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The Current Up, Yet Down Status of Freelance Journalism

In 2011, freelance photojournalist James Foley was hired to cover the civil war that had started in Libya. In April, Foley and three other journalists were captured and taken hostage by local guerrilla forces. After 45 days in captivity, Foley's employer, *Boston Globe*, and his family arranged with the Libyan government to have the journalists released.

However, Foley was determined to continue to cover the dangerous situations around the world. Later in 2011, he found himself once again covering a civil war, but this time in Syria. One year later, Foley was captured by ISIS forces and was held in captivity for two years. In 2014, Foley was beheaded and killed in a video that was seen by millions.

After the tragic video, Foley's parents said, "We have never been prouder of our son Jim, he gave his life trying to expose the world to the suffering of the Syrian people."

Foley and many other freelance journalists want to inform the world on what is happening in the world, even in the most dangerous places. However, their hard work and determination only gives them potential suffering and a lack of support.

Whether freelance journalists are writing about stories from abroad or at home, the current trends of this profession prove the job to be difficult, unreliable, and unsustainable.

However, in the face of all this, the number of freelance journalists are increasing all over the world. According to Mark Spilsbury, from 2000-2015 in the United Kingdom, overall levels

of freelance journalists have increased from 59,000 to 72,000 and this number continues to grow today.

Spilsbury explains that this increase can be largely attributed to multiple factors. For one, people are having a changed-mindset. A greater amount of people find themselves valuing freedom in their profession and finding enjoyment in the acts of doing it themselves.

In addition to this, Spilsbury finds that new markets and new technologies are also setting up people to go freelance. New technology has allowed for lower costs and more ways to work remotely. This new technology also creates new markets, such as on the Internet, for freelancers to find work and publishers.

In an interview with Assistant Professor of Communication and Media Studies at St. Norbert Mark Glantz, the emergence of new and smaller markets set up more opportunities for freelance journalists.

“I think that as we continue to see the proliferation of new channels and new news organizations,” said Glantz, “the smaller, newer, and less established a news organization is the more likely they are to rely on outside help in the form of freelance journalists.”

Freelance journalism is also an inviting profession for older demographics as well. Spilsbury highlights that freelance journalists tend to be older and this is because they find this work to be rewarding, even past retirement age. This can be seen as Spilsbury references a RSA research survey that showed that the number of over-65s, that have entered self-employment, has increased by 140 percent.

Many believe that journalists enter into self-employment because they can not find any jobs or that the market has forced them to. Spilsbury describes this kind of factor as “push” factor as the market pushes them towards freelancing.

“The question is whether the rise in self-employment is a result of a drive to embrace self-employment or whether people are turning to self-employment as a result of a stagnating labour market,” said Spilsbury.

However, Spilsbury finds that this is not the case. In fact, most people are “pulled” towards freelance journalism as they want to enter into this field.

In his article, Spilsbury shows a National Council for the Training of Journalists survey done in 2016 that asked around 600 journalists their reasons for going freelance. 83 percent of these journalists responded that they had chose to.

In the same survey, 82 percent said that they were not seeking to leave freelance journalism and 53 per cent have the intention of still being freelance in five years’ time.

This apparent increase and stability in freelance journalism begs the question of where they get employed or how they find their source of income in this vastly growing career.

According to the NCTJ survey in 2016 referenced in Spilsbury’s article, 49 percent of freelance journalists work in the online sector and 41 percent work for national newspapers.

Also, when journalists work for these clients they tend to stay with the same ones. In the same NCTJ survey, 67 percent of freelance journalists work with the same client all the time.

According to Spilsbury, when journalists get paid by their clients, it is largely through commission. For many, this is the only job and source of income that they have. The NCTJ

survey shows that 65 percent of freelance journalists do not have a second occupation.

Additionally, the survey shows that these journalists work an average of 34 hours a week.

With the sheer amount of freelance journalists present and the sole dependence on this job, these journalists find it hard to get by.

According to Dominic Ponsford, freelance journalists in the United Kingdom typically earned around £20,000 a year in 2015. Ponsford reports that this low income puts around one in three journalists on state benefits. To put this in perspective, he reports from a NCTJ survey that the median salary for full-time journalists in 2015 was £30,884 and the United Kingdom median salary overall is £27,645.

According to the National Union of Journalists, more than 80 percent of freelancers said their income could not keep up with the cost of living and 60 percent said that they have suffered financial hardships. Furthermore, 90 percent of freelancers said their rates had not increased in the past year and more than one in five said that they have been asked to do work without pay at all.

“The growing trend for outlets (especially online) to offer no payment for work citing ‘exposure’”, said Ponsford.

“In a lot of ways, a freelance journalist’s labor is being exploited by the news,” said Glantz, “organizations that decide we could use what you do, but we are not going to pay you, really in any way that has worth to us.”

This is a drastic difference in income, especially in relation to full-time journalists. The extreme disparity between the income of freelance journalists and employed journalists is concerning because it displays the lack of benefits and support that freelance journalists have.

Freelance journalists and full-time journalists essentially do the same job, yet receive completely different salaries. However, this is the case because of the multiple problems that face freelancers when it comes to wage.

One of the first issues that they face comes from the economics basic of supply and demand. With the ever-expanding supply of freelance journalists increasing, the price for their services are inevitably going down. Rates will continue to decrease as these journalists will work for less because they need the money.

“The basic problem with freelance journalism now is that the rates for the job have collapsed as has the amount of commissioned work publications will entertain,” said Ponsford.

According to the National Union of Journalists, a number of freelance journalists said they were able to negotiate rates for their work, but the majority said they had to settle for a given fee. For these journalists, there will always be someone that is willing to do the job cheaper. If they do not accept the rate given to them, companies can easily find someone else that will do it.

“By its nature, it’s just not steady work. The same company that decided they could pay you in October might not need anything from you for another four months,” said Glantz.

Spilsbury references a freelance journalist’s response in the NCTJ survey as they said, “Freelance rates are poor and due to the sheer number of freelances, companies can keep rates low as they can pick and choose who they use.”

Another wage problem that freelance journalists face is late payment.

“The real downside to freelance work is not being paid on time (or being paid less than agreed) and the humiliation of having to chase for what you are due,” said Ponsford.

Lastly, freelance journalists and what they write about solely relies on the world around them. The content that they can cover is shaped around current events and can limit their pay even more.

An example of this came when Donald Trump was elected. For months after that and still today, the media has latched onto anything that is Trump.

According to Mridu Khullar Relph, this means that media companies are buying on Trump, but are not looking for anything else.

“If you’re not hearing back on your non-Trump pitches or if you’re finding that budget cuts from your regular clients are affecting your income, it *may have absolutely nothing to do with you*,” said Relph.

The content of stories that clients look for are always in flux and that adds extra stress to freelancers. One month a freelancer may be selling high on what topic, but in the next month, it could plummet and that spells disaster for their scarce income.

Because of these difficulties, many freelancers, like James Foley, turn to go abroad to find positions. They do this because, recently, large media corporations have started to shut down their outposts in foreign countries and these corporations still need the news from there. Instead of having their own staff abroad and having to pay them, they turn to freelancers to fill in these gaps.

“Less and less money in newspapers, less and less money in news. So, most news organizations, if they ever have those kinds of outposts, they are shutting them down,” said Glantz, “and freelance journalists are actually filling that gap.”

There will always be organizations in need of foreign correspondence and this type of content, and that is why many freelancers find themselves covering wars and conflicts in foreign countries.

According to José Gonzalez, this increase in foreign correspondence is certainly the case, as technology has improved allowing for more independent journalism to arrive in foreign countries, especially in the Middle East.

However, these freelancers go to these foreign countries without the necessary training, supervision, or insurance. Valentina Ieri finds this increasingly more dangerous as the conflicts have gotten worse in recent years.

“Since the civil uprising of the Arab Spring and the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011, reporters are facing increasing threats, from abduction, to imprisonment, kidnapping and ultimately murder,” said Ieri.

Additionally, Gonzalez writes about just how dangerous the conflict in Syria has been.

“Since the revolution began, Syria has become the most dangerous country in the world for journalists,” said Gonzalez. “In its 2013 annual report, the Committee to Protect Journalists counted at least 29 journalists killed while working in Syria.”

“In addition to deaths, kidnapping has been used as a method of silencing journalists, with over 60 cases reported in 2013 alone.”

Also, in comparison with full-time foreign correspondents, freelancers have nothing to aid them. This makes their already dangerous job even more so.

Allison Shelley, a freelancer herself, wrote about this pressing issue after the death of James Foley.

“And freelancers, including those on regular ‘stringing’ contracts, almost never have the same support that staffers do,” said Shelley.

“They don’t have the security guards, safe housing, well-paid fixers and expert logistical help from their institutions,” said Shelley, “and those things can make all the difference.”

According to Alysia Santo, the reason for this lack of aid stems from the economic changes in the news industry.

“With all the cutbacks, there are more freelancers out in conflicts, gathering the news, than ever before,” said Santo, “And the level of support that’s available in general is completely curtailed.”

By suffering from their own cutbacks, media corporations use freelance journalists as cheap labor to cover their stories. They realize that it would be more expensive to send a full-time staff out with all their obligations, than to hire a freelancer who would be willing to cover the story without any coverage.

“There’s less money in journalism, and it is less expensive for a news organization to hire a freelance journalist, than it is to hire a full-time journalist,” said Glantz.

Without insurance, these freelancers are responsible for any expenses caused by injuries that they may suffer. Yet, when a freelance journalist attempts to obtain insurance for their time, they are met with only a few options.

Santo reports that Reporters Without Borders offer insurance plans specifically for those going to cover conflicts. The “extended plan” can be bought to cover them for their time, but the premiums are expensive, especially for the typically already low-income freelance journalist.

“The minimum insurance premium for one month in Afghanistan is \$567. To add coverage for accidental death or dismemberment is extra; a payout of \$100,000 costs \$192 per month,” said Santo.

For a freelancer, this is a hefty amount that is shouldered by themselves the majority of times.

“Today, about 80 percent of insured freelancers pay for their own policies,” said Santo.

With this heavy burden of insurance placed on themselves, freelancers often times try to negotiate with the employer. However, many freelancers do not mention insurance out of fear of losing the job. Similarly to writing locally, there will always be someone who will do it for cheaper.

The media corporations see these people as potential stories, rather than people who could potentially get hurt. Santo, in her article, quotes veteran freelancer Michael Kamber on this issue.

“A lot of newspapers and magazines, they use you when they need you and then they walk away,” said Kamber.

“When they don’t need you anymore, there’s no follow up. I’ve seen it; people get hurt, and they’re not taken care of.”

But, for many young and inexperienced journalists, taking these kinds of dangerous stories is the only way to get into the industry.

“The Libyan war appeared to draw a large number of unprepared and inexperienced photographers to the war zone,” said Kamber, “It’s the way in, it’s always been the way in. It’s the way I got in.”

Foreign freelance journalism is the start for many great journalistic careers and that is why these practices need to improve.

“But the journalist is the little guy. We can’t put this on a 22-year-old journalist starting out with a few hundred dollars in the bank,” said Kamber.

There has to be support for these young journalists starting out and the problems that are occurring are not impossible to solve.

“There are ways to do this, it’s a partnership. I’m not putting it all on the companies,” said Kamber, “It would be great if these organizations came together and had a pooled policy to put freelancers under.”

Already this kind of partnership and organizational cohesiveness is starting to develop. Valentina Ieri reports that over 85 organizations have signed up for A Culture of Safety Alliance and committed to endorse the 14 Freelance Journalists Safety Principles. These principles outline some practices that both the journalist and news organizations should follow to further protect themselves.

ACOS Alliance writes before the principles, “In a time of journalistic peril, news organizations and journalists must work together to protect themselves, their profession and their vital role in global society.”

Freelance reporters are also taking a step in the right direction by taking classes to orientate themselves on how to handle life-threatening situations and battlefield safety. These courses are put on by the Reporters Instructed in Saving Colleagues, but they still need to do more, according to Santo.

“Some wonderful organizations have sprung up to try to help, but there's only so much they can do,” said Santo.

Yet, any step towards better conditions and safety for freelance journalists is positive. As technology continues to evolve and news companies continue to shift, freelance journalism will always be there.

Freelance journalism is certainly on the rise and is looking unlikely to stop. More and more writers are pursuing the career of informing the public and showcasing stories that need to be seen. These journalists are clearly not in this field for the money, but do so because they enjoy it and feel the need to serve the public.

Even in the current trends of freelance journalism, people continue to write. Even in the midst of low wages, late payments, dangerous conditions, and lack of support, people still strive to be self-employed journalists.

Imagine if society and media corporations supported these journalists as much as they support staffers or full-time reporters. The desire to write would increase exponentially, journalism would get back some credibility, and foreign correspondents will come back to their families safely.

James Foley and many other freelancers gave their courageous lives for the public and to inform the world of their problems. However, the people themselves, who document these problems are often overshadowed and exploited in the status of the media industry today.

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