



WRITING DECENT WORK INTO THE FUTURE OF NEWS

Journalists are among the many workers whose employment has become precarious in the transition to a digital economy. Their core values and the quality of the news are threatened as a result. The threat to our democracy is even greater. Decent work must be written into plans for Canada's news media industry to create a responsible future.

A young music journalist gets her dream job at a magazine but she must move across the country to San Francisco. Her long-term boyfriend breaks up with her and now she has a week before the big move to live it up one last time with her besties in New York City. This is not only the logline to the recent Netflix film *Someone Great*. It is also yet another tired, deeply flawed portrayal of what it is actually like to work in journalism.

Alas, job insecurity, compromised values and struggles for survival are not sexy movie themes. It is true that for the better part of the 20th century, journalism was a white-collar profession with relative job security that allowed for strong journalistic values, but that era is long gone. Instead, journalists like myself are becoming entrepreneurs and branding ourselves online to survive in an industry that is not producing decent work.

There is no shortage of evidence detailing the journalism crisis in Canada and around the world. The advertising revenue model that once reigned is no longer viable. Revenues have been siphoned to major social networking companies that are better able to deliver audiences to advertisers. Google and Facebook accounted for 72% of Canada's 5.5 billion dollar advertising industry in 2016¹. Their share of the global digital ad market in 2018 was close to 85%.²

A third of Canadian journalism jobs have been eliminated since 2010³. This is reflective of a larger trend over the past few decades that has seen mass closures of local news outlets, a gutting of newsrooms, and a hollowing out of journalism as coverage deficits abound. Many of the jobs that do exist are precarious; contract based or part-time with little job security or workplace benefits. Over one-quarter of the Canadian public broadcaster's unionized workforce are contract and temporary workers,⁴ many of whom are working an endless stream of contracts.

THE RISE OF ENTREPRENEURIAL JOURNALISM

The response to such immense disruption in this industry has tended to view entrepreneurial journalism as the ticket to survival for journalists and news media organizations. The argument goes that the wall between business decisions and editorial decisions (not that it was ever impenetrable) ought to be breached for journalism to survive. This requires redefining what journalism is by setting aside former notions about editorial independence, one of the key norms that has governed the profession.

Canadian journalist David Skok, former managing editor and vice-president of digital for the *Boston Globe* and founder of *The Logic*, puts it this way: "Without sales, marketing, strategy, leadership and, first and foremost, revenues, there is no editorial independence left to root for."⁵ There have been increases in sponsored content and native advertising partnerships with news organizations as a result of this shift in thinking.

As for journalists, we're advised to accept our new fate. Freelance is the new normal. We need to start our own businesses and find ways to make our journalism profitable. We must be adaptable and flexible, willing to constantly reinvent ourselves. We must develop personal brands to market ourselves, bring an audience to our reporting, and build a community around our brands.

The role of journalists is, therefore, is to prioritize journalism's economic viability first and social utility second (if at all). The celebration of the entrepreneurial journalist takes legitimate struggles for decent work and recasts them as opportunities to revitalize the industry. The positive aspects of this new environment are overstated and the struggles are rarely discussed.

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It's time to discuss these struggles. In the wake of completing my PhD, I co-founded a media production company that produces journalism, original scripted content, and branded content. I became an entrepreneur not out of a desire to own a business but out of necessity. I needed some stability. I wanted some work opportunities that did not expect me to compromise my values. At the same time, I entered this field knowing full well how precarious it is.

Our profession has always emphasized autonomy, truth seeking, and independence but few journalists can survive on reporting gigs alone anymore. Many of us who work in journalism consider taking on freelance branded content and PR assignments to pay the bills. The skills between these two fields are transferable and the boundaries between them are largely difficult to discern. I can't imagine many people decide to become journalists for the money, but it is sobering to learn that public relations and branded content pays so much better than journalism. Working under such conditions means focusing on what you can sell, not what is needed. Sometimes these things may coincide. There are, however, no guarantees.

The idea that I must 'set aside' my values to survive is irrational. Values cannot be set aside. They can only be compromised. The absence of decent work means journalists compromise their values daily in the process of informing readers and building our careers.

My time is divided. One day, I am making a radio documentary for the CBC on how companies co-opt activism in their campaigns. The next day, I am making branded content for a comparable company. There is a cognitive dissonance that you simply can't ignore or shake. Journalism is meant to expose truths. Public relations, on the other hand, is about shaping a positive image even when undeserved. Being split between these two worlds forces me to weigh how critical I can be and what the consequences might be for employability in the future.

THE NEW EXPECTATION OF UNPAID LABOUR

Journalists are expected to invest thousands of unpaid hours to create personal brands powerful enough to attract and hold audiences, make media platforms more profitable and to get paid. A strong social media following, expansive networks, and industry connections are the leading determinants of success when it comes to successful story pitches and calls for what is known as 'inbound work'. There are shockingly few discussions about the ethics underlying this expectation.

There are now layers of what I call "visibility labour" in my research which examines the rise of entrepreneurial journalism and its impact on a new generation of journalists. Visibility labour is both unpaid and essential to build a network, gain notoriety and translate that into paid employment opportunities. Journalists must maintain a consistent social media presence, establish and manage relationships with editors, engage with audiences, and be constantly pitching. The layers of unpaid labour pile up in addition to reporting assignments, which is the only activity recognized and compensated as work.

Personal branding and networking are not new phenomenon in journalism, but they used to be connected to a full-time salaried wage, not as a condition of entry into the field. To work under these conditions means that you work constantly, the lines between leisure and work time are

blurred, and there is no guarantee that this investment will be recouped let alone pay off. What's worse is that no one talks about these activities as work. They are simply expectations.

Declining unionization and increasing precarity has had a detrimental impact on worker protections, pay, and journalistic autonomy. In the past media unions were pivotal in fighting to protect journalists from unpaid labour, providing workplace benefits, creating better equity and transparency around job structure and compensation, and preserving editorial independence. As industry-wide layoffs and buyouts continue, so does union membership amongst journalists.

There has been, however, a resurgence of newsroom unionization in many digital native media outlets such as Vice and BuzzFeed. The Canadian Freelance Union (a local of Unifor) and the Canadian Media Guild Freelance are providing training and benefits for a growing body of precariously employed media workers. It appears that much of this union activity is taking place after many workers have already been laid off.

But these unions are playing a different role than the unions of the past. They are in the process of adapting to a new economy and its challenges. They exist not only to protect decent work within their unions but to foster a relationship between workers, the public, and the services they provide. The 'Journalism Is' campaign spearheaded by Unifor is a great example of how unions are engaging with the public about what's happening to the field of journalism, its workers and our democracy.

WHO IS LEFT OUT AND AT WHAT COST

While technically the barriers to entry are much lower now in journalism, the barriers to success remain quite high. Working in this industry is a struggle. It is a struggle over agency, over values and over wages. It is a struggle for me and I don't face the same class or racial barriers that many do when entering this industry. When layers of unpaid labour are required to simply enter a field and the logic that one must 'pay their dues' prevails, there will be class, racial and gender barriers for who can become journalists.

Journalism has always suffered from lack of diversity but current working conditions make it worse. Pursuing a career in journalism is a risk and those that are better suited to absorb that risk are people from more affluent backgrounds. People who can't afford to work for free, dedicate the time to developing their personal brands, or become entrepreneurs are left out. Journalistic output suffers as a result. There is ample evidence that lack of diversity leads to poorer coverage of particular issues and groups.

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BECOMING THE NEWS

Some personal brands more readily attract audiences. Opinionated journalism, having a niche area of expertise, and inserting personality into your online presence are more conducive to attracting an audience than being a neutral journalist, a generalist, or simply sharing your work. The 'hot take' economy prevails, where journalists provide provocative commentary designed to attract an audience. The goal is to not only report the news but to become the news. This creates an environment where opinion journalism reigns. It is easier and cheaper to produce and it draws in the audience. This isn't necessarily a problem but it is correlated with a decline in original reporting. It is less labour-intensive to opine over existing information than to invest in gathering new facts. It is also riskier. If you are too critical or cross a line, you may find yourself in a position where you can no longer get work.

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Instead, they can rely on freelancers who have already built an audience surrounding a beat. This allows them to more easily shift their priorities, respond to shifting public interest, and attend to the changing monetary interests of their organization. If certain beats are no longer trending, relevant or profitable, organizations can move on to the next hot topic that is piquing the interests of audiences. The impact of the unpredictability and volatility of the industry is, therefore, shifting rapidly from media companies to media workers.

THE IMPACT ON THE QUALITY OF PUBLIC INTEREST JOURNALISM

The cult of celebrity in journalism has made visibility and notoriety more important than skills or substance. 'Hot take' journalism, personality journalism, and quickly produced 'churnalism' are favoured over hard news reporting and investigative journalism when a social media following leads success metrics.

In this environment, public interest journalism becomes a charitable act, subsidized by content that pays. The focus on metrics can overlook the fact that journalism cannot exist solely to fulfill a market function, and its social function cannot be so easily quantified.

What is in the public interest and what is interesting to the public are often very different things. When editorial concerns are more directly linked to commerce, values like accuracy and transparency can be some of the first casualties. What is profitable doesn't even need to meet the low bar of accuracy. In a continuous news environment, pressures to be first to the story can supersede other values — especially those related to a healthy democracy.

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Journalism has never been entirely paid for by subscriptions. It has always been subsidized by advertising or public funding. Until we know more about what audiences and taxpayers will pay for, it seems journalists will continue to carry a disproportionate share of responsibility for producing and subsidizing high quality journalism.

THE ROLE OF PUBLIC AND PRIVATE FUNDERS

In November 2018, the federal government announced new tax incentives to support Canadian journalism which will cost \$595 million dollars over five years. The idea is to help media organizations adapt to new industry conditions by providing tax incentives for the labour costs associated with reporting, offering tax credits for subscribers to digital news services, and allowing non-profit media organizations to obtain charitable status and issue tax receipts to corporations and individuals.

These policy measures open the door for foundations and other private donors to support journalism. They are in addition to \$50 million dollars that was pledged in the 2018 budget for local journalism and underserved communities, which have taken the biggest hit in these new conditions. Eligibility criteria will be determined by an independent panel of members of Canada's news and journalism community.

Concerns have been expressed about these provisions, particularly by prominent media startups. There are worries about the makeup of the independent judiciary that will decide who can access these credits, and that only legacy media organizations will benefit — not media startups. There are fears that companies will not innovate their business models but become reliant on bailouts to preserve what is destined to die. Finally, critics say reliance on public funds is likely to decrease public trust in journalism. All these concerns stem from considerations for the public interest. I cannot help but notice, however, that there is very little discussion of labour conditions or implications for media workers in Canada's current and future news gathering system.

With new prospects of charitable support, there is a great deal of attention being paid to what kind of relationship philanthropy ought to have with journalism. Discussions of editorial control are, of course, important when thinking about preserving independence and integrity in the journalism produced with philanthropic support. But again, there is a noticeable absence of discussion about decent work or the risk of incentivizing precarious work in this field.

WRITING DECENT WORK INTO THE STORY

To date, discussions about subsidization of journalism tend to focus on the risks of becoming overly reliant on government bailouts, tax breaks or charitable dollars. These resources can be stripped away at any time when governments and their priorities change. There is also a threat

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that government officials and philanthropic donors will exert undue influence on the journalism that is created, comprising its independence. These are important considerations.

Similar concerns existed, however, when advertising was the dominant source of revenue for journalism. How resources are spent is as important as their source. Decent working conditions are a prerequisite for independence and long-term financial viability.

Perhaps conversations should focus less on 'saving' journalism and more on building the strongest possible foundation for the future of journalism and the media workers who will be part of it. Decent work is defined by the International Labour Organization as delivering a fair income, workplace security, the ability for workers to have a voice and to organize, to have fair treatment of men and women, and better equality of opportunity.

The future of public interest journalism simply does not exist without this kind of work. When structuring funding arrangements, government representatives and philanthropic donors should ask: are we helping to create precarious work or decent work?

If public and private funders want to support high quality journalism and a reliable news gathering system, they will first consider these questions:

1. How do media workers participate in the decisions that affect them?
2. How is a media company's commitment to its workers expressed?
3. How can funders use their individual and collective power to raise employment standards in the field?
4. How can funders help protect journalistic independence from powerful interests in the reporting they support?

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[1] <http://www.cmcrp.org/the-growth-of-the-network-media-economy-in-canada-1984-2016/>

[2] https://www.cjr.org/special_report/google-facebook-journalism.php

[3] <https://shatteredmirror.ca/wp-content/uploads/theShatteredMirror.pdf>

[4] <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/article-the-perils-of-being-casual-at-the-cbc-how-precarious-work-affects/>

[5] <http://niemanreports.org/articles/finding-a-way-forward/>