to be viewed in the context of 24/7 online publishing. Many recent studies highlight the issues resulting from journalists' reluctance to innovate, share knowledge, and embrace the new technology (Stevens 2002; Singer 2004; Boczkowski 2005), in part because it changes the process and nature of journalistic labour (Gade and Raviola 2009) and because it is disrupting their professional status and autonomy (Witschge and Nygren 2009). We are living in a digital, globalised, multicultural, and interconnected world that has changed the work of journalists tremendously in recent decades. Consequently, journalistic ideology might have to reinvent itself as well.

Sociologists have documented such changes in professional self-perception and value-orientation in other occupations, including most notably white-collar professionals working in information and communication technology industries. Software engineers in the US, from the 1990s onwards, have increasingly oriented themselves not towards employment security in large corporations like IBM, Microsoft, or Xerox, but towards 'employability security' by maintaining a constantly evolving skill-set relevant to a wide range of potential customers and employers (Kanter 2001). More broadly, workers in this sector are increasingly encouraged to see their work as a form of 'venture labour' where even ordinary rank-and-file freelancers and employees see their work as a form of investment with a risk/reward profile, rather than as a secure and potentially career-long position (Neff 2012).

Far from being the only profession undergoing rapid and dislocating change, the shifts taking place within journalism are arguably a reflection of wider changes produced by the so-called 'New Machine Age' (Brynjolfsson and McAfee 2014). Here, as a result of the growth in computing capability and the increasing role of 'big data', many jobs which were once organised around tasks are instead being automated. While this has led to significant changes in the fields of transport, logistics, and administration, within the newsroom it has contributed to the process of 'churnalism' and even experimentation with the auto-generation of reports, particularly in the financial media. Moreover, alongside these specific changes, the broader effect, both on journalism and within the wider economy, has been the creation of a 'squeezed middle' in an era of growing economic polarisation and income inequality.

In part because of these growing technological possibilities Western economies are witnessing a shift away from institutional employment. Although by no means unidirectional – doctors and lawyers are for example now less likely to be self-employed than in the past – the result has been the growth in the number of co-operatives, partnerships, and self-employment, the latter particularly affecting journalism which has long had a tradition of freelance work. Nor have those who continue to work within institutional settings been unaffected by these technological and socio-economic changes. Today increasing numbers of employees are either switching professions or continuing to work for companies who now expect their workers to engage in

greater multi-skilling and multi-tasking. In this respect, journalism may well be far behind many other occupations in terms of its gradual adjustment to a new work environment that is generally more precarious and polarised than that of the second half of the 20th century (Ross 2009).



## The Work of Journalists

Given these changes journalists' day-to-day work has, in some cases, dramatically altered. At one end of the spectrum – particularly amongst regional providers – much journalistic work no longer contains a genuine 'news' element but is instead largely the recycling of press releases and other forms of PR. At the other, a return to long-form journalism is noticeable even among non-traditional outlets such as Buzz Feed. Indeed, more broadly, where once factual reportage was the mainstay, journalists are today increasingly engaged in the provision of analysis and comment – particularly those working for high-end or premium outlets. Such shifts are arguably representative of the broader erosion of the departmentalised and expert system which long dominated traditional newsrooms, as well as the trend towards multi-skilling.

Perhaps nowhere has this trend towards multi-skilling been more apparent than in the technical and computing abilities that journalists are today expected to possess. Alongside the growing role of audience analytics, part of the reason for this is the perceived need for news outlets to engage in 'Social Journalism' where individual journalists communicate directly and in multifaceted ways with readers and users. Such social journalism frequently involves journalists branding themselves through operating personal blogs and twitter feeds, etc. as well as interacting as representatives of their news outlet. More radically perhaps, the movement towards social journalism also involves the repositioning of audiences from news recipients to news sources, with journalists using posts, statuses, and comments on social media as a means of information gathering. Together, this new social form of journalism is increasing both the amount and pace of information input, as well as the output of journalistic work, arguably leading to cognitive overload, with journalists less able to filter and analyse their sources and detect and remove biases.

Indeed, one could argue that social journalism and the ever-increasing amounts of audience information held by news organisations are redefining the very category of news-worthiness, as well as how journalists write, display, present, and follow up their stories. In a world of instant connectivity journalists are now always 'on deadline' and acutely aware of their competition both from other news providers and the myriad of other content available online. While this of course generates great benefits it nonetheless raises new (and not so new) questions over information quality, objectivity, autonomy, and the capacity to mentally and physically survive in a more pressured environment. In order to understand these challenges better, further research needs to be undertaken on questions such as:

- To what extent are changes in journalist work practices country specific or are there differences in practices within and between Europe, America, the BRIC nations, and the global South?
- Are these changes equally reflected in all types of journalism (print, broadcast, online) and in different sectors (local, national, specialist, PSB, etc.)?
- With journalists themselves in charge of more of the value chain and able to publish instantly and autonomously, is the role of editors and proprietors also changing?
- What effects are big data and greater analytics having on the way journalists select, write, and present their stories?

- Is the growing practice of social journalism making journalists more or less likely to rely on traditional sources of information?
- What impact has greater and more direct interaction with audiences had on journalists? How has the opportunity for greater falsifiability affected how journalists select and write their stories?
- Is an increase in both speed and pressure affecting journalists' health, welfare, and work–life balance and if so in what ways?
- How are journalists of different ages and backgrounds reacting to these changes?

## The Labour of Journalists

Alongside this change to the working practices of journalism there have also been considerable shifts in what can be termed journalistic labour. As with a number of other professions there has been a growth in the number of individual entrepreneurs – much of it ‘forced entrepreneurship’ as a result of redundancies and the shrinking pool of available work. Though freelancers have always had a place within the news industry, the growth in self-employment nonetheless poses new and difficult challenges. Perhaps the most important of these is the increased risks self-employment brings and the potential for entrepreneurial failures either through falling behind the innovation curve, lack of customer demand, or losing partners. Alongside this greater risk is the challenge of having to undertake new tasks previously provided by the employer, such as retirement planning, administration, and insurance, all while enjoying a less favourable tax status compared to limited liability firms. The effects of this switch towards greater self-employment within the news industry are as yet uncertain, however, it is inconceivable that they will not have some impact on decisions about career trajectories, family timing, and indeed whether or not to become a journalist. Perhaps most importantly for those who are self-employed, many journalists are no longer journalists alone; other activities – notably consulting, public relations, and communications – supplement journalistic activities and incomes. The marriage of these activities, while often financially necessary, nonetheless raises questions of objectivity, story selection, and bias, as well as whether journalists are capable of marrying the humility needed for journalism and the self-confidence required for marketing. This is a question at a given point in time – can one cover an issue independently while simultaneously doing consultancy for clients active in the same area? It is also a question that concerns the career paths of journalists over time – it is one thing to cover a company today, knowing you will also cover it tomorrow. It is another to cover it today, knowing you may want to work for it tomorrow.

While the switch towards greater freelancing deserves attention, it is important to note that the nature of institutional employment has also altered in recent years. For a start, the primary benefit of working for a company, stability, is being eroded as both individual companies and the industry itself change rapidly and the possibility arises that many current organisations will not survive. Moreover, the skills that firms seek from their employees are altering. Alongside a desire for greater technical competence firms are increasingly seeking to promote ‘intrapreneurship’ to enable their firms to adapt to these new market conditions. Further questions on journalistic labour include, among others:

- How far is journalistic entrepreneurship desired or forced?
- How do journalists foresee their career trajectory and is journalism becoming less of a vocation and more of a life-phase?
- Are the patterns witnessed in journalistic labour reflected in other similar professions?
- Can consultancy and journalism be reconciled and if so how?
- How has the profession responded to changing labour in the past?
- Can a profession that is now increasingly both relatively poorly paid and insecure be maintained in the long term?

## Journalistic Identity

When taken together these changes to the nature of journalistic work and labour are arguably transforming the very nature of journalistic identity – an identity previously based on shared experiences and shared values.

In terms of common experience, the growth in self-employment is arguably opening up a wider divide between journalists employed in institutions and those who work for themselves, as well as between those who marry journalistic activity with consultancy services and those who do not. Indeed, for some, questions arise about the very possibility of maintaining such an identity outside of an institutional setting. Similarly, the changing nature of work within the journalistic profession challenges the notion that journalism still entails values of public service, objectivity, immediacy, and autonomy, and if such a shared code can continue in the face of economic and social pressures. Questions need to be asked about the extent to which even the official accreditation of 'journalist' prevalent in many European countries – notably France – continues to appear relevant to those it has been attached to.

- How do journalists perceive their own identity?
- Is there now a difference between undertaking 'acts of journalism' and being a journalist?
- Where do older journalist self-descriptions such as 'reporter' now fit in?
- How do journalists themselves – across generations, status, and types of employment – actively negotiate and renegotiate their professional identity?
- Is the occupation itself becoming increasingly polarised between securely employed and precarious labour, between many replaceable and relatively deskilled rank-and-file journalists and a few high-profile stars?

## Responding to Change: The Role of Stakeholders

What then are the possibilities for those interested in either halting or influencing these changes to the work of journalism? Here, our answers will depend very much on how we conceptualise the causes of this change. For those holding either a Marxist or neo-liberal position – where current changes are the products either of the inexorable processes of capitalism or the inevitable shift towards a more connected and globalised economy – the prospects for moulding or retarding change appear bleak. Thankfully, however, recent trends in field of economics and management, where the focus has been on how change is provoked and mediated through institutions and capabilities, open up greater possibilities. First, it is possible to look to specific institutions, be they government or civil society, to generate more stability within the news industry, perhaps by providing greater legal protection for content creators or introducing content taxes. Second, attention could be paid to the role of actors, notably journalists themselves, within the news industry who through working more reflectively have the capacity to challenge the system as it stands today. Finally, the future by its very nature is unknown, thus conversations and dialogue between different actors open up the possibility for different patterns of journalistic work and labour tomorrow.

Such actions have great potential but they are necessarily long-term solutions, so what can be done to help journalists adapt to changing conditions now? One answer might be for journalists to better organise themselves either through existing representative organisations (trade unions and professional associations) that could adapt to their changing needs or by forming new institutions with the work of the Freelance Community of the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) and the Society for Freelance Editors and Proofreaders (SfEP) as interesting examples. Outside self-organisation other stakeholders also have a role to play. Schools of journalism here have an obvious job to do, with greater emphasis being placed on both technical and entrepreneurial skills. Alongside educational institutions, existing employers also need to improve the training of journalists for this newer age, as well as working to provide internal champions for the ‘intrapreneurs’ they claim to desire. Finally, academics, so often external spectators, need to be offered a seat at the table in order to provide the insight and experience that comes from studying these issues in a deeper context and over a longer period.

- In order to secure the future of journalism do certain institutions require saving and if so how and by whom?
- Who are the actors that can shape through conversations and dialogue the future of journalism?
- How can we make journalists more self-reflective and directly engaged in changing the future of their profession?
- What kind of structures need to be put in place to facilitate intrapreneurship within existing companies – and are small and medium-sized firms capable of doing this?
- What should we train journalists for and how should we teach the skills which will be needed in 15 years’ time, particularly at a time when educational costs are rising and rewards are diminishing?

## Conclusions and Implications

This report shows that the changes occurring in journalism have significant implications for the work and labour of journalists, whether they remain in traditional employment or pursue careers as independent journalists, members of journalist co-operatives, or journalistic entrepreneurs.

Many of the changes that seem to be underway in journalism – at least in the Western world – are promoting the rise of more flexible and often precarious forms of employment, a greater variety of organisations employing journalists, a greater degree of skills polarisation and accompanying greater diversity in the risks and rewards for journalists. These are broadly parallel to similar changes underway in other white-collar occupations.

Diminishing institutional employment of journalists can be seen not just as a threat, but as a chance for new flexible forms of labour. The new more cooperative forms can safeguard jobs in journalism. However, a reinvention of a 'new' journalistic identity and a stronger organisation of the journalistic profession overall seem necessary for that to succeed in the long run.

The convergence process, multi-skilling, the need to integrate digital network technologies, and a new producer–consumer relationship have become the largest challenges for journalism today. Consultancy and entre/intrapreneurship are now becoming part of journalistic work and the expansion of the profession has diluted the identity of journalism.

The precise nature, extent, and consequences of these changes are still poorly understood, in part because empirical research on the changing nature of journalistic work and journalistic labour is still limited, partly because scholarship in journalism and the media has not always engaged directly with the broader literature in economics, sociology, and management.

The aim of this report is to bring together key insights about the ways work and labour are changing today from across the social sciences and to identify key questions for understanding the changing nature of journalistic work specifically. By extension these have consequences not only for journalists themselves, but also for media organisations and society more broadly.

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## **Participants of the Workshop**

Green Templeton College, University of Oxford, 4 March, 2014

- Kieran Cooke, [Climatenewsnetwork.net](http://Climatenewsnetwork.net)
- Mick Fealty, [Sluggerotoole.com](http://Sluggerotoole.com)
- Ian Hargreaves, University of Cardiff
- Dylan Jones-Evans, University of West England (presented)
- François Nel, University of Central Lancaster and Digital Editors Network
- Rasmus Kleis Nielsen, Roskilde University and Reuters Institute, University of Oxford (presented)
- John Oliver, University of Bournemouth
- Robert G. Picard, Reuters Institute, University of Oxford (presented)
- Philipp Rottwilm, University of Oxford (presented)
- Jane B. Singer, City University, London (presented)
- Aidan White, former general secretary, International Federation of Journalists
- Marc Thompson, Said Business School, University of Oxford and Director Green Templeton College Future of Work Programme (presented)

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