

20 Entrepreneurial Journalism: The Life of the Freelance

Mary Evans

"I was a writer for 40 years. Now I'm a content provider.
And content is free."

P J O'Rourke (2012)

"If there are any students out there thinking of careers in journalism, think again. My advice is to go into accounting and specialise in the administration of companies that have gone bust."

Toby Young (2009)

Oxford [Dictionaries.com](#) proffers two possible definitions for the word 'freelance':

1. *adjective: self-employed and hired to work for different companies on particular assignments*
or:
2. *noun, historical: a medieval mercenary.*

Anyone who has ever tried to earn a living as a freelance journalist will be quick to tell you which is the more pertinent description.

The challenge facing freelance journalism has never been more pronounced: there isn't enough work to go around. With ever-growing numbers of freelancers – some through choice, more through necessity – there is a surfeit of journalists willing to supply in a market that doesn't have the demand. As publishing budgets are squeezed, publications are cutting the luxury that freelancers have become. Freelancers across all genres are

accepting more work for less money and professionals whose careers have always relied on the ability to say ‘yes’ can simply no longer afford to say ‘no’.

But in a world where the written word proliferates like never before, there will always exist a need for highly - skilled writers – and freelancers will forever be an essential part of an industry that relies on people to power it. So the challenges for any freelancer are simple: where is the work, where is the money and where is the future? The answers may be rather harder to find, but this chapter will explore the industry from the perspective of freelancers and those who would employ them, as well as taking an overview of a sector both besieged by – and finding salvation within – advances in new media.

The freelancers' perspective

Over his 20-year journalism career, media consultant Adrian MacLeod has observed the industry from every perspective. A technical journalist since 1990, Adrian established his own technical magazine, Approval, in 1995. He now advises print and digital publications through his website writethinking.co.uk, ‘helping them to improve what they call content, but I like to call writing’. His assessment of the current outlook for freelancers paints a gloomy picture.

“The commercial side of publishing has had a massive impact on staff writers and freelancers. Everyone is expected to do more for less,” he says. ‘It’s always been difficult as a freelancer to get the work, very difficult to get paid and you seem to spend a horribly small proportion of your time actually writing. And that’s got a lot worse.”

Blogger fleetstreetfox has been freelancing for nearly 20 years and believes it has always been a tough industry:

“Freelance-wise there aren’t many changes. It’s just as hard as ever it was, except, as newspapers have had to make cutbacks, the market’s a little more crowded. Quite a few people though leave staff jobs and abandon journalism altogether, so it’s not impossible. I think the money available is probably roughly the same, i.e. dreadful.”

Sally Brockway has enjoyed a highly successful freelance career for two decades, writing for myriad publications including The Sun, The Mirror, What's on TV, Woman's Own, Essentials, Soaplfe and Woman. Her professional life has often suffered the inevitable highs and lows of a freelancer, but the present climate is a whole new ball game.

"It's never been this bad. All the work has gone in-house now and it's becoming impossible to get in anywhere. You always keep several irons in the fire and of course jobs come and go. But at the moment it's awful. I always used to be able to drum up some work in a dry spell by pitching features or doing some shifts. But so many places are just not taking work from freelancers. I once earned £97K a year, a long time ago. Those days are long gone. Now if I earn half of that, I'm happy. I'd never recommend anyone to go into freelance journalism anymore."

It's easy to see why print media is watching the pennies. Even the most superficial analysis of circulation tells a sorry tale. According to the ABCs (Audit Bureau of Circulations) to March 2012, every national newspaper reports a drop in year-on-year circulation, from -4.28% at Daily Mail to -44.67% at The Independent – although all have seen significant year-on-year growth in their digital editions (Newspaper ABCs, March 2012). The magazine industry is holding up better with an overall average drop per publication of -1.4% (Professional Publishers Association, March 2012), but the figures vary dramatically from sector to sector. The men's mag market is in crisis (Loaded -30.2%; FHM -20.6%; Zoo -20.4%) while Private Eye has enjoyed 10% growth in the past year (Magazine ABCs, February 2012).

Ian Abbott, editor of TV Times magazine, confirms every freelancer's suspicion:

"I would say we use less than half the amount of freelancers compared to the good old days,' he says. 'We do a lot more in-house with our staff because it's cheaper. For slightly more than the cost of one feature commission, I can get someone to come in for a whole week and write four or five features, so

we tend now to use freelancers on a day basis.”

And there's the rub – a feature that would earn a freelancer several hundred pounds in a few hours is being replaced with a day's work for less than half as much – burdened with travel and childcare costs, but without the tax breaks that self-employed freelancers enjoy. And that's for those fortunate enough to get the shifts. It is no surprise then that the National Union of Journalists (NUJ) has observed many people leaving the profession. ‘While many people are forced to go freelance through redundancy, a lot are finding that they can't make ends meet and are heading away from journalism for greener pastures,’ says NUJ organiser John Turner.

The advantages of youth

But the aspirant journalist need not lose heart altogether. While many publications are relying solely on tried and tested freelancers, many are opting for the younger – and cheaper – journalists who enter the profession at its grass roots. Ian Abbot says that at TV Times:

“We tend to go for younger people because then we can train them up how we want to. We don't really need hard-bitten news hacks, who are fed up with it all and just want to pay the bills. We'd rather have people who are massively keen. And we can help them to improve. Everyone who works here came in on work experience and then we took them on as a freelancer.”

Work experience remains the key to that crucial break, but it's not without challenges of its own. There are many parables of ‘workies’ expected to do hours of menial tasks with little or no professional or financial reward. A degree of this is to be expected at the entry-level to any profession, but experienced freelancers are noticing a new phenomenon that is putting even more pressure on a strained industry. ‘At the moment, if people can, they will pay you nothing,’ says Sally Brockway:

“A friend of mine, a medical journalist of 20 years, her freelance work dried up and she thought she'd go for a staff job. Someone offered her £15K a year. This is working 9am – 6pm. They said

that although she was experienced, they could get an intern for that money and train them up, so weren't going to pay her anymore. If publications can get away with it, they will. Why would they pay more if they don't have to?"

Adrian MacLeod agrees that his generation of freelancers are 'scandalised' by the notion of writing for free, but believes that the canny journalist can turn it to their advantage:

"The Huffington Post has some good writers working for free – and other people are trying to do the same thing. But the interesting thing is that the most successful Huffington Post contributors have done quite well out of it. It's a bargain that works for some people – in all this noise, if you're noticed you start getting work. But other people are writing stuff for free and it just gets nowhere. The pressure to work for nothing is just horrible."

In a cut-throat market where only the fittest will survive, the ethics of personal finances soon come into play. Rates for day shifts have risen significantly below inflation and publications are determined to get as much bang for their buck as possible. Freelancers often find themselves stuck between the rock of being asked to do more than is reasonable for the money and the hard place of knowing there is a queue of people waiting to take the work if they don't. Arguably, freelancers do one another no favours by agreeing to work below an acceptable rate of pay, thereby keeping the rates for the job artificially low. But as Sally Brockway says, principles don't pay the mortgage:

"There's not much honour going on here. It's all about making money. And we shouldn't be working for tuppence ha'penny. But if you've got kids to feed and bills to pay and there's nothing else around, you have to take it."

The way ahead

The onslaught of digital media has certainly done traditional freelancing no great favours, as the sheer volume of free content is doing little to ease the print media purse strings. As P. J. O'Rourke (2012) said 'I was a writer for 40 years. Now I'm a content provider. And content is free.' The fact that anyone

can write and publish material instantly online raises questions about why you'd pay someone to do it. But as Adrian MacLeod points out, along with a need for quality content, digital media also creates new opportunities for the entrepreneurial journalist.

There's an interesting merging between blogging and journalism. It has negative effects, but it also has opportunities to be your own brand and be your own publisher. There are a number of freelance journalists whose financial model is totally different. A colleague found his work drying up when his main employers closed down. He could see, almost overnight, his work disappearing. Yet companies were bemoaning the fact that there was nowhere for them to advertise. So he carried on writing exactly the same features, but he set up his own website. He needed four advertisers to break even. He got eight the first year and was up to 13 the second year. It's a model that seems to be working. You only need the courage to do it and you can become an international publishing guru.

So what does the future hold for freelancing – and if it is to survive, what does the modern freelancer need to do to create opportunities? 'I think there will be freelancers, but I don't think there will be as many,' says Ian Abbott:

"And they will have to be very good and put a lot of effort into it. The days when you can dip in and out are gone. You need to really be focused. You need to find the stuff no-one else can get. That's what a good freelance is about."

And for successful freelancer, Sally Brockway:

*"The most important thing is knowing people and having contacts. So you've really got to have had a staff job so you can get to know people. When I left *The Sun* I had really good contacts. People have got to like working with you. You can't just phone up and no-one's ever heard of you – there will be 10 other people they know 10 times better."*

'Plug away at it,' says fleetsteetfox:

"It's all a race but the difference is that as staff you are a sprinter, but a freelance is more like a marathon runner, and you need to keep all your plates spinning in the air and just plod on

even if you have three bad weeks when you don't sell anything. A journalist is a journalist is a journalist, and you get stories wherever you can. It takes a journo to spot one, whether you overhear it at the hairdresser's or see it on Twitter."

But Adrian MacLeod believes that freelancers need to move with the times:

Embrace new media. Some journalists use Twitter (among other tools) to create a personal brand. If you keep Tweeting about what you know, what you're researching, who you're interviewing, it acts like a drip feed, keeping you in the consciousness of editors and commissioners without having to be too pushy (or in addition to being too pushy). You can also use it to directly promote what you have written.

Twitter is brilliant for crowd sourcing. If you build a following of people interested in your specialist area, you can ask them what they think, do rough and ready polls, get instant feedback on ideas and angles. Increasingly, editors are looking for these skills in a freelance and, if the editors are also among your followers, they will get continual examples of your social media expertise.

The first thing I do when someone new approaches me is to Google them. So you need to manage how you show up with a blog (with your name in the URL) and listings on Journalisted.com and similar sites. Your Twitter account will also show up. Being right up to date is one of the things expected of a journalist and I find Twitter the easiest way to post new stuff all the time and quickly.

Stage one is to find people who are useful to you and follow them. Try:

<http://muckrack.com/>

<http://www.journalisttweets.com/Europe/UK>

<http://www.twellow.com/>

<http://wefollow.com/>

Stage two is to get them to follow you. That means Tweeting useful, interesting, vital, funny, human stuff. Getting into conversation with people. Responding to people who communicate with you. Twitter loves openness, authority, scoops, links, heated debates, correct English, and funny cat pictures. Should be a snap for any good journo. It is surprisingly hard work.

Allow four to six months of Tweeting and following before expecting to see any real benefit. But if you talk to freelances who have stuck it out, they'll tell you Twitter is invaluable.

The more the challenges facing freelance journalism change, the more they stay the same. It was ever a tightrope walk of finding work, keeping work and getting paid for work and will ever be thus. People skills, business management and skin like rhino hide remain crucial weapons in the freelance arsenal. But the revolution in how we communicate means that freelancers must find a way to move with the times if they are not to go the way of the dinosaur. With innovation comes opportunity – digital media may threaten some forms of print journalism, but it also creates a whole new worldwide web of opportunities for the savvy freelancer. Or even better, The Savvy Freelancer.com.

Challenging Questions

- 'I was a writer for 40 years. Now I'm a content provider. And content is free' (P J O'Rourke, 2012). What are the differences between a 'writer' and a 'content provider' and how do they affect modern freelancing?
- Should freelancing be better regulated to prevent undercutting? Or is it every freelance for themselves?
- 'Video killed the radio star' (The Buggles). Has digital journalism killed traditional print media freelancing?
- In a new age of 'citizen journalism' when anyone on the street can publish fact or opinion, what role is there for the freelance journalist?

Recommended reading

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