

## Venture Labor, Media Work, and the Communicative Construction of Economic Value: Agendas for the Field and Critical Commentary<sup>1</sup>



### Freelancing as the Good Life?

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This article asks how venture labor manifests in the work of producing journalism on a freelance basis in a time of labor precarity. While freelancing offers journalists much-desired flexibility and autonomy, it is also a way for corporations to offload the risk of producing media onto individuals, infusing freelance work with instability. Freelancers earn low wages and face increasing pressure to work for no pay, have limited social protections, and are presented with exploitative contracts for their work. In the face of competing risks and rewards, collective action holds potential for improving freelancers' conditions.

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As media firms continue to outsource work to freelancers, part-time, and contract workers, media work—like work across the labor market—has come to be characterized by precarity. Thousands of media workers have been laid off in recent years, and emerging models of online journalism, heralded as journalism's savior, continue the process of destandardizing journalistic work, drawing on aggregated information, software-generated content, and piecemeal writing sourced from the growing freelance labor pool. In popular discourse, the myth of the freelancer persists, not only as a quick fix for job scarcity but also as liberation from rigid schedules and office routines, a direct route to flexibility and work-life balance. In this view, freelancing is a ticket to "the good life." And despite many media freelancers reporting high job satisfaction, at the same time, they express concern about income instability and the challenge of earning a living on freelance wages. These insights emerge from my research into the nature

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of precarious employment in journalism and the implications for media in Canada (N. S. Cohen, 2016). For the research, I conducted an online survey of 200 self-identified freelance journalists across Canada and interviewed freelance worker organizations and unions. I find that freelance journalism is marked by deep contradictions and tensions that need to be interrogated by attending to the labor process and through a critical political economy lens, which has generally been sidelined in research on cultural labor.

Historically, journalists have pursued freelance work in an effort to gain control over the conditions of their work and the terms under which their labor power is engaged. Many decide to freelance so they can write more interesting stories, work fewer hours, and write for multiple publications. In some ways, freelancing represents the ultimate in journalistic independence, as writers can detach themselves from media firms and escape the structural constraints imposed on staff journalists, which has long been a subject of critique of communication studies scholars. However, most freelance writers in Canada and beyond earn low pay, experience insecurity, have limited social protections, and experience declining control over their work and working lives.

Freelancers have long accepted low wages and uncertainty as a calculated tradeoff for the freedom freelancing offers (every freelance how-to manual contains a requisite, but increasingly unfunny, quip about the impoverished writer). But the political economy of journalistic production has changed over the past few decades, and media companies have intensified practices of exploitation enabled through freelance employment relations. My research makes these lines of exploitation clear by attending to the labor process, or the relations of control and contestation at the point of production, and by drawing on Marx's theorizing of labor (S. Cohen, 1987). Although freelancers often seem removed from the labor process because they work outside of a workplace and employment relationship, their status as self-employed workers enables intensified exploitation, or the extraction of surplus value from workers who work for a variety of "clients" rather than a single employer. I examine two such strategies: increased extraction of value from writers' unpaid labor time—or the large and expanding quantity of unpaid work required to produce articles on a freelance basis, which lowers wages—and, once articles are sold, the continuation of extracting value through publishers' appropriation of ownership of writers' works. Freelancers are increasingly required to sign contracts that give away, for example, "all rights, in perpetuity, throughout the universe" (PWAC, 2006, p. 35), including rights for media formats yet to be invented.

The great power imbalance between individual freelancers and the media corporations for which they work troubles our understanding of freelancing as a model for the good life—at least in how freelancing currently exists. The ongoing shift from full-time to precarious employment is not just a worker-led response to the desire for flexibility, but at the same time a key strategy for publishers intent on lowering production costs. Freelance writers' experiences of long hours, overwork, intermittent and low pay, and highly individualized coping strategies are directly linked to their self-employed status. This status generates contradictory experiences, manifesting primarily in the way freelancers face declining material conditions, yet report a sense of enjoyment from their work. This flows from freelancers' positioning as entrepreneurs—the ideal form of self-employment—who are engaged in purely commercial transactions with publishers and who have immediate control over their labor process, but who also belong to a class of workers facing declining power, autonomy, and control.

Despite growing labor scholarship in communication studies, there remains a need for continual scrutiny of media workers' conditions. We need to clarify the links between precarious forms of employment in media industries and the type of media texts it is possible to produce under such conditions. The chance to work on critical, creative, or autonomous journalism is the reason that many writers decide to become freelancers in the first place. But opportunities for Canadian freelancers to write interesting, creative, critical, or investigative works—and to be paid for those works—are shrinking. Writers working for pennies a word find they need to work faster and produce more to earn a living, which limits the amount of time they can invest in their work and encourages writers to focus on articles that can be produced quickly and that can be sold. Market relations have always shaped what writers could write, but precarity adds an extra edge of insecurity that further binds freelance writers and their works to the commodity form. A related issue is who can afford to be a journalist these days. The pressure to do unpaid and low-paid work to become established as a media worker or to gain the "experience" to necessary to freelance successfully limits who is able to afford to pursue work in media industries, cementing already existing class and racial inequalities in media.

The aim of such a critique is to develop a basis on which change can be made. And so I conclude by pointing toward emergent efforts in Canada and beyond to collectively organize freelance journalists. Organizations like the Canadian Freelance Union, the Canadian Media Guild's Freelance Branch, the Europe-based Freelancers' Movement, and the National Writers Union in the United States, as well as unionization efforts under way by digital journalists, are developing and renewing efforts to improve conditions for freelance journalists. Much is at stake in this struggle, and action-oriented research into labor conditions can make a valuable contribution.

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