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### Making Precarity Productive

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# 12

## MAKING PRECARIETY PRODUCTIVE

*Erwin van 't Hof and Mark Deuze*

This chapter puts forward the argument that the precarious circumstances of media work in general and journalism in particular can be made productive in terms of considering different ways of conceptualizing what it means to do “good work” in the media. We aim – with Havens et al. (2009, p. 237) – to understand precarity as *productive*, in the sense that it can produce specific ways of thinking and doing for media professionals that both exemplify their vulnerability as much as their struggle to circumvent or at times even utilize the precarious conditions of their work.

This is not to deny nor naively “explain away” precarity as a problematic condition of contemporary ways of working in the media, but to highlight the various complex, sometimes conflicting, and often inconsistent ways in which media professionals make it work. Our argument is grounded in a study of independent investigative journalists in the Netherlands, as well as a growing body of literature on the nature of freelance and other “atypical” working arrangements in the media industry.

Media work, like so many other professions in the contemporary “creative” economy (Howkins, 2013), is a lesson in precarity, that is coming to terms with having little or no control over “what happens next” in one’s professional career. Although precarity is not necessarily new for many journalists, precariousness is evident in constantly changing labor conditions, in particular, the rise of the so-called gig economy with its emphasis on short-term labor and projects often organized through online platforms. Such a way of living and working – of having a workstyle rather than a lifestyle, “where life becomes a way of working and a way of being at work” (Deuze, 2007, p. 1) – necessitates, among other things, the maintenance of a permanent self-promotional profile across various social networks.

This is not to say that the “happy few” who have indeed secured stable, steady jobs supported by (permanent) contracts and excellent working conditions (such as a pension plan and medical insurance policies, employer assistance regarding

childcare, as well as regular opportunities to learn new skills) do not experience precariousness. The omnipresence of precarity is quite possibly the most important insight regarding this principal component of how media professionals “make it work”: Regardless of formal status as a worker in the media industries, you always work from project to project, from one story to the next, from task to assignment, all the while being governed by the informal rule that you are only as good as the last thing you did. More often than not, media professionals remain unsure whether they just did a “good” job at all. This is because clear benchmarks or consensual definitions of what counts as having done “good” work in the media typically are either absent or conform to a market logic (ratings, clicks, sales, and so on) – while most practitioners prefer an editorial logic (peer recognition, craftsmanship, creative autonomy) governing their actions.

While precarity and precariousness are staples in the contemporary scholarly study and lived experience of media work, such concepts were largely absent in the early history of production studies and research. Scholars and media practitioners alike focused much more on how people fitted in at work in terms of production routines, organizational structures, and company hierarchies (Paterson et al., 2016). Professionals certainly experienced profound uncertainty in their work before the 2000s. Indeed, as Vonderau (2019, p. 66) remarks, sometimes we should question whether all the research on precarious media work is really original and socially relevant, as our normative bias (toward supporting those we perceive to be victims of exploitation) may result in a “pseudo-problematization” of precarity. On the one hand, precarity is a fundamental element of what it means (and what it takes) to work in the media. On the other hand, we may risk problematizing the predicament of media professionals to the extent that our research ceases to speak to the lived reality of their work.

Media workers are generally not completely without agency and are not without resources (material, human, or otherwise) to counteract the effects of unsupportive organizational structures, efficiency-driven managerial strategies, and an overall lack of financial incentives to do their best work. This relative power is necessarily grounded in their “workstyles,” the blend of work and lifestyle strategies and tactics of professionals across the media industries. The management of everyday life revolves around *making* it work and *doing* the work – a fairly common lived experience for workers across the media industries (Deuze et al., 2010, pp. 227–228). Furthermore, precarity sometimes can actually drive creativity and innovation, inspiring new forms of collaboration and solidarity. By looking closer at such practices and the values and variables shaping these, we may articulate a theory of precarity as being (potentially) productive.

The major source material for our argument here is data gathered for the research project “De Nieuwe Journalist” (also the title of a Dutch-language handbook for reporters, see Arends & Van't Hof, 2020). Between 2017 and 2019, Erwin (with Sjoerd Arends, informally mentored by Mark) conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with 50 Dutch freelance journalists. The project's main focus was to showcase the various ways in which freelancers organize their working life in order

to be able to cover stories that matter most to them. As the Netherlands is one of the frontrunners worldwide regarding the flexibilization of the labor market (e.g. as expressed in the number of people with temporary contracts<sup>1</sup> and the rate of self-employment<sup>2</sup>), these journalists provide insights in how precarity can be considered productive.

## The productive potential of precarity

As with atypical work more generally, precarity is a historical condition. Generally speaking, precarity tends to be understood in two ways. First, it is seen as a specific consequence of the transformation of labor and the welfare state in the latter half of the twentieth century, exemplified by industry-wide deregulation and the redistribution of risk and care away from employers and the state to the individual. This in turn contributed to a rapid rise of atypical work arrangements. A second understanding of precarity refers to an ontological condition of insecurity and interdependency that affects not only the world of work but also pervades all other aspects of life. As Gill and Pratt attest,

This double meaning is central to understanding the ideas and politics associated with precarity; the new moment of capitalism that engenders precariousness is seen as not only oppressive but also as offering the potential for new subjectivities, new socialities and new kinds of politics.

*(2008, p. 3)*

At the heart of precarity is not so much having or not having a (contracted) job, but rather (coming to terms with) the experience of being unable to plan, control, and predict what will happen next in one's work-life. When experienced as a structural condition of everyday life, precarity can contribute to a sense of "ontological insecurity" (Giddens, 1991) eroding one's belief in the continuity, reliability, and consistency of oneself, other people, and things. This existential perspective brings people's feelings of vulnerability, displacement, and hopelessness into view.

The vast majority of the literature on precarity and precariousness focuses, understandably, on its at times debilitating features, limiting the capacity of workers to plan and control their work, pushing professionals to internalize the unsettling demands of structural discontinuity and "permanent impermanence" (Deuze, 2012, p. 39). An additional problematic aspect of precarity, as Banks argues, is that "the control and mastery of the temporal domain is something readily available, but only to the privileged few"; this makes being able to work in the media into a "social luxury" (2019, p. 13). Numerous studies show how the access to work and jobs throughout the creative sector in general and the media (including journalism) in particular is to some extent determined by socioeconomic indicators. Being able to afford living in the world's metropolitan centers (where most media companies are located), having access to (degrees from) reputable schools and colleges, and being part of a country's dominant social groups (which in the Global North

generally means being White, male, and middle class) to some extent function as informal prerequisites for “making it work” in the media industry.

Han (2018) notes, however, that such general theories of precarity omit the particular experiences of precarious life such as those documented through ethnography. There is no “one-size-fits-all” notion of precarity. This fact attunes us to examples of “complex agency” among those living in and through precariousness (43). We suggest that Han points to what one could call the *productive potential* of precarity and precariousness. This has been signaled in the past, most notably by Judith Butler (2004), who identifies our common human vulnerability and interdependency as a potential source for a “good life” based on radical democracy and collective organization (e.g. through new social movements). Allison also points to a more hopeful notion of precarity if one senses optimistically, observing “an emergent potential in attempts to humanly and collectively survive precarity: a new form of commonwealth (commonly remaking the wealth of sociality), a biopolitics from below” (2013, p. 18).

Several scholars have documented emerging forms of collective organizing and renewed unionization among workers in digital games, journalism, film and television since the early 2000s (Blair, 2003; Rossiter, 2006; Bureau & Corsani, 2016; Cohen & De Peuter, 2020). Beyond formal organization, for example, Blair (2003) suggests that some media workers develop tactics to counter the precarity embedded in their work-styles, especially by self-organizing into affective groups or teams that move from project to project for a certain period of time. These so-called “semi-permanent work groups” (SPWG) in theory could benefit both employers and employees. Employers can outsource the hiring and firing of team members to those in charge of specific aspects of the production process (such as team leads in game development, magazine editors, or assistant directors in film and television). Employees can secure future employment through their personal networks. Each SPWG has its own inclusion and exclusion mechanisms; some workers may choose not to be part of such networks. But networks are always available in some form or another.

Networks such as SPWGs can be considered as examples of conceptualizing (good) work in the absence of job certainty, fueled by a motivation to “make it work” while adhering to shared ideals of what that work should be like. Our own research on journalistic start-ups around the world (see Deuze & Witschge, 2020) found similar emancipatory aspirations among reporters and editors banding together to strike out on their own. Similarly, Cohen and De Peuter (2020) document a new wave of unionization among digital journalists, forming affective bonds of solidarity when faced with precarious futures. Although most journalists do not unionize, some form of self-organization is paramount in the news industry, either at the level of a particular company, among a specific group of reporters, within a start-up or editorial collective, or simply among a group of friends who also are journalists.

Furthermore, precarity produces certain ways of thinking about an audience. At the heart of any creative venture is a nugget of precarity that drives not just the

work but also the larger social context of media work; it informs decision-making processes throughout. With media, the ever-present “imagined” audience is always giving or withholding its approval. Like media workers more generally, journalists are continually asking themselves “will they like it.” “They” can refer to clients, employers, peers, a specific community, or an audience otherwise conceived. As cross-national comparative research shows that this audience orientation is one of the most powerful explainers of the gap between individual role conceptions and role performance of journalists – between what journalists want to do and whether they are capable of doing it (Mellado et al., 2020, p. 567). Precarity can in this context be seen as motivating in terms of Richard Caves’ principle of creative industries that “nobody knows – referring to the intrinsic uncertainty about the effect of people’s actions in media work” (2000, p. 40). But it can also be undermining, when nothing is certain (Elefante & Deuze, 2012, p. 12).

The productive potential of precarity is not limited to (new) forms of collective organization and different ways of imagining one’s audience. It can also include different perspectives on the helplessness and vulnerability that comes with a lack of power and control over one’s future. The complex nature of society manifests itself not just in the domains of work, finance, or politics, but also pervades all aspects of life. Whereas the unpredictability and uncontrollability of the future can be perceived as a problematic feature that renders us helpless and vulnerable, it also can be explored for its agentic potential through what Riel Miller calls “non-predictive narratives” produced by “what if” imagining guided by spontaneity, experimentation, and learning-by-doing (2007, pp. 342–343). Miller developed the UNESCO Futures Literacy program as an approach to an unknowable and unpredictable future.<sup>3</sup> This program aims to help people (individually and collectively) to think about their precarious relationship to the future in terms of “anticipatory systems.” That is we need to always be able to distinguish three types of futures: *contingent* – caused by an external event such as the coronavirus pandemic crisis; *optimized* – a future that we can somehow plan and control for; and *explorative* – based on seeing the present differently and identifying novel ways of making sense of what is going on (Miller, 2011). Miller suggests that much of our debilitating feelings about the future and our lack of control over it stem from an underdeveloped “capacity to discover and invent anticipatory assumptions” (27).

At the heart of the future’s literacy approach spearheaded at UNESCO is the notion that the assumption of predictability, controllability, and linearity of “what comes next” is flawed to begin with – regardless of contemporary economic, social, or other trends. The key for us here is to find ways in which to recognize the productive potential of precarity. We explore this further when assessing the data from interviews with independent investigative journalists.

## A mental model approach

Our work specifically considers the complex ways in which media workers think about, conceptualize, and act upon the precarious context of their work. Although

we focus on individual professionals and their stories, our analysis does not highlight individual cases (as generally privileged in critical media industry studies to investigate the particular from a “helicopter” point of view; see Havens & Lotz, 2009). This would merely return us to the age-old structure–agency debate. A macro-level (or “jet plane” perspective) on media work that focuses on mapping underlying and overarching structures is equally problematic, as this turns a blind eye to workers’ initiatives and meaning-making practices that (potentially) bypass, alleviate, redirect, or transform precarious industry processes and procedures.

Borrowing from institutional and behavioral economics, Flew’s (2020) alternative framework focuses on the “mental models” that individuals create of their institutional contexts. In other words, Flew emphasizes how professionals imagine and understand the various institutions (and their processes and procedures) and how these shape how they act and how they perceive their own actions. Thus, mental models are “the internal representations cognitive systems create to interpret the environment, institutions and the external (to the mind) mechanism individuals create to structure and order the environment” (North, 1994, quoted in Flew, 2020, p. 99). Within the context of this essay, mental models are personal heuristic tools based on assumptions about the field of journalism, which influence a various range of navigation tactics.

Besides helping us to move beyond the limitations of macro and micro analyses, a mental model approach also provides flexibility to analyze the inherently unstable and “liquid” nature of journalism (Deuze, 2008; Carlson, 2016). Journalism, like any other media profession, is therefore best seen as being in a permanent state of becoming (Deuze & Witschge, 2017). This means that individuals are continually forced to adapt their practices to avoid precarity as much as possible, while at the same time attempting to do the kind of journalism that matters most to them. A mental models’ approach facilitates the analysis of this process since it focuses on the ways in which practitioners try to reach their goals instead of the goal itself (i.e. a journalistic product or service).

Interviews with Dutch freelance journalists (Arends & Van’t Hof, 2020) unveil a distinction between what could, for analytical purposes, be conceptualized as “traditional” versus “contemporary” mental models for precarious newswriters. The next section highlights four core assumptions of the mental models about the field and journalism as a profession, which guide the interviewees’ practices. Then we show how these assumptions lead to navigation tactics freelancers use in their pursuit of making journalism that matters most to them. The journalists’ navigation tactics are seen in illustrative quotes from the interview transcripts.

As already noted, precarity is widespread among journalists. Mirroring research on the working conditions of journalists in other countries, all journalists in this study noted that working as a freelance journalist was more or less precarious, a word they themselves sometimes used. Each interviewee was specifically asked whether their income from journalistic work was sufficient to meet financial needs or not. The vast majority responded that it was not. Then, variations of the sentence “I don’t want to be rich but. . .” often followed, after which a description of

the desired living standard was given. These living standards varied, ranging from “wanting to live a comfortable life without worrying about money” to “wanting to secure the rent of my apartment each month.”

Despite financial concerns, all interviewees preferred to remain freelancers. This corresponds with findings from annual surveys among freelance journalists in the Netherlands, showing that – despite often not earning enough income to make ends meet – just 5 percent of Dutch freelancers would prefer waged labor (Vinken & Mariën, 2019, p. 5). Freedom and autonomy in some form were the most mentioned reasons for this, both in these surveys and in our interviews. The sentiment that life as a freelancer was better than having a permanent fulltime contract was especially widespread among journalists who had enjoyed previous careers in fulltime employment: “I worked at a national newspaper and could not stand all the daily meetings,” a freelance journalist in her forties told us. “There was never room to pursue stories that mattered to me most. Partly because of all the bureaucracy.” Another freelancer, also in his forties, added: “I worked as a sports journalist, and after a few years of doing interviews with soccer players I never felt like I contributed to something real or genuine. I wanted to make stories I personally feel strongly about. Freelancing provided that opportunity.” We did not find evidence that would suggest that their claims to a newfound freedom were made possible by savings accrued during their earlier careers as salaried newsmen; this is not surprising given that one of the key reasons employed reporters leave journalism is the fact that other industries – especially public relations – simply offer better pay and job security (Viererbl & Koch, 2019). The association of freedom and autonomy with freelancing correlates with research on the motivations of freelance journalists (Cohen, 2015). This further highlights the highly affective and emotional nature of newsmen (Beckett & Deuze, 2016; Siapera & Iliadi, 2015; Siapera, 2019).

## The “traditional” mental model

The traditional freelance journalist works primarily for legacy media – a relatively narrow range of so-called “quality” regional and national newspapers, magazines, broadcast organizations, and online news publishers appealing to a general audience. This freelancer engages in a business practice that consists of roughly five steps: pitch, negotiate, create, invoice, and repeat. In general, the way these freelancers navigate the field of journalism closely resembles the practices of journalists who are employed by legacy media institutions but without the benefits and social protections their employed counterparts enjoy.

The first core assumption of the traditional mental model of journalism is that professionalism in journalism is closely related to and mediated by legacy media institutions. Freelance journalists adhering to this assumption adopt a strategy focused on getting published by well-known legacy news organizations. To achieve this goal, they pitch stories that match the (perceived) desires of such “mainstream” titles. The strategy is informed by a belief that publishing under the banner of big brands helps one to ascend the journalism career ladder. This kind of hopeful work



in the media can be considered as “prospect” work (Fast et al., 2016). Like the copper miners of old, journalists are looking for a rare nugget, that is some form of career stability or perhaps even employment at a legacy news organization. Exemplifying this navigation tactic is a quote by a Dutch journalist who, at the time, wrote about Middle-East political affairs: “I have been published in Al-Jazeera, which is really good for your resumé.” While it is true that publications in well-known so-called “quality” news outlets provide journalistic capital (Örnebring, 2018), prospect work by itself seldom results in a short-term financial gain or a long-term career stability. In practice, the career ladder of journalism has more resemblance to the “impossible staircase” made famous by the drawings of Escher (Fast et al., 2016).

A second assumption involves a strong self-identification with a specific mode of professional communication. When asked what kind of journalists they are, the interviewees regularly responded with a preferred method of conveying information. “I am a writer,” responded one of the freelancers. “I am a photographer,” responded another. This mode of self-identification led journalists to publishing with a particular format, such as newspaper articles or photographs. In conjunction with the current state of the political economy of journalism characterized by an uneven power relationship between media organizations and makers, this navigation tactic resulted in a more or less stable income only for well-known journalists with a long-standing reputation within a professional sub-field. However, most “traditional” freelancers had a hard time meeting their financial needs doing the time-consuming journalism they cared about. One journalist, who at the time wrote long-form investigative articles, explained a common process and its emotional toll:

It takes a long time to get familiar with a new subject, to interview all people and process its contents. Next, you have to analyze all information and write the article in a logical and interesting way. If I calculate how much I make per hour, then it is very little. (. . .) There have been times I asked my father to help me with the bills, which was very stressful.

The third assumption within this traditional mental model shapes the interviewees’ entire lived experience. Multiple freelance journalists did not necessarily interpret journalism as a profession but rather as something they “are,” internalizing the job as their personal as well as professional identity. This is akin to the way professionals in the creative and cultural industries generally give meaning to their work – as somehow divorced from the industrial (and often commercial) context within which the work takes place. This profoundly influenced the way they approached career navigation in general and their work ethic in particular. For many, working long hours emphasized their dedication to journalism. A young freelance journalist told the interviewers: “I am always checking my e-mail. Always thinking about new stories. I don’t really know what weekends are, because everything I do and everyone I interact with could provide inspiration for the next story.” The focus on “long hours” as a way to adhere to the idea of being a “real” journalist

is widespread, both among the practitioners we talked with and within the field of journalism more generally (Brouwers & Witschge, 2019).

Another recurring theme stemming from the assumption that a journalist is something that you are is self-deprecation. Interviewees often suggested that they felt wholly responsible for their perceived failure to “make it” as a journalist. Interviewees regularly highlighted how they should have been more “pro-active,” should have “worked harder,” or should have “created more original stories.” The traditional freelance journalists seemed especially likely to blame themselves and their personal inadequacies, rather than point to structural inequalities or exploitative tendencies of the legacy news industry. Being a journalist rather than doing journalism also led some interviewees to refuse to do non-journalistic work to make ends meet, because this would potentially damage their identity and reputation as a journalist.

The fourth assumption embedded in the traditional mental model is a rejection of the identity of being an entrepreneur or business owner. Viewed from a legal perspective, all freelancers are business owners and therefore responsible for taking care of their own pension plans, health care, and other provisions. Freelance journalists regularly said that they knew that these were matters of concern. Yet, they postponed these to a future situation when, as one of the interviewees put it, “my financial situation is stable enough to afford all that stuff.” Asked whether he felt like a business owner, a freelance journalist in his twenties responded: “Me a business owner? No, to me an entrepreneur is someone with a factory. Someone who sells bricks.” The resulting navigation strategy to deal with the rejection of being an entrepreneur was to focus solely on the production of journalism, the craft, while neglecting other matters, especially regarding the financial and business side of things, for example regarding fundraising or client acquisition.

In sum, especially those freelance journalists who produced time-consuming stories in the “traditional” way shared profound worries about their precarity. The income generated from working independently yet exclusively for legacy media is generally insufficient to sustain even a modest living standard, a finding supported by international comparative research among freelance investigative reporters (Project Word, 2015). Despite this, traditional freelancers had strong reservations about working outside of their narrowly defined boundaries of the profession: they felt this would damage their self-identification as an independent journalist. Normative attitudes toward what journalism entails or should be play a powerful role in these presuppositions.

## The “contemporary” mental model

Contemporary freelancers are well aware of the complex, dynamic, and changing nature of journalism, as well as of the normativity of deterministic assumptions about what journalism should be, should do and who can be considered a “real” journalist. In practice, the contemporary mental model reflects a move away from prevalent dualisms (fake/real, core/periphery) within both the field of professional

journalism and the scholarly discipline of journalism studies (Witschge et al., 2019). Instead, in this mental model, we find more open-ended and context-related interpretations of both journalism as a whole, and one's particular position within the field, leading to different assumptions about what it means to be a journalist.

The first assumption inherent to the contemporary mental model of journalism is that journalism has core principles (mirroring the values of journalism's occupational ideology, this means autonomously reporting the truth as soon as possible with professional responsibility in the service of the public; see Deuze, 2005) but no clear boundaries. Interviewees who assumed this felt free to develop an interpretation of journalism that fitted their personality and goals. For instance, one journalist, after working for legacy media, decided to shake things up when he realized his work was not fulfilling. He now writes up personal stories, often of elderly people, to give family members a written memory of a loved one. "For me, journalism is telling the people about the people, that's the interpretation I like the best," he said. Embracing a new broad notion of journalism, he rejected his former work because "now I am creating work that is meaningful, not to a mass audience, but to a few people." Another freelance journalist decided to make a podcast series about ordinary people in his neighborhood in Amsterdam. When asked whether his work is journalism, he responded: "I don't really care whether it's journalism or not, I just want to tell stories."

A second assumption is that personal values are a leading factor when creating journalism. A navigation tactic inspired by this assumption is exemplified by a documentary maker, who had been making independent films with her twin sister for nearly 20 years. "Making documentaries is not easy," she said. "The process of getting the finances together is also not easy. That's why we only start a project when we are blown away by the subject matter. . . . This intrinsic motivation is the engine running every documentary we make." Many other interviewees shared personal motivations that affected their career trajectories. A freelance journalist explained that he spent a few years in a Jakarta foster home before being adopted by a Dutch couple: "I feel like I've been given a second chance. Therefore, I've always had the feeling that I had to give something back to others." He worked as a producer for a Dutch television program about abandoned children. Years later, he worked as a freelance war reporter. Internalized values provided a firm constant in the unpredictable careers of many freelance journalists, becoming a point of focus and reference and helping them manage the dynamic, complex, and instable reality of freelance newswork.

A third assumption governing the contemporary mental model of freelance work is that journalism is a profession and a mode of communication. This difference of journalism's craft and ideological prerequisites from one's self and social identity opened up possibilities for freelancers to navigate their careers beyond the conventional boundaries of journalistic work, without feeling guilty about it. An audio-visual journalist explained: "For me, journalism is a skill which I can use to tell stories. These stories do not necessarily have to be journalistic." This way of making sense of their work fit a common theme among independent media

professionals who cross-subsidize their work: doing what you have to do in order to get to do what you want to do. In practice, for example, this meant that non-journalistic work provided a welcome income stream enabling them to stay focused on their personal values and journalistic goals. The journalists adhering to this assumption argued that their non-journalistic work poses no problems for their journalistic work. In contrary, the non-journalistic work was regularly described as quite enjoyable. “It is really simple,” one audio-visual journalist told us. “I make corporate videos for offshore businesses . . . and therefore I would never make journalism about that sector.”

The fourth assumption here is that freelance journalists are entrepreneurs or at least need some “entrepreneurial spirit” to achieve their goals. The freelancers interviewed for this project did not strive to be innovators per se. Their first and foremost concern was to find ways within the contemporary context of professional journalism to create the stories that mattered most to them. “At the end of the day, you have to move the product,” one freelancer answered when asked whether he saw himself as a business owner.

I know how little legacy media pay, and within this context I make it work. For instance, by combining income from freelance shifts in newsrooms with the production of my own stories. Or selling the same stories multiple times to various international magazines.

Another young freelancer argued that, whether he liked it or not, he had to deal with the current state of news as an industry in order to achieve his goals: “I wanted to make long-form investigative reports but knew that these are hard to make within the current state of journalism.” He therefore called the Dutch Association of Investigative Journalists, whose director took the time to explain how things work in practice. That explanation, he said, “really helped me with the navigation of my career.”

Contemporary journalists often use many different modes to distribute their work, both because their journalism is driven by personal values (and not restricted to any one way of telling a story) and because they can monetize the same information multiple times. Combining different genres and media also can fuel one’s creative interests in journalism as a craft. Said one freelance war reporter who contributed to radio and television broadcasts, wrote articles and books, and lectured about his work: “In order to make it, you have to do more than just report war stories. You need other ways to distribute your expertise and make money.” Freelancers found that the work they published across different channels does not exist in a vacuum but influences and feeds off each other. A freelancer told us that he strategically publishes articles in well-known newspapers, despite this being his lowest revenue source:

It certainly helps to get published by a well-known news brand. If I’m invited to speak somewhere, which usually pays significantly more than an article,

I am regularly introduced as “journalist who writes for [*insert name of a quality legacy news title*].”

In sum, contemporary freelancers understand both the limitations and changes of the current state of freelance work well and actively consider and play with the porous boundaries that define journalism as a practice and a professional identity. They position themselves and their professional goals at the core of their business, rather than being benchmarked by the demands of legacy media, the occupational ideology of journalism, or the limitations of genre or format. These freelancers approach work around the information they gather, mostly on a specific subject they tend to specialize in. Using continuously collected material, they build expertise and decide what to do with the dossier. They package some of it into reports to sell to legacy media or stories for other outlets (such as documentary film, book publishing, national or international nongovernmental organization communications). Their expertise can be marketed to different institutions, including various commercial partners. This signals a decidedly entrepreneurial approach to the precarity that is endemic across the journalistic field.

This entrepreneurial approach is not suitable for everyone, however; it requires significant investments in time, money, and other resources to reach a certain level of expertise that can be commodified this extensively and creatively. Demographic and socioeconomic profile, personality traits, and social and cultural capital all figure into making this type of professional practice work. Although we cannot generalize from our participants to all journalists, we must point out the documented tendency of “middle-classification” in the media industries. This is largely caused by the rising costs of securing a position in the industry, as noted earlier, including needing to do speculative or otherwise underpaid work to increase visibility in an industry heavily reliant on “know whom” that goes above and beyond “know how” (see Deuze, 2007). These tendencies not only reduce the social mobility within media professions but also limit the potential diversity of voices and participants in professional media organizations. At the same time, we haste to note that the entrepreneurial approach to being a journalist we identified in our work in numerous circumstances was often framed as a critical response to the lack of diversity, support, and creativity in companies or the profession as a whole (see especially Deuze & Witschge, 2020 for more examples of this among journalists collaboratively starting their own ventures around the world).

## Discussion

This chapter sought to nuance macro-level claims about precarity in newswork as well as micro-level analyses of individual perspectives. Genuinely being interested in how freelance investigative reporters “make it work” not just in terms of earning an income, but doing the kind of journalism they believe in and which matters most to them, we mapped their mental models of precarity. The ones who tended to suffer most from precarity were those who self-identified as “journalists” in a strict sense,

looking only at legacy news brands as outlets for their work and coloring well within the lines of a traditional definition of what counts as journalism. On the other hand, those with a more flexible attitude, a well-developed sense of who they are and what they want out of their profession, and a pragmatic approach to being a freelancer in an otherwise competitive, exploitative, and uncertain economic field seemed to be better able to turn precarity into a set of productive strategies and tactics. However, we found no “one size fits all.” There is no silver bullet to slay the precarity dragon. Yet, freelance journalists are (and can be) much more than mere cogs in the machine that is the current news industry. The key that may unlock the productive potential in precarity can be found in a more diverse, complex, and dynamic understanding of what journalism is – and, importantly, what a journalist can be.

## Notes

- 1 See: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/-/DDN-20170502-1>
- 2 See: <https://data.oecd.org/emp/self-employment-rate.htm>
- 3 See: <https://en.unesco.org/themes/futures-literacy>

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