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9 The Netherlands: making it work

Mark Deuze

Introduction

Since 2012 well over 1,000 journalists have been made redundant in The Netherlands, out of a total population of approximately 18,000 working journalists. In 2015, 16% (or 3,000 practitioners) of all Dutch journalists were formally registered as unemployed.¹ This chapter reports on an online survey among working journalists who have been forced out of their contract or who have decided to resign, supplemented with a series of oral history interviews with prominent journalists who faced resignation in recent years.

The Netherlands media landscape

The Dutch media landscape is relatively stable, with 98% of Dutch households having Internet access², a high circulation of newspapers and magazines (with about 6 million daily readers of newspapers out of a total population of 17.4 million people), moderate TV viewing (with people increasingly switching to streaming services), a dominant public broadcasting model that is still protected by government, and relatively close relations between political parties, politicians and quality news media.³

Press concentration is high, with almost all (80%) of the total circulation of newspapers owned by two Belgian publishers. Commercial television and the glossy magazine market are largely concentrated in the hands of Finnish and German companies. One Dutch media entrepreneur, John de Mol, has been building a Silvio Berlusconi-type media ‘empire’ in recent years with the acquisition of the national news agency ANP (with plans to develop a comprehensive multimedia online news service), several commercial TV and radio stations, including digital channels, as well as numerous e-commerce and data-analytics businesses and platforms.⁴

Media concentration, private equity ownership (which preceded the ‘Belgian takeover’ of the print news industry), budget cuts in public broadcasting (as government support has been steadily declining), and relatively ‘expensive’ contracts of the remaining workforce protected by unions, have led to waves of layoffs across all media. The market for

traditional print media in terms of copies sold is declining, also the position on the advertising market is weaker than before. Income from readers has increased over the years. Total revenue has declined because of the weak advertising market for newspapers. On the other hand, publishers still do make a profit on print media.

Freedom of the press is guaranteed by the constitution, as is free speech. Successive Dutch governments have formulated strict rules regarding media concentration for collaborations between media companies across different media, while taking a largely hands-off approach regarding vertical concentration, resulting in a relatively high degree of concentration within the print and broadcasting industries.⁵ The Netherlands traditionally has a unique approach to public broadcasting. Programs are made by groups that reflect political or religious currents, or other representative public interests. These organisations are allocated airtime on TV and radio, in line with the number of members they have. This system was established in the 1960s, known as a ‘pillarized’ broadcasting system, and although it has been challenged throughout its history, it remains the foundation of media policies to date. In recent years a major policy change has been industry deregulation, influenced by successive coalition governments led by a conservative-liberal political party intent to loosen restrictions for (inter-)national business. Fixed levels of press concentration have been dropped; government is more open to commercial broadcasting expansion with limits set to the presence of public broadcasting online.

Journalistic professionalism has increased in recent decades. Since the 1990s the majority of journalists in the Netherlands either went to a vocational Journalism School or studied at university.⁶ Until recently, journalism student numbers gradually increased every year, with at least nine institutions offering vocational and university-based training programs. As the number of prospective journalists increased, so did the rise of atypical media work – professionals employed within the media industry, including journalism, without a contracted relationship with an employer, stipulating workers’ rights, employer pension contributions, and so on. The most challenging issues are commercialism and entrepreneurship as jobs in traditional media are not as available as they were 20 years ago, and tariffs for freelance work have dropped consistently, at least since 2014, and especially as compared to the early 2000s.⁷

New Beats in The Netherlands

In this context, the Dutch research of the New Beats Project was conducted. The New Beats Project is an international analysis of mass redundancies, forced career changes, and the digital reinvention of professional journalism at a time of industry restructure and technological change (for a global assessment of journalism in transformation from the perspective of labour, see Deuze & Witschge 2018). Since 2012 well over 1,000 journalists were

made redundant in The Netherlands, out of a total population of approximately 18,000 working journalists. The research consisted of an online survey among working journalists who, since 2012, had been forced out of their contract or who have decided to resign. The survey was modelled after the international project and was hosted on the website of, and promoted by, the Dutch national journalists' association *Nederlandse Vereniging voor Journalisten (NVJ)*.

Key questions covered in the online survey, totalling 51 items, related to topics including past and present career trajectory, education and training, and details on how job loss was organised and experienced. In addition, basic demographic information was collected. The survey also included several open-ended items with a focus on the emotional impact and consequences of job loss (see, Beckett & Deuze 2016; Kotisova 2019; Siapera 2019, for the significance of emotion in the practice of journalism and the identity of journalists), including:

- What it was like to leave journalism and starting in a different field;
- What the emotional consequences were of the career change;
- How this change influenced one's perception of journalism as a profession; and
- How this change impacted one's sense of well-being.

In the Dutch version of the project, we also conducted a series of in-depth video interviews with prominent journalists to reflect on their careers and the development of journalism as a profession. Questions were asked about topics such as their reflections on the trends and developments shaping journalism in their lifetime, as well as whatever key changes they perceived in the news industry between the start and toward the end of their careers. Interviews were undertaken following the survey to gain further in-depth insights into the experiences and meaning-making processes of journalists around redundancy, career development and well-being, changes in the profession and industry. Beyond the NVJ the project received support from the Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision, a national institute for Dutch audio-visual heritage.⁸ This project accounts for the complex interplay between economic, technological, workplace, and career pressures reshaping professional journalism, as experienced by journalists. The survey ran during September 2016. Respondents were based on self-selection after the NVJ distributed a call to participate among its members. In total, 77 former journalists responded to the request. Between the Fall of 2016 and Spring of 2017, a total of seven additional in-depth oral history interviews were conducted. These journalists were opportunity-sampled based on criteria related to professional prominence and reputation, their recent announcements of leaving the profession, for retirement or other reasons, and their role in publicly reflecting on the state of journalism throughout their career.⁹

Results

The question of careers in journalism is a fascinating one – as careers based on more or less dependable and predictable linear trajectories and ‘moving up the ladder’ within a news organisation have been replaced by job-hopping and a portfolio of clients, atypical (paid and unpaid) work, and temporary stints for one or more news organisations. Such careers are more likely to follow a ‘spiral staircase’ model, in a best-case scenario, where one’s advancement is based on slowly but surely getting better at specific tasks, skills, and competencies, rather than attaining positions with more prestige, authority, or pay. Further, journalism jobs are now often combined with non-newswork (such as the ‘turncoat’ phenomenon where journalists double as PR workers; see Kester & Prenger 2020), as well as ‘double dipping’ whereby an independent reporter milks their research into multiple stories and reports for different clients, both at home and abroad.

As much of what we know about journalism, and what journalists perceive journalism to be, is derived from the discourse and process of professional socialisation within established news organisations, we wonder how independent journalists in a contemporary precarious context develop a more or less coherent sense of *professional identity* (Deuze & Witschge 2018). Before we answer this question, we need to explore what such a professional identity, as traditionally derived from a more or less stable career within one or more news organisations, looks like today, how important it is for journalists, and what all of this means to them. Our key interest and motivation to participate in the New Beats Project, and the main issue that drives the analysis in this chapter, is: what does their career, and therefore what does journalism, mean to journalists?

A considerable number of the survey respondents lost their job after a long career in journalism. Eighty-four per cent of the 77 participants had enjoyed an appointment of 11 years or longer when they left. The reasons for leaving varied. Almost half of the respondents (47%) resigned on their own initiative. For the others, termination of contract was forced. In 80% of the cases, this was because an existing labour contract was disbanded prematurely. The contracts of the other 20% expired and were not extended for a variety of reasons, first and foremost among them cost-cutting measures.

Reducing the costs associated with labour – wages, pension contributions, funds for training and reskilling, human resource management – is one of the key ways in which media companies can contribute to the bottom line at a time when income from sales, subscriptions, and advertising is stalling or falling. Interestingly, at the time of writing – during the coronavirus crisis of 2020 – the wholesale shift toward atypical work (of which the respondents in our 2016 survey were the main victims) in Dutch journalism backfired tremendously. Many, if not most, freelance workers at major news organisations were let go, doubling the workload for contracted employees and making their extreme vulnerability in the journalism workforce instantly

visible. This led to remarkable action in various high-profile news organisations as reporters and editors organised a crowdfunding initiative among the workers in their newsrooms to raise funds for their freelance colleagues. Reputable regional and national newspapers – including *Brabants Dagblad*, *Algemeen*, and *De Volkskrant* – shared part of the annual profits with freelancers hardest hit by the crisis.¹⁰ In some cases, editors-in-chief additionally committed to having one-on-one talks with various freelancers to discuss their future perspectives with the organisation.

At the time of our survey, 12% of formerly laid-off respondents were fully employed again in the field of journalism. Another 21% combined work in journalism with another profession. As one of them explained in an open comment: ‘I have come to realize that there is a broad range of possible instances between “independent journalism” on the one hand and “dependent communication instruments” on the other’. For a sizeable number of respondents (43%) the termination of contract led to (temporary) unemployment and dependence on welfare. Among the respondents who continued to work in journalism (one-third of all respondents), the lion’s share got back to work within a few months.

Strikingly, 77% are no longer contracted employees but work as a freelancer (90% of the female and 70% of the male respondents). If they had the choice, half of the respondents would prefer to work as a freelancer. This finding fits a larger pattern among freelance journalists in The Netherlands, who, in annual surveys conducted by the NVJ, consistently and overwhelmingly indicate they prefer the relative freedom and autonomy of freelance work over the supposed ‘steady’ paycheck of a contracted career. This is all the more remarkable as the income of freelancers more often than not falls below the minimum wage. Not only has freelance remuneration in The Netherlands declined since the start of the 21st century, up to 50% for news photographers, but almost half of Dutch freelance journalists today also depend on the income of their partner, and about half cannot make ends meet with their news work (based on national representative surveys conducted annually since 2016; see Vinken & Mariën 2019). These same surveys show 70% of these independent news workers preferring this way of making a living over having a permanent salaried position in journalism.

In what follows, we explore the principal components that make up these journalists’ sense of who they are, what their profession means to them, and how they reflect back upon their careers. In short, we can conclude that the participating journalists in our interviews and survey see their professional identity primarily in terms of financial and occupational security, autonomy, creativity, community, and passion for journalism as a profession.

Professional identity: security

Among our participants, a frequently mentioned consequence of a lay-off is a decline in income. On average, the respondents working in journalism again

earn less than they did before their contract was ended or expired – a situation mirrored in the experiences of recently laid off Australian journalists (Zion et al. 2016). Particularly the women in journalism now earn much less than they did before. One of the participants¹¹ described the situation:

After four years of struggling in a country that is not cheap, I am not sure how long I can persevere. I don't manage to save up money. If I would have a client who would pay a fixed fee every month, that would give me rest. But all my clients pay per contribution. That provides me a huge amount of freedom, but gives a restless feeling too. I haven't managed to find the right balance yet.

For those over 60 years of age, redundancy causes fewer concerns – it even gives some of them the chance for early retirement. But worries prevail among younger reporters: about pension shortfall, loss of financial security, termination of collective health care provisions and other insurances, and about loss of equipment that they were able to use that was owned by their former employers.

Furthermore, professionals point out that they feel more insecure about their future in general. Back on the job, one journalist remarks: 'Much more than before I feel like I am fair game'. This can have problematic consequences, as workers stop voicing their opinion, for example about certain projects, innovations, or other managerial interventions, in order not to be seen as a 'difficult' colleague:

For the sake of job retention, I tend to be more cautious when communicating with my superiors. I am hunting for new opportunities and make sure not to push issues too hard, because I don't want to risk losing my job.

The real or perceived lack of opportunity and freedom to voice concerns (or opposition) within the news organisation is found in other studies as well. Interviews with Israeli journalists for example suggest that major news organisations in their country are seen as riven by internal conflict and characterised by a management deficit, which dysfunction contributes to practitioners' problems in voicing discontent (Davidson & Meyers 2016, p. 597).

These factors combine to create a context of increasing insecurity, about a range of factors including ongoing income, opportunity to speak out in a context of a tight labour market, and an often traumatising experience of losing, or quitting, one's job in journalism, and a prospectless long term future.

Professional identity: autonomy

Many respondents experience greater freedom and independence in their current professional situation, as compared to their previous employment

situation. Yet, they are less committed to the media companies and titles they work for, especially the freelancers. At the same time, they feel more engaged with their subjects. As one of the respondents, now working as a freelancer, explains:

Nowadays, I am less likely to see an interviewee as a story for the newspaper. I see them as a person with a story. The fact that I am no longer tied to one particular medium, increases my engagement and the satisfaction that interviews give me. [...] I feel less like I am playing a role. I meet people as the person that I am, and that feels good.

About one-fifth say they have adopted a more commercial attitude in their journalism. As one of them explains:

The relation with my clients is entirely about business. I have learned to be distant and not to accept any work before we have agreed on financial compensation. I also work faster than when I was employed. I remember I would spend my free time working sometimes. Today, I still work a lot, but I got better at estimating the maximum amount of time that I should spend on an assignment to make sure it is still profitable.

Journalists who cross-subsidise their work with other jobs tend to self-describe their current career and job title as ‘text writer rather than journalist’ or as ‘half communication worker, half journalist’. Similarly, their laid-off colleagues in Australia who found new ways of doing news work in combination with other ways of securing a salary described themselves as ‘partly a journo, but partly something else too’ – something that Sherwood and O’Donnell (2018, pp. 9–10) consider as evidence of a ‘fading’ or ‘conflicted’ professional identity.

Professional identity: community

The regular contact with colleagues that came with being an employee at a news organisation is something that is missed by many who have started freelancing. Some respondents mention loneliness; others miss the chance to discuss professional questions and issues. As one of our participants commented:

I have questions on my mind, like: which ideas should I pitch to whom and how do I sell them best? Should I invest my time in short term ideas (pitching to the contacts I already have) or should I aim for long term development (acquisition to find new clients)?

There may be some idealisation of the newsroom dynamic going on here, as most studies suggest that the culture of the contemporary newsroom can be

both collegial and friendly as well as highly competitive and conflictual (Deuze 2004; Ryfe 2012). Reports on conflictual, disorganised, and rivalrous working environments are paramount in the production studies literature – sometimes such a tense context is seen as essential to the creative process. As Ehrlich comments, ‘This is a competition centered around an ethos which holds that it is right and inevitable to measure one’s performance consistently against that of others and that one should thrill in victory and agonize in defeat’ (Ehrlich 1997, p. 314).

Interestingly, several respondents in our survey, as well as those in the British and Australian contexts, mentioned issues related to this cultural aspect of news work as a motivation to leave the profession or to re-enter it on their own terms. We have found this sentiment in particular among the journalists we interviewed for another research project called *Beyond Journalism* (Deuze & Witschge 2020), where we conducted comparative case study analyses of teams and groups of reporters and editors all over the world starting up their own companies. Participants in those interviews would often set the fun, exciting times had at the startup against experiences some of them had while working at legacy news organisations. They stated how they perhaps wanted the same thing as news workers in any context, yet hated the ‘oppressive’ environment there, complaining about a lack of creative opportunities or an overall inefficient way of doing things (p. 68).

Professional identity: creativity

Despite everything, many still voice optimistic opinions about the craft of journalism, especially when it comes to being able to explore one’s creative or experimental urges when it comes to telling stories in new ways and using different media technologies:

Now I do not have a team anymore and am solely responsible for myself, the whole world of journalism is open for me. Learning new skills, like video, is exciting.

At a 2017 industry conference in Amsterdam, I had the chance to discuss this aspect of news work with Chris Hamdy of BuzzFeed and Andrew Golis of Vox, and both emphasised how establishing a culture of experimentation and creativity was key to their organisations’ success (Witschge, Deuze & Willemsen 2019). Studies suggest that journalists who respond positively to experimentation and innovation tend to be happier and more hopeful at work than those who feel unsure or who are outright fearful of failure (Ekdale et al. 2015). The challenge, authors note, is to manage such processes carefully. As Hamdy and Golis remarked, since their organisations started online, they do not have a legacy structure to contend with, giving them an advantage when trying to establish a culture of experimentation

and innovation. Overall, however, the literature is unified in its conclusion that creativity and experimentation tend to be poorly managed in the contemporary news organisation (Deuze 2019; Ekdale et al. 2015; Killebrew 2003; Malmelin & Virta 2016), often leading to scepticism and cynicism among employees.

Professional identity: passion

It is clear that losing one's job has profound consequences. For most of our participants, the profession has lost some of its lustre as a consequence of this process. At the same time, almost none of our participants – nor those in similar studies among laid-off news workers elsewhere in the world – are critical of the profession. In fact, 86% of our participants still feel very positively about the promise and ideals of journalism; 73% said they are proud to be a journalist, even if being a journalist is not part of their job description anymore, and two-thirds consider journalism to be a noble profession. At the same time, 63% of respondents are very critical of the everyday practice of journalism. 'A dying profession', as one reporter describes it.

The coincidence of these journalists being very critical and negative about the industry, yet still idealistic about the profession (expressing pride, considering the work noble, feeling passionate about being a journalist), shows how difficult it is to be truly critical towards a job or career when that work is 'who you are'. The conflation of work and identity, so forcefully expressed by practitioners throughout the cultural and creative industries (Deuze 2007), here leads to a profound depoliticisation, as news workers are more likely to blame themselves and their personal inadequacies when jobs fail or opportunities dwindle, rather than the structural inequalities and exploitative tendencies of the media as an industry. There is no workplace politics, argues McRobbie (2016), because there is no workplace, just a highly individuated set of freelance pathways and informal networks of professionals in non-standard employment contexts. While this may be changing to some extent – see the earlier mentioned growing solidarity in The Netherlands between newsroom employees and freelance reporters – a lack of worker organisation and overall reluctance to see systemic failure beyond biographical solutions is clear, also from our research project.

Another telling comment highlighting the paradox between a sustained passionate belief in journalism coupled with profound scepticism toward its everyday practice: 'I would not recommend anyone to go into journalism, even though it is the most beautiful profession there is'. Such unwillingness to question the foundations of the profession – while delegating its faults to the way it is managed and acted out within particular company contexts, or assuming individual responsibility for not having the skills or personality traits necessary to 'survive' it – has also been explicitly documented in a

study by Usher (2010) among laid-off US news workers. Finding a similar lack of reflexivity connected with a deep nostalgia about what journalism is (or could be), Usher (2010) concludes:

[S]ignificantly, they ... fail to be forward-looking even as they are backward-looking: their nostalgia is self-limiting because it fails to produce a vision of the future that catapults traditional journalists into the new media world and new media economics. Thus, they are limited by their own lack of self-reflexivity and their own sense of loss to see beyond their current situation. (p. 923)

A nostalgia about the ‘good old days’ among news workers when faced with job loss and organisational reshuffling was noted earlier in a study of the institutional and cultural contours of innovation at two Dutch newspapers by Ybema (2003). Ybema typified management strategies in this context as *postalgic*, noting how the industry’s executives tend to come up with all kinds of far-reaching plans and futuristic ideals that are primarily interpreted by the journalists involved as unfair criticisms of their work. However, it seems that journalists embody both nostalgia and ‘postalgia’ in their ways of giving meaning to their work and career in the context of precarity, professing a melancholic longing for a ‘better’ journalism that simultaneously harks back to an imagined past and a promised future. This meaning-making practice ties in with journalists’ overly idealistic and depoliticised views about the profession, divorcing themselves and their (collective) agency from the industrial system of news work.

Discussion

What we take from the New Beats Project is an awareness of the paradoxical nature of a professional identity in journalism. This identity is grounded in a sense of financial and social *security*, even though the contemporary context of atypical news work as well as the combined trends of lay-offs, buy-outs, and managerial reorganisations provides little if any such security. For journalists, a sense of *autonomy* is key to their identity, while by all accounts the actual autonomy of a reporter today is rather reduced because of the need to self-commodify, to cross-subsidize, and to promote and publish your work next to just producing it. To be part of a *community* of peers, to have a sense of belonging – those are essential elements of making it work for journalists. At the same time, the sociality of journalists on the job can be quite a struggle for many, as the working environment tends to be at least in part based on rivalry, creative conflict, and intense competition. Although one has to consider the relative isolation of freelancers as opposed to the peer community offered by a newsroom working environment, such juxtaposition belies the contemporary organisation of news work in newsrooms, where a significant contingent of professionals

continuously move in and out of such working environments (Deuze & Witschge 2018). The enjoyment of journalism as a craft and exercising one's *creativity* is a perhaps understated, but significant, element of what it means to be a professional journalist – even if it is generally absent in the common discourse among journalists or poorly managed at the level of the news organisation. Beyond it all, journalists tend to idealise their profession, as this *ennoblement* is a fundamental feature of their identity – even when the experience of working in that profession can be anything but delightful. The passion of journalists for journalism possibly prevents a more critical and reflexive view on the profession.

In our analysis of the observations, documents, and interviews regarding people's career trajectories and experiences, we have focused on how participants experience the key elements of a journalist's professional identity as a hallmark of their career: security, autonomy, community, creativity, and passion. In all of this, we remain mindful of professional identity's paradoxical and therefore unstable nature, seeking to find out how those working for the new news organisations in our study define and give meaning to the building blocks of who they are as journalists.

Notes

- 1 Source: <https://www.svdj.nl/de-stand-van-de-nieuwsmedia/hoeveel-journalisten-zijn-er-eigenlijk/> (in Dutch).
- 2 Source: <https://longreads.cbs.nl/european-scale-2019/internet>.
- 3 All relevant data on the news media in The Netherlands is compiled here: <https://www.svdj.nl/stand-van-de-nieuwsmedia/> (in Dutch).
- 4 See: <https://medialandscapes.org/country/netherlands> and <http://www.digitalnewsreport.org/survey/2019/netherlands-2019/>.
- 5 See the annual reports (in Dutch) of the government-mandated media concentration watchdog Commissariaat voor de Media: <https://www.cvdm.nl>.
- 6 Latest survey among journalists in The Netherlands (PDF, in Dutch): https://www.villamedia.nl/docs/091018_rapportage_%20HetGroteJournalistenonderzoek2018.pdf.
- 7 Source: annual surveys among Dutch freelance journalists are reported (in Dutch) in the Freelance Monitor; the 2018 version (most recent at the time of writing) is available here: <https://www.nvj.nl/nieuws/monitor-freelancers-en-media-2018-freelance-fotojournalisten-regio-verdiene-n-minder>.
- 8 See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Netherlands_Institute_for_Sound_and_Vision.
- 9 Special thanks to independent researcher Nele Goutier for arranging and doing the interviews.
- 10 More information: <https://www.svdj.nl/nieuws/crisis-kweekt-solidariteit-vast-en-freelance-maar-eigenlijk-moet-bedrijf-oplossen> (in Dutch).
- 11 All quotes used in this chapter are from different participants in the survey, also including oral history interviews from the various oral history interviews we conducted at the time.

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