

Journalism Practice, special issue on Entrepreneurial Journalism

Word count: 9219 (without title page)

Title Page

Freelancing in Flemish news media and entrepreneurial skills as pivotal elements in job satisfaction: perspectives of masters or servants?

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Abstract

In this study, we focus on a segment of journalists that is often neglected or marginalized in the bulk of research on the profiles of journalists and their careers: freelancers or entrepreneurial journalists. The most recent large scale survey among professional journalists in Flanders, the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium, shows that one in five journalists is a freelancer (Raeymaeckers et al. 2013, 10) but that only half of them is satisfied with their job against 93% of employed journalists. Seen from this perspective, Flanders does not appear as a very fertile ground for entrepreneurial journalism. In spring 2012, based on a randomly selected sample of freelancers from the database of the Flemish Union for Journalists (VVJ), we conducted a qualitative in-depth interview study among 22 freelancers. Interviews were built around three main research questions: 1) What are considered the advantages and disadvantages of working as a freelancer in Flanders? 2) How satisfied are freelancers in Flanders with their work and lives? What are the reasons for their (dis)satisfaction? And most importantly: 3) What are the preconditions to make entrepreneurial journalism 'work' in Flanders? Our results show that there is no such thing as a 'fixed' list of advantages and disadvantages as most features of freelance work (e.g. flexibility in working hours and assignments) can be considered in both ways. Free choice is the main precondition that discriminates between the perspective of the master and the servant and entrepreneurial skills serve as a pivotal element in job satisfaction.

KEY WORDS

career; Flanders; freelancers; entrepreneurial journalism; entrepreneurial skills; in-depth interviews; job satisfaction; news media

Professional Journalism and Entrepreneurship

The bulk of research on the profiles of journalists and their job careers consist of large scale surveys among employed journalists working in an editorial team. Freelancers or entrepreneurial journalists are often neglected or marginalized in these studies (Edstrom and Ladendorf 2012, 711; Ryan 2009, 648) and a qualitative research approach is even rarer. A report of the International Federation of Journalists and the International Labour Office (IFJ/ILO 2006) that explicitly looked into the situation of freelancers, still called them 'atypical' workforces. Within this amalgam of unsteady employment such as temporary and occasional jobs, freelancers (71 %) make up the largest subset (IFJ/ILO 2006, 6). The report stresses the growing share of this type of employment within media personnel and journalists. The journalism profession is increasingly becoming more uncertain and more intense. The situation in which collectively negotiated working statutes were the norm has been changed into a situation in which individuals have to negotiate contracts on their own (IFJ/ILO 2006, 3; Deuze 2009). As freelancers form an increasing subset within the professional market and as they already make up half of all journalists in some countries (for instance in the Netherlands, Hermans, Vergeer, and Pleijter 2011), the label 'atypical' is no longer either satisfactory or appropriate and more in-depth research into their daily journalistic working culture is necessary.

Profile of Freelance Journalists

Flanders, the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium, serves as an interesting case study. The label 'professional journalist' has been a protected occupational title in Flanders since 1963. Along with the title comes a press pass that makes work easier for the journalist: the pass enables access to information (e.g. access to official press conferences), includes material privileges (e.g. free public transport) and guarantees administrative, social, ethical and legal support. However, this title and consequently its privileges and protection are far more easily obtained by employed journalists than by freelancers, as one of the preconditions is the absolute ban on independent commercial activities (e.g. copywriting, PR and advertising). It is obvious that entrepreneurial journalists, who have to be professional journalists as well as professional entrepreneurs (businesses) at the same time, encounter conflicting practices with this strict requirement more readily than employed journalists. Notwithstanding this 'discrimination by the law', (only?) one in five 'professional journalists' in Belgium is a freelancer (Raeymaeckers et al. 2013, 10). More freelancers are to be found among youngsters (under 35, 26%) and people who are older than 54 (30%). The proportion of freelancers within weeklies and monthlies is significantly higher (30%) than within other media sectors. Among newspaper and television journalists, nearly one out of five works as an entrepreneurial reporter, while, within radio and online journalism, freelancing is nearly non-existent (Paulussen et al. 2010, 31-32). Nearly half of the freelancers work for multiple news media brands on a regular basis, a quarter gets orders by constantly changing customers, and the remaining quarter serves only one client (Raeymaeckers et al. 2013). Journalists that are self-employed but who serve only one client find themselves in a weak position if their patron suddenly changes the rules or severely cuts back on fees (Goris and Delforge 2012, 129).

Journalists in Flanders are highly educated. Nine out of ten professional journalists hold a bachelor or master degree and more than half of them successfully finished a specific training program in journalism (Raeymaeckers et al. 2013, 5; Paulussen and Hoebeker 2010, 41-42). The significant relationship between educational level and working statutes is remarkable: of all freelance journalists, only 56% finished university, among employees, this percentage reaches 72% (Raeymaeckers et al. 2013, 7). Working as a freelancer might serve as an alternative pathway towards a journalistic job in which building experience and on-the-job qualifications may 'compensate' an initially lower level of education. In the already cited IFJ/ILO report (2006, 4), Belgian journalists state that less experienced journalists or starters are regularly forced into a freelance working statute. It remains unclear whether educational level plays a clear and explicit role within this process. In every way, the Belgian findings in relation to educational level do not correspond to research results from, for example Sweden where the level of education is even higher among Swedish freelancing journalists (87 % have a higher education diploma) than among employed journalists (78%) (Edstrom and Ladendorf 2012). In his book *Changing journalism*, Lee-Wright (2012, 23) points out the loss of 'mentoring relationships' within a news room in which, traditionally, young journalists were supported and trained by experienced news room staff. This type of training is mostly lacking nowadays, especially when young journalists work on a freelance basis and have very weak ties with the news room.

Working Conditions

On average, a journalist in Flanders works 45 hours a week. This applies to both freelancers and employed journalists. Freelancers, however, have less regular working hours than their

employed colleagues. 88% of freelancers has varying working hours against 55% of employed journalists (Raeymaeckers et al. 2013, 17). Freelancers also work more during the evening (86% do so regularly to always), during weekends and holidays (76% do so regularly to always, 21% do so constantly, which is four times more than employees) than journalists who have a fixed contract, even though their rates of working evenings and weekends are already high (Paulussen and Ugille 2010, 57-59). In general, journalists are at risk for burnout (Teugels et al. 2009), self-employed journalists show evidence of an even higher risk (Teugels and Vercaigne 2010).

The 2012 survey among Belgian professional journalists shows that, on average, freelancers earn 500 euro per month less than employed journalists (Raeymaeckers et al. 2013, 19). This difference was not manifest in the 2008 Flemish journalists' survey, though the distribution of the wages shows a different pattern (Paulussen and Ugille 2010, 63). Among freelancers, a much wider distribution was and is evident. At both ends of the continuum, i.e. the ones that earn good money (23 % of the freelancers vs 7 % the employees) and those who earn far less than the average wage (26% of freelancers vs 9 % of employees,) we find a larger proportion of freelancers compared to their colleagues who work on a permanent basis. These findings are parallel to the results of research into freelance journalism in Germany where only a small professional elite of freelancers earn a high income as well (Henninger and Gottschall 2007, 54). The same pattern re-occurs in Austria where the mean income of freelancers reaches only half that of the wages of colleagues that hold a fixed term contract (Hummel, Kirchhoff, and Prandner 2011, 5). The majority of freelancers get paid per story, while others are paid per word or receive payment in relation to time effort (IFJ 2006, 6). In general, freelancers have to produce more news stories than their employed colleagues in order to receive the same amount of money. Extra benefits such as a hospitalization insurance, a company car, a mobile phone or luncheon vouchers are predominantly found among employees (Paulussen and Ugille 2010, 64). On top of these aspects, worldwide, self-employed journalists exercise to a far lesser degree their right to sick leave and paid leave (only 10% of freelancers versus 85% of employees), their right to maternity leave (12% versus 88%) and pension rights (7% versus 73%) (IFJ/ILO 2006, 7).

Not only the size of the wage, as such, is troublesome, the sheer necessity to devote attention to the financial aspects of the job may hinder self-employed journalists. Freelancers need to renegotiate over and over again in order to obtain a good salary. Many dislike this part of the job, but it is inextricably bound up with self-employment (Goris and Delforge 2012, 129). The situation becomes problematic when freelancers do not get paid for months at a time or even, do not get paid at all: "It can be compared to quicksand. You cannot build your life on it", as one freelancer formulated it in a file Apache put together on its website of May 2, 2012. Commercial skills and strategies for personal branding, therefore, are not a luxury but rather essential (Gynnild 2005).

Job Satisfaction

The 2013 survey shows that only half of the freelancers (55%) are (very) satisfied with their job against 93% of employed journalists (Raeymaeckers et al. 2013). Within the literature on job satisfaction, a distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic factors of motivation is made. Intrinsic factors such as level of creativity, variety in daily tasks, multiple contacts, intellectual challenge, autonomy and individual freedom increase internal job satisfaction and focus on the content of the journalistic work. Extrinsic elements stimulate the external job satisfaction and are related to social status, status within the professional sector, social engagement, working hours, work certainty, work pressure, and wages (Deprez 2010). In general, professional journalists are more satisfied with the intrinsic than with the extrinsic aspects of their job (Deprez 2010; Hummel, Kirchhoff, and Prandner 2011).

It is clear that specific disadvantages related to a job in journalism (such as volatile working hours or job uncertainty) are more strongly felt by freelancers than by employees. However, not all of these are automatically translated into a higher degree of dissatisfaction. As far as satisfaction with working hours (45%) and working pressure (35%) is concerned, percentages are remarkably similar between freelancers and employees (Deprez 2010, 74-75). Differences occur when both groups of journalists are questioned about their wages (employees are more satisfied than freelancers), options for promotion (only 7% of freelancers is satisfied compared to 30% of employees), job certainty (only a quarter of freelancers are satisfied compared to nearly three quarters of salaried employees) and perception of social status (63% of freelancers are satisfied versus 72% of employees). Research by Teugels et al. (2009) already indicated that journalists who work on a permanent basis estimate their personal competence to be higher than their colleagues who have temporary working contracts or work as freelancers. A permanent job seems to be linked to more self-esteem.

Thus, when we focus on job extrinsic factors, we see that journalist who work on a permanent basis are more satisfied than their freelancing colleagues. When we shift our attention to job intrinsic factors, a different image emerges. Freelancers, more than salaried journalists, are satisfied with their individual freedom (83% vs 74%), job variety (95% vs 88%), the multitude of contacts and new people they meet (90% vs 81%), the intellectual challenges and the opportunities for showing creativity in their job offers. Freelancers score higher on all but one of these intrinsic factors; namely, freelancers do not score higher on individual autonomy, a variable that is mostly regarded as indicating job satisfaction in general. Individual autonomy is located in the extension of editorial autonomy, concerning which self-employed journalists are more negative than employed journalists. The differences are small, but significant (Cannie and Voorhoof 2010, 103). Freelancers indicate more often than employees that their ideas 'never' or 'only now and then' lead to a story. They feel that they are less able to influence editorial decisions.

Swedish research by Edstrom and Ladendorf (2012) connects the job satisfaction of freelance journalists to the condition of free and deliberate choice for self-employment. They distinguish between a portfolio model (derived from Handy 1994; see also Henninger and Gottschall 2007), in which talented, highly educated *young professionals* "are pulled into self-employment" and a marginalization model, in which less talented media workers "are pushed into self-employment". The former is an optimistic model that stresses the advantages of self-employment, if deliberately chosen, for personal development and career structure. The latter is far less optimistic as many people are 'forced' into self-employment to escape unemployment or simply because this is the way the media industry is organized.

Whereas in 2008 three out of four freelancers (75%) in Flanders still expressed their deliberate choice for self-employment, this number dropped to 58% in 2012. The remaining 42% said they had 'no choice' but work as freelancer (Raeymaeckers et al. 2013, 10). The former group fits in with the portfolio model, the latter with the marginalization model. The corresponding satisfaction scores confirm the importance of a free choice: whereas in 2008, 69% of Flemish freelancers expressed satisfaction with their jobs, only 55% did so in 2012 (Deprez 2010; Raeymaeckers et al. 2013). Together with the increased number of freelancers, their satisfaction level decreased. As 'forced freelancing' appears to be especially important among journalists below 35 years (69%), the future looks rather bleak.

Belgian journalists opt for self-employment for divergent reasons, but the longing for freedom and independence (82%) is by far the most important. Other main motivations are family related (24%) or financial (32%) (Raeymaeckers et al. 2013, 10). The latter concurs with the income distribution among self-employed journalists. As we have seen, about 23% of freelancers can be considered 'big earners' for whom freelancing might be "a career opportunity for experienced workers, providing more challenges and better income than work as an employee" (Henninger and

Gottschall 2007). Freedom was also crucial in the discourse of Swedish self-employed journalists (Edstrom and Ladendorf 2012): both freedom *from* (managers, colleagues, assignments, working hours,...) as well as freedom *for* (especially family time). Not surprisingly, women in particular link all activities in life to one another ((Edstrom and Ladendorf 2012, 717). Although “the feeling is stronger than the actual freedom” (716), the feeling nevertheless is important. Also an idealistic belief in the job, “or simply, the belief that the game is worth playing” (Hummel, Kirchhoff, Prandner 2011), causes journalists to minimize the negative aspects of the job relative to the positive aspects and thus to job satisfaction.

Future?

The choice to work either as an employed or self-employed journalist seems essential for job satisfaction but at the same time involves risk. In Belgium, a lot more journalists in 2012 saw no choice but freelancing in comparison to 2008. In the 2008 survey, 44% of Flemish journalists agreed with the statement that “media increasingly *force* journalists to work as freelancers” (18% did not agree, 38% were neutral) (Paulussen et al. 2010, 35). Hummel, Kirchhoff, and Prandner (2011) in Austria and, more generally, Deuze (2007, 2009) point at a steady rise of the number of freelancers, turning the formerly ‘atypical’ workers into the future ‘typical’ ones.

This has consequences, not only for the individual journalist but also for the journalism market as a whole. A recurrent notion describing recent developments is “the loss of the collective” (Lee-Wright 2012, 23). Peter Lee-Wright describes the disappearance of “mentoring relationships” whereby young employed journalists are taken under the wing of experienced journalists to become socialized and educated on the job. Self-employed journalists, in contrast, are on their own and forced to fall back on themselves. They are not covered by collective statute, having to negotiate individually (IFJ/ILO 2006). There is more work uncertainty which fosters individual competition. Lee-Wright (2012, 24) states “the withdrawal of the collective umbra which protects workers from the constant stress of responsibility for every decision in their working life”. Self-employment can be a lonely occupation: “On a bad day you will not be carried by the momentum of a supportive editorial team” (Goris and Delforge 2012, 129). Freelancers fall outside the collective structures such as unions and interest groups. Solidarity between fixed editors and freelancers is small. Freelancers are often considered as “garbage”, reads the website of Apache on May 2, 2012.

But what is for some the end of an era – the loss of collective solidarity, for others is the beginning of a new era – and new opportunities for enterprising individuals. This is where the term entrepreneurial journalism pops up. Hence, Baines and Kennedy (2010) make a distinction between *self-employment* (when the freelancer is insecure, powerless and in a dependent relationship with clients) and *entrepreneurialism* (in which the freelancer is perceived as having a sense of independence, empowerment and self-direction). They might overlap, but are not necessarily the same. Or, as also Edstrom and Ladendorf (2012, 713) indicate: “Freelancers are affected by the interplay between opportunity and insecurity”. Lee-Wright (2012, 33) fully agrees: “Entrepreneurialism is a very current buzz-word, with the view that it is fast becoming an essential skill that journalists need to be taught if they are to survive”. New handbooks such as ‘Entrepreneurial journalism’ from Mark Briggs (2012) do not hesitate to connect ‘entrepreneurialism’ with ‘journalism’ in order “to train journalists to become entrepreneurs” (Jef Jarvis cited in Briggs 2012, xv).

Methodology

In spring 2012, 71 freelance journalists were randomly selected from the database of the VVJ - Flemish Union for Journalists. 22 of them were willing to contribute to our in-depth interview study: fourteen men and eight women. Their ages varied from 22 to 62. Interviewees were working as journalists for newspapers (quality papers, popular papers, national and regional papers), magazines, radio (national and regional), television (regional, public and commercial channels) and online media (special interest magazines). Each interviewee signed an informed consent form. An interview guide consisting of central themes and open ended questions served as a guiding instrument throughout all 22 in-depth interviews. The interviews were fully transcribed and coded by use of the qualitative software package Dedoose (dedoose.com). Each interview was coded by at least two coders who received coding training and discussed their work in order to reach agreement and to guarantee consistent labelling. A coding scheme was created during an inductive and iterative process. Open coding of the interviews was followed by axial coding.

Based on the literature review, our qualitative and exploratory research among Flemish freelance journalists is built around the following three research questions:

RQ 1: What are the necessary **preconditions** for feasible freelance journalism ?

RQ 2: What are considered the **advantages and disadvantages** of working as a freelance journalist?

RQ 3: How satisfied are freelance journalists with their work and lives and what are the **reasons behind their (dis)satisfaction**?

Results

Preconditions of Feasible Freelance Journalism

Based on the analysis of our qualitative interview results, we found three clusters of preconditions our freelance journalists mentioned during the reflective conversations. In the presentation of our results, we firstly discuss the preconditions within the professional content and context of the job (a), then we deal with the preconditions within an organizational context (time management) (b), and finally, we go further into preconditions related to the wider socio-demographic context of freelance practitioners (c).

a. Professional Know How: Extra Competences

Although they say the purely journalistic work in itself remains the same, the freelancers we interviewed stress the need to dispose of extra competences compared to salaried journalists. Being self-employed means that you are obliged to behave as one's own manager and to demonstrate the capabilities of a competent entrepreneur: you have to work pro-actively to acquire orders and you need long term vision. It is an absolute must to show initiative, to invest in client acquisition by offering proposals and by initiating topics for possible news items. A sit and wait attitude is definitely no option within this specific segment of journalism. Some freelancers are especially aware of this situation and they formulate 'entrepreneurship' very explicitly in straightforward economic and marketing terms:

I have always introduced myself personally. I teach my students to operate as an entrepreneur (...). Make a business plan and that is: what do I need to do in order to realize my plan, my USP, my Unique Selling Proposition? First of all: what is my USP? What do I want to do? It is better to focus onto one point, something you are really good at and where there is no competition. That is better than telling yourself, "I am going to do it all". (Freelancer M)

You have to be able to define your position. You have to place yourself in the market. Also as a journalist, wherever you are going, I mean, you have to be the one who immediately shows personality, someone they can rely on. (Freelancer F)

Next to the passion and business instinct of an entrepreneur, discipline is a constantly recurring term throughout the interviews. Freelancers state that they have the advantage of experiencing a lot of freedom through their job (see infra: advantages of freelancing) but this immediately implies that you need to be able to handle this freedom in a very sensible way. There is no direct superior who is guiding and steering, you need to fall back onto your own will power and perseverance to achieve your goals within the harsh journalistic world.

Discipline, lots of discipline. You need to have the discipline to really say: "Look, today, I am going to work". Because, when you have no discipline and you do not work, ...Well, postponing is extremely dangerous as a self-employed journalist. And planning, planning is really very important. Because, it all falls onto your shoulders. There is no one who will do it in your place or who tells you what to do. You have no structure, you have to build your own structure. You have to make sure that you earn money and make a living. So you have to think properly in advance (...) Thus, I really think we are the better planners. (Freelancer B)

Next to possessing a strong sense of discipline, successful freelancers manage to handle their working schedule in a flexible and adaptable way. More busy periods simply do alternate with lean times when the going gets tough. In this respect, freelancing journalists speak of possessing "a certain kind of peace of mind", having the flexibility to deal with uncertainty.

I think, you need to have some peace of mind, because there are many people who would not be able to live with uncertainty. I have already gone through times during which I had loads of work to do for two months and then, it suddenly, it comes to a stop. By now, I know that June, July and August are very calm months for me, months when I earn nearly nothing at all. Now, I am neither surprised nor scared by that any more. (Freelancer S)

In order to receive paid assignments, it is even more importance for freelancers than for salaried journalists to have a large and well-built social network at their disposal. Whether you should create and enlarge this network by means of social media was a point of discussion among our interviewees. Some are very proficient in networking throughout Facebook and Twitter, others swear by a live approach because they believe it offers them a better return on investment. Whatever method of networking they prefer, stretching out their antennas while searching for news remains the central competence they want to develop more.

In the beginning, I went out to introduce myself personally. That helps. I also use Facebook a lot for that. I am more of an internet journalist. I do a lot online. I use Facebook and the internet as a member of associations and clubs, they offer me lots of information. (...) Through Facebook, you can find all possible contacting information. Whatever you see when you are out somewhere, you just log in on Facebook, you send a message to someone and people always answer me, actually. (Freelancer C)

You do need intellectual capital and a good network. It is extremely important for someone who studies communication sciences or journalism to start building their career while they are still studying. And you do so by networking. (Freelancer M)

The starting period is especially hard for freelancers. Only after a couple of years of practicing can most of them can fall back on a long and rich contact list or even a well-filled order package. This can even result in a situation in which freelancers have to decline orders and have to acquire a new competence: daring to say 'no'.

It is hard to say “no”. The first two years, it is difficult to find jobs, you have just graduated, you have no network to rely on. But after two years, you feel: “Ok, orders are coming in, and when an order is dropped or a client turns you down, there is always something new coming along to replace them”. It is hard to say “no”, especially in those first years, because you think: “Oh, they are not coming back” and it definitely took me about eight years to say “no” to my clients. Because now I know: they do come back. (Freelancer U)

b. Organizational Preconditions: Timetables and Time Management

Besides the specific interpretation of the freelancers’ job with respect to content, there are other factors that play a crucial role in the pursuance of this branch of journalism. The precise working schedule, time pressure and the combination of work and leisure time serve as preconditions for (keeping on) working as a freelancer. Contrary to what may be expected, most freelancers do not complain about the work pressure being too high nor about working overtime. They do mention their many working hours and a few clearly state that they do not want to calculate how much they earn per hour because they are afraid this would demotivate them, but most of the freelancers report that working overtime, working during the evening and at weekends is simply part of their type of job.

I really do a lot of work during the weekends, actually, it is never finished. Occasionally, I say to myself: “This weekend, I am not going to work”. But most of the time, I am preparing for an interview and doing research, or I am writing a story. Most of the time, I am doing something, but it doesn’t really feel like working. That is also because, during the week, it can happen that you say to yourself: “Okay, today, I don’t have a lot to do, I can go to practice my sport”. (Freelancer S)

There is no such thing as “doing overtime”. Generally, I easily work ten hours a day, on average. And then I am not even mentioning days on which you start working at 10 a.m. and have to go to a movie première in the evening or a reception, or a fashion show or the presentation of a production or the television stars awards. Then, you are working until 3 a.m. in the morning. Is that working overtime? No, that is just doing your job. It is part of the job, if you can’t stand that, you shouldn’t enter the profession. (Freelancer A)

More important than actual working hours of overtime is what one interviewee called ‘mental hygiene’. This mental state ensures that one can deal with the demanding job of a freelance journalist, making it is possible to charge yourself up and keep going without risking a burn-out. New energy can be gathered by carrying out activities outside the work environment. It is important to invest time in energy recharging even though freelancers do not earn any money during that time. However, in the long run, it appears to be an essential and indispensable strategy.

I believe you ought to pay a lot of attention to “mental hygiene”, by that, I mean you have to do other things than only working. You have to eat well, eat nice and good food, not only junk food. You have to drink well, nice and good drinks. You need to have good hobbies, seeing other people on a regular basis’ (Freelancer M)

When we asked freelance journalists about the implications of the economic crisis, we received a double layered answer. The crisis has created a situation in which freelancers have to work harder to receive the same remuneration as before, but there are also freelancers who claim that the crisis period is in a way related to an ‘advantage’ for journalists who are not fixed employees on the payroll of news companies.

Interviewer: According to you, what makes for the fact that you have “good periods” in which you receive many orders and what causes lean periods?

Yes, there are times in which they make a strong appeal to salaried employees during crisis periods, but actually, it is a dual situation because ... Sometimes, they also fire employees and they make a

stronger appeal to freelancers because they are cheaper. Crises, they are dual: sometimes they are good news, sometimes they are not, but it hasn't bothered me yet. In the past, it went up and down. There were times that it was very quiet from June onwards until September, due to the fact that many magazines had no publications. But now, by doing specific projects, I notice that I can work throughout the whole year, actually. (Freelancer U)

c. Preconditions Within the Socio-demographic Context of Freelance Journalists

Our results reveal socio-demographic preconditions to start and keep on working as a freelance journalist. We asked our interviewees about their education, age, job satisfaction and wage, the importance of start capital and the possibilities for financial back up when times are lean. For most of our interviewed freelancers, it was very important to have a financial safety net at their disposal, both during the process of deciding to start working as a freelancer and during financial hard times in order to tide them over. It regularly happens that quite some time goes by between the carrying out of an order and the payment of the work. A safety net can take the form of financial back up by the partner, parents or a part-time job that offers more security. This part-time job sometimes consists of journalistic work as a part-time employee but it can also refer to a job completely out of the journalistic sector. Freelancers also mention savings as start capital for purchasing a car, a phone, a camera, a laptop or other essential material for an entrepreneurial journalist.

I was very young when I started. I was still living at my parents, so that was an advantage. I did not have to pay any rent and that was a good thing, because, in the beginning, it did happen that I had only work for two days out of five (...). I definitely would advise people not to become self-employed when you do not have any savings. When you start from scratch, do not start as a freelancer. It is better to start doing some temporary fill-in jobs. In that way, you can save a bit because, financially, it is not so easy to be self-employed. It takes a while. The first year, well, the costs are higher than the benefits (...). You really need some savings. Another disadvantage of being self-employed, is the fact that some news companies are bad payers. I do not get paid every week, sometimes, it takes eight weeks before I get paid. In those situations, it happens that you need to fall back on your savings. When you have costs of your own, when your car breaks down and you have to pay the mechanics, well, then you need a nice little nest egg. (Freelancer B)

During the hard times at company X, it was important that someone at home brought in a bit of cash. If I had been on my own during that time, well, then I would not have survived because I had not been able yet to build up any reserve. (Freelancer B)

Interviewer: And is it important that you can fall back on a partner who has a financial more stable status?

It is a comforting thought, yes. It makes you sleep better at night. (Freelancer A)

To survive, most freelancers work by order for multiple clients. This ensures a more certain and higher income. Freelancers who work for only one customer, are more exceptional and often have a practical reason to do so:

Interviewer: Do you only work for newspaper Y or are there any other papers you work for?

Well, I am an exception as far as that is concerned. Most freelancers combine things, because you do not get paid that well. Most of them work for free local papers as well. Anyway, I don't have to support a whole family anymore. My husband makes good money and I can add a part to it. (Freelancer C)

Strictly speaking, journalists who want to acquire and keep the protected occupational title of a 'professional journalist' in Belgium are not allowed to accept any commercial orders. Within the professional field itself, this stern stipulation has long been a subject for discussion, especially when times are hard and freelancers need to scrape in order to survive. Some of our interviewees dared to openly admit that these more commercial orders such as copywriting supply the necessary financial input to survive as a freelancer:

From time to time, I even work for advertising companies. Simply because, unfortunately, you cannot make a living out of journalism only, you need to take in a bit of commercial work. (Freelancer J)

When we asked about their wage satisfaction, we noticed a difference between the so called 'entrepreneurs' (see supra) and the ones who possess these entrepreneurial skills to a far less degree. All our interviewees report that remuneration for orders is continuously decreasing and that media companies should reward their freelancers more financially, but for some of them this is a larger problem than for others. Freelancers who have managed to situate themselves firmly in the market face fewer financial concerns.

When I see how much time I spend doing research and writing and when I compare it to the money I earn for it, than I can only say it is a distorted ratio. I have enough orders to make a living, so I am not complaining about my wage but, in my opinion, journalists should get better paid because there are huge differences between different customers. Some pay me 0.04 euro a sign, some pay 0.05. Others pay per page and that differs a lot. (Freelancer U)

I really believe newspapers and media companies ought to pay more. Payment is declining and they are taking advantage of it, especially because some say you get paid under the form of copyright royalties. They tell you that you have to pay less tax on it, but in the end, this is not accepted by the tax authorities. The media companies are using this as a false argument to pay you less. For me, that is unacceptable. I used to work within the walls of a media company, and freelancers do not make up the largest cost entry, although they always tell you so. These companies are splashing around money in other ways, so they really could pay their freelancers some more. (Freelancer S)

Interviewer: And what do you think about your wage?

Well, it is too low, too uncertain; as a freelancer, you can get fired very easily just like that. (Freelancer E)

Advantages and Disadvantages of Freelance Journalism

The answers of the interviewees show that there is no such thing as a 'fixed' list of advantages and disadvantages as most aspects of freelance work can be considered in both ways. How journalists experience something is largely dependent on their personality and whether or not they made a deliberate choice for self-employment. Those who chose to work on their own see more advantages and are more satisfied than those forced into this statute. We call them 'forced freelancers' versus 'voluntary freelancers'. 'Forced freelancers' are more inclined than others to see drawbacks.

I had to give my resignation [as an employed journalist] because if you get fired, you are not allowed to work as a freelancer for that same company for one year. As I wanted to be sure to be able to work (for that media company) during the uncertain transition period, I resigned myself. After a while, I also started to work for other media brands. But in the startup period, it was useful to ensure the connection with (that media company). (Freelancer U)

Interviewer: Was freelancing what you wanted to do?
No, I just wanted a decent job. To be honest, I applied for the job not with the feeling "this will be it" but more "it doesn't hurt". It was not something I did with conviction. (Freelancer I)

Uh, I was not specifically motivated to work as a freelancer. To me, it was just work, and I took the fact that it had to freelance as something I had to live with. I had no choice. (Freelancer G)

Others are *pulled* into freelancing. They consider freelancing more as 'entrepreneurial journalism', associated with independence, empowerment and self-direction. As a freelancer you can show what you are worth as a (starting) journalist and, if you do it right, you can even earn more:

Interviewer: It was more an obligation than an option?

No, no, it has nothing to do with obligations. It is simply easier to start as a freelancer, to introduce yourself and to show what you are able to do. Afterwards, you can choose yourself whether you switch to employment or whether you stay self-employed. For example, I worked as an employed journalist for two years. Then I got tired of listening to a boss. When I left, they asked me to work as a freelancer for them. And then you get a crazy system where you earn more as a freelancer than as an employed journalist, provided you properly handle your accounting. (Freelancer F)

Interviewer: Have you ever thought of doing something else, or getting an employment?
No, I think I will never again go for an employment. Then you are no longer your own boss. Now I have almost no control. (..) I prefer self-employment. But I am atypical, I have worked as an employee but I don't want to go back ever. (Freelancer C)

Some aspects of freelance work – for example irregular working hours and working at home – are considered an advantage by the latter group of voluntary freelancers and perceived as a disadvantage by the former group of forced freelancers.

Irregular working hours have the advantage that you can manage your own time. You do not have to stick to the 9 to 5 rhythm but you can follow an alternative daily schedule, better adapted to your personal life and the needs of, for example, your children. It can foster the combination of work and family life:

I make it a point to pick up my children from school at half past three. So then I stop working and I start working again in the evening and at the weekends. (Freelancer E)

We had children, so the combination of work and family became more complicated. My wife also had a career. So I decided: "I will stay home and look after the children and work as a freelancer". (Freelancer F)

At the same time, irregular working hours can be perceived as difficult to live with and consequently a disadvantage:

For example, news stories about the police, firemen,.. (..). It can wreck you. With three or four hours sleep at night, you are a wreck at the end of the week and this has an impact on your social life. (Freelancer S)

Actually, it never stops. You always work. It's okay for family life, but for yourself, personally, you are never done. It's very stressful. You are really never done. And if you decide not to work, you don't earn anything. (Freelancer C)

I admit, I find it more difficult now than before. When I had just arrived in Brussels I was (net)working at cafés during the evenings, distributing business cards, doing interviews. In the end, you become crazy. Now, I try to do other things, going out with friends. So yes, it's not self-evident. (Freelancer E)

Interviewer: To what degree are you expected to be reachable at any time?

For the radio, this is not too bad, but for the newspaper, it turned out to be a problem. It made me sick in the end, the feeling that it never stops. You ask yourself: "why are you not able to go quietly to the theater one night." At a certain moment, it is just too heavy to bear, you know. (Freelancer E)

Working at home also is also a double sided aspect of the job. On the one hand, it is a time saver as you do not have to navigate towards your work space, with the corresponding traffic jams and stress situations. You can work in a quiet environment at your own rhythm while following your own personal routines:

Interviewer: What are the advantages of working at home?

You can work. You are much less disturbed. When you work in the newsroom, there are morning and evening meetings in which you have to participate, in particular when you are coordinating things. That is fun sometimes, and any journalist should pass through it once, to see how a newspaper is made. It gives you a thrill to complete the newspaper and to go celebrating it with your colleagues, but after a while, it is no longer necessary, all those meetings, and all that buzz. And yes, it is an important element: I'm never stuck in traffic anymore. (Freelancer S)

I believe you can work better at home, because you are not disturbed by telephone conversations from others. I often hear from other journalists that these open 'landscape offices' are like hell because everyone hears everyone. Of course, I do have my own methods to write, and this is always accompanied by music. In the newsroom, of course, that would not be possible. (Freelancer U)

On the other hand, when you work at home, you can feel isolated. There is no (or less) contact with colleagues, both social contacts as well as work related conversations. You are less involved in 'making the news product'. Another disadvantage, named by the freelancers, is the fewer opportunities to receive feedback on their work. Quite a few freelancers would prefer to receive regular feedback on their work, to learn from it and to grow in their job:

What I lack, as a freelancer, is feedback. I don't know whether employed journalists receive a lot of feedback, but I find this a shortcoming. Feedback can also be negative. You learn from it, and sometimes I miss that. (Freelancer U)

Though freelancers miss feedback, they do not miss the competition felt in the newsroom. Although competition between freelancers does exist, the interviewees declare that they experience less competition pressure within the media institution they work for. This leads to more job satisfaction:

The advantage is that people are more satisfied as a freelancer. A newsroom is a collection of strong personalities which results in fierce competition. They would, so to say, saw the legs from under your seat. I don't say everyone is like this, but in any newsroom, there are two, three persons who begrudge you everything. (Freelancer S)

Freedom and flexibility are the most important advantages that interviewees put forward. Possible negative aspects of the job are for the majority of journalists more than offset by the acquired freedom:

I prefer to be my own master rather than someone else's servant. And a good paid servant remains a servant. Yes, I prefer to be a poor master instead of a well-paid servant. (Freelancer B)

Though freelancing might be financially beneficial to some, to others the financial aspect is a clear disadvantage. Freelancers have to take risks and they are not always well paid for it. It even causes freelancers to discourage others from doing the job:

It's a disadvantage of being a freelancer: they give you the responsibility to do things, you take the risks and they take the profit. That's not nice. (Freelancer F)

It's a 'dog's life' nowadays. Freelance journalists, according to media companies' logics, have to be paid as little as possible and have to work as hard as possible. It is slavery. I do not recommend slavery to anyone. (Freelancer P)

Job and Life Satisfaction

We asked the participants in our study to express their satisfaction with their job as a freelancer on a scale from zero to ten and to explain in their own words what this means to them. Furthermore, we asked them to do the same for their general satisfaction with life.

On average, the freelancers in our study gave 7.6 out of 10 for job satisfaction. Individual scores fluctuated between six and ten. In spite of the obvious disadvantages, next to the actual crisis in media, the interviewees appear to be rather satisfied. A few journalists urgently want to make a distinction between job satisfaction and the financial satisfaction connected to the job:

Well, that's difficult to say. Can I split this? Remuneration, that is 5 out of 10. But the work in itself is 8 out of 10. That makes on average 6 out of 10. The work is frustrating. You curse a lot. But it is, of course, also very satisfactory. (Freelancer H)

Yes, that's a difficult question. It depends, financially I would only give it a six, but with regard to amusing oneself, it's a nine. It is difficult to bring everything together in one figure. Let's make it a seven, then. (Freelancer B)

8 out of 10! I think that you already got the message that I like it and that I'm greatly motivated but there are some serious drawbacks: the financial aspect of the job, the lack of separation between work and private life, the lack of colleagues. So, 8 might be a good figure, I think. (Freelancer J)

A fat 8. What lacks is appreciation for your work. With appreciation, it would be 10 out of 10 for me, notwithstanding the stress and very high work pressure. Look, when you choose this job, you know that's part of it. (Freelancer A)

Scores for overall appreciation of life run largely parallel to job satisfaction scores. On average, respondents gave 7.5 out of 10. Scores, however, did not run parallel for each individual participant.

Conclusion and Discussion

In Belgium, one in five journalists works as a self-employed, entrepreneurial journalist. This is a rather small proportion compared to the general international figure of one third of all journalists (IFJ 2006), to the Netherlands (half of all journalists; Hermans, Vergeer, and Pleijter 2011), or to the UK (a quarter of all reporters; Baines and Kennedy 2010). Freelancers are found foremost among older journalists (+ 54 years old) and younger journalists (- 35 years old). Younger journalists are more than others forced into self-employment as 69% of them indicates to have had 'no choice but freelancing'. On average, 42% indicate a lack of choice whereas 58% made a deliberate choice for self-employment with freedom as the main motivational factor. (Raeymaeckers et al. 2013)

Our qualitative interview results clearly show that a 'fixed' list of advantages and disadvantages of freelancing does not exist, since most features of freelance work (e.g. flexibility in working hours and assignments) can be considered in both ways. The perception of journalists regarding these aspects is dependent on the choice to freelance was free or forced. Those who chose freely to work on their own see more advantages and are more satisfied than those who were forced into the statute. This finding confirms the distinction made by Edstrom and Ladendorf (2012) in Sweden between those (young) professionals *pulled into* self-employment and others *pushed into* self-employment. Free choice, therefore, is the main precondition distinguishing between the perspectives of the master and the servant.

In our study, we found three clusters of preconditions our freelance journalists put forward during the reflective conversations. First of all, we discussed the preconditions within the

professional content and context of the job (a), then we dealt with preconditions within an organizational context (time management) (b), and finally, we focused on preconditions related to the wider socio-demographic context of freelance practitioners (c).

Freedom – and even more mastery, self-control - are frequently cited words in the interviews throughout these three clusters. Flemish freelancing journalists want to be the master of their own time, their job, and their life. Freedom in journalistic work (e.g. choice of subjects, stories), however, seems more difficult to reach than freedom in work organization (e.g. working hours). But freedom has a price: the work is uncertain and never done. Freelance journalists need to devote an important part of their time to 'running their business'. Essential preconditions to be successful therefore are business skills and competences with regard to budgeting, time and project management – discipline is a key element –, risk-taking, negotiation and presentation (self-promotion). Journalists need to build a 'unique selling proposition' – bringing a business value into the ethos of journalism. The traditional divide between the values of journalism and those of business seems no longer maintainable within entrepreneurial journalism: There are plenty of opportunities within journalism for those who dare to think in a commercial way (Laenen 2011; Briggs 2012). As stipulated before, the Flemish definition of an accredited 'professional journalist' as someone who bans any commercial activity is problematic in this sense.

A successful freelance journalist is not an isolated journalist: he or she is the pivotal element within a broad social network (social capital), he or she preferably has a partner with a fixed income and gets some professional help with regard to accounting and budgeting. Again, accredited 'professional journalist' in Flanders can count on the support from the journalists' organization but as a lot of freelancers are not able to receive the title of 'professional journalist', they cannot count on this support. Feedback and appreciation from the environment (e.g. colleagues, peers, clients) is an often neglected but especially important precondition for (ongoing) motivation as well. Our results provide support for "mentoring relationships" (Lee-Wright 2012) as freelance journalists would also like to benefit from them.

To conclude, freelancing in Flanders is not a black-and-white story with all entrepreneurial journalists feeling or behaving as 'masters' instead of 'servants'. Unfortunately, due to unsuccessful preconditions and/or a lack of appropriate financial rewarding and appreciation, some still feel themselves to be 'slaves'. Those journalists able to 'master' their career structures – not least with the help of entrepreneurial skills - however, no longer wish themselves a future as a 'servant'.

Future research could focus on the huge differences between countries as far as their proportion of freelance journalists is concerned, the reasons behind these differences and the link with journalistic cultures and working conditions. The precise role of news companies who serve simultaneously as the 'customers' of freelancers and as their 'patrons', their expectations, demands and offers, need to be mapped more clearly in order to understand the future of feasible entrepreneurial journalism.

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