

Journalism Research

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HERBERT VON HALEM VERLAG

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"The future is freelance!"

The state of the freelance journalism in Germany

by Nina Steindl, Corinna Lauerer, Thomas Hanitzsch

Abstract: Journalism is increasingly characterized by freelance journalists. Although the number of studies on freelance journalism is growing, the field continues to be largely unexplored. Therefore, the present paper focuses on who the freelance journalists in Germany are, under which conditions they work and how they perceive their professional role. We use data from the second wave of the Worlds of Journalism Study for Germany. Based on 137 interviews conducted with freelancers, findings indicate that freelance journalists often work for the broadcasting sector, magazines or online media. Although they tend to work for more than one media outlet, their income is rather low. Compared to their regularly employed colleagues, freelancers perceive slightly less editorial autonomy but indicate parallels regarding political stance and professional role perceptions. However, data show that the entertainment role is of less importance for freelancers than for their employed counterparts.

1. A peek into the *black box*

"The future is freelance!" is the intriguing conclusion the German professional association for freelance journalists has come to (Freischreiber 2017). Proof comes in the form of the estimated 122,500 people currently working as freelance and amateur journalists as their main or additional job in Germany (Buckow 2011: 24; Deutscher Journalisten-Verband 2014; Meyen/Springer 2009: 18).[1] Just a few years ago, these freelance journalists were considered an under-researched "black box" (Pöttker 2008). More research in the field has since been undertaken (see Buckow 2011; DJV 2009, 2014; Meyen/Springer 2009), but the literature remains limited.

Yet the topic is hugely relevant. Globalization, digitalization, increasing competition and commercial pressures are driving outsourcing in journalism (Pöttker 2008; Weischenberg et al. 2006: 36). This approach has economic benefits for media companies, as using freelance staff allows them to reduce additional costs and to hire and fire at will (DJV 2017).

At the same time, employment conditions for freelance journalists have become increasingly precarious in recent years. With unpredictable workloads and low pay, many freelancers are unable to earn a sufficient living from journalism alone (DJV 2014). An increasing number is taking up additional work, such as in PR or corporate communication, while the number of people working as

journalists as their main job continues to fall, from 18,000 in 1993 to 12,000 in 2005 and just 9,600 today (Steindl et al. 2017; Weischenberg et al. 2006: 36). Freelance journalists also have to invest a lot of time and effort in self-promotion in order to succeed against ever-tougher competition. The main people they have to impress are the editors who commission and purchase their journalistic products (Meyen/Springer 2009: 151). This often results in conflict regarding loyalty and quality (Bunjes 2008). Nevertheless, studies show that, despite the low pay and competitive nature of the job, freelance journalists are often very happy with their work, valuing advantages such as professional freedom and the opportunity for personal fulfilment particularly highly (Buckow 2011: 66ff.; Bunjes 2008; Pöttker 2008; Meyen/Springer 2009: 97, 149ff.).

This paradox is part of what makes freelance journalism such an interesting subject for research. As freelancers gain in importance, fears grow of journalism becoming de-professionalized and losing its boundaries (Pöttker 2008; Weischenberg et al. 2006: 14ff.). This raises the question of whether and to what extent freelance journalists view their professional role differently from that of their regularly-employed colleagues, be it through their different professional socialization or through their activities outside journalism (Koch et al. 2012).

Given the move towards greater use of freelance journalists, it is worth taking a closer look at this group – and at how it has changed over recent years. This study aims to investigate who these freelance journalists are, where they work, and how they perceive their role within journalism.

RQ1: *Who is the “typical” freelancer in Germany?*

RQ2: *In which fields and positions do freelance journalists work?*

RQ3: *How do they view their role and how does this guide their journalistic activities?*

2. Method

The data on freelance journalists is taken from the second wave of the collaborative international *Worlds of Journalism Study*[2], funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG). This standardized survey comprises 775 interviews with regularly-employed and freelance journalists in Germany, chosen in a two-stage random process. The interviews were conducted between November 2014 and August 2015.

Determining figures on journalists was crucial to the study. Only *professional journalists* were included. These are defined as people who are predominantly entrusted with journalistic tasks, act based on professional norms, values and rules, and are employed in journalism as their main profession at the time of the survey (i.e. earn at least 50 percent of their income from journalistic activities) – be it as freelancers or under a regular employment contract. While regularly-employed journalists can be considered employees due to their involvement in editorial processes, the DJV (2017) considers freelancers “independent journalists” who “market their texts or images like

contractors". In contrast, *regular* freelance journalists work "not as day workers", but under a "contract with monthly fixed payments and notice periods" (ibid.). The regulations regarding fixed price staff, whose pay is "guaranteed by a fixed monthly amount", are equally vague (ibid.).

The first task was to get to know the world of journalists in Germany better. This was achieved by studying the German media landscape in detail and recording the population of *editorial units* – those that present journalistic content, enjoy editorial independence, and fulfil the functions of journalistic communication, such as topicality. In an attempt to approximate the number of editorial units, the media services[3] were first examined in detail. Lists were compiled of the units, before a random, proportional sample of units was selected from each media type. The media units selected fell under the following categories: *newspaper*, *magazine*, *advertising paper*, private and public service *television* and *radio*, *online media* (divided into distinct online media and online offshoots of traditional media), and *news agencies or media providers*.

The next step was to estimate the population of *journalists*. Based on our research and with reference to the second *Journalism in Germany* study by Weischenberg et al. (2006: 36f.), we can make a qualified estimate of 41,250 people in Germany with journalism as their main job, including 9,600 freelance journalists.[4]

Next, a simple random sample of journalists was taken from the media services defined (age, gender, and position were not taken into account). Our research showed that some freelancers are listed explicitly on the homepage or in the legal information of specific media houses or services. Media that did not provide public information on freelance journalists were contacted by telephone. Some organizations were more than willing to provide information, while others did not cooperate, citing data protection reasons. Contacts from databases (e.g. Zimpel) were therefore also used and checked before data was collected.

The data was collected via a telephone and online survey. A total of 775 usable interviews were generated (combined response rate 35%). The difficulty of accessing freelancers means that they are slightly under-represented in the random sample, making up just under 20.0% instead of the planned 30.0%.

The analysis below is based on the data collected from those working as freelance journalists as their main job (n=137). The objective is to gain deeper insight into this still-under-researched group. It is embedded in the overall study in Steindl et al. (2017). The evaluation of these results in this paper compares the data on freelance journalists with that of regularly-employed journalists, discusses it, and compares its development over time.

3. Results

3.1 Freelancers in Germany: Male, graduate, low-paid

The freelancers surveyed were between 23 and 71 years old (mean=45.31; SD=10.58). The average age is lower than that of previous comparative studies (Meyen/Springer 2009: 60). The typical freelancer is likely to be male (58.5%), be politically left of center (mean=3.68; SD=1.23; scale from "0"=left to "10"=right), and have an average of 18.08 years of professional experience (SD=10.21). The percentage of females of 41.5 percent is approximately in line with that of the regularly employed (39.8%) and represents a slight fall, following a rise from 35.4 percent in 1998 (Grass 1998: 6) to 45.1 percent in 2005 (Weischenberg et al. 2006: 47).

Freelancers (82.0%) are also more likely to be university graduates than their regularly-employed colleagues (74.1%), reflecting the increasing importance of university qualifications. While just 51 percent of freelance journalists in 1998 had a degree (Grass 1998: 7), this figure had risen to around 63 percent just ten years later (DJV 2009: 19). This trend was corroborated by the latest DJV study (2014: 4), in which 75 percent of respondents had a university degree. Yet there is a gender disparity with regard to the freelancers' educational background, with 90.9 percent of the women but just 75.6 percent of the men interviewed having graduated from university. Furthermore, of those graduates (n=121), 38.8 percent stated that they had specialized in *journalism or a similar subject* (or both). There was a gender disparity here, too: The proportion of freelance male journalists who had studied a subject in the field was almost nine percent higher than the proportion of female journalists.

Previous studies have shown freelance journalists to be unhappy with their pay (Buckow 2011: 66ff.; Meyen/Springer 2009: 87ff.). The latest data gives cause to expect a change in this. While 27.9 percent of the freelance journalists earn less than EUR 1,800 per month, just 15.0 percent of regularly-employed journalists earn as little (n=599). Weischenberg et al. (2006) found a similar difference ten years ago. In addition, the proportion of freelancers earning less than EUR 1,800 is higher in local media (52.1%) than in regional (14.9%) and national (20.0%) media. Female freelance journalists were also more likely to be low earners (35.4%) than their male counterparts (23.3%).

3.2 The reality for journalists: Increasing numbers in additional jobs

Only a tiny fraction of the 137 freelance journalists works as fixed price members of staff, while the numbers of freelance journalists and regular freelancers are evenly balanced (Table 1). The majority of freelancers (88.9%) work as journalists without leadership roles, with 7.4 percent holding a partial leadership role and just 3.7 percent a full leadership role. In addition, the data confirm a trend already seen in other studies (DJV 2009: 24; Meyen/Springer 2009: 80): Freelance journalists work predominantly for broadcast media, magazines, and online media, as Table 2 shows.

Table 1: *Employment status*

	All freelancers (percent, n=137)	Male freelancers (percent, n=79)	Female freelancers (percent, n=56)

Freelance journalists	45.3	48.1	41.1
Regular freelancers	46.0	41.8	51.8
Fixed price staff	8.8	10.1	7.1

Table 2: *Type of media*

	All freelancers (percent, n=137)	Male freelancers (percent, n=79)	Female freelancers (percent, n=56)
Print			
Daily newspaper	19.7	21.5	17.9
Sunday/weekly newspaper	10.2	11.4	7.1
Magazine	31.4	30.4	33.9
Advertising paper	11.7	13.9	7.1
Broadcast			
Television	23.4	22.8	25.0
Radio	35.8	35.4	37.5
News agency and media provider	9.5	13.9	3.6
Online			
Distinct online media	12.4	12.7	10.7
Online offshoots	27.7	30.4	25.0
Total	181.8	192.4	167.9

Question: *Which type of media do you work for?* (multiple responses permitted)

Freelance journalists often work for several different media simultaneously (Grass 1998: 9; Meyen/Springer 2009: 78ff.; Weischenberg et al. 2006: 39ff.) – something that is borne out by our data. While 24.8 percent of those surveyed worked for one and 21.2 percent for two editorial departments, the majority worked for more than two (54.0%). When it comes to the media services in whose production the freelancers are involved, 18.3 delivered content to one, 27.5 percent to two, and the other 54.2 percent to more than two. In addition, 32.6 percent of freelancers whose main job is journalism also have a paid additional job outside journalism. Additional jobs outside journalism among freelance journalists have thus increased by more than six percentage points over the last twenty years (Grass 1998: 23).

When it comes to the work they are do, most freelance journalists are assigned to specific topics or department (61.3%); employees are slightly less likely to be specialists (59.6%). The latter have less of a focus on the topics of politics (14.3%), business (7.6%), and art and culture (11.1%) than their freelance counterparts (Table 3), confirming the results of previous studies (Meyen/Springer 2009: 78ff.).

Table 3: *Assignment to a department*

	All freelancers (percent, n=84)	Male freelancers (percent, n=48)	Female freelancers (percent, n=35)
Politics	23.9	29.2	17.3
Art, culture and features	14.3	14.6	14.3
Business	14.3	16.7	8.6
Service and lifestyle	13.1	8.3	20.0
Local and regional news	8.3	4.2	14.3
Sport	6.0	10.4	0.0
Science and education	3.6	2.1	5.7
Entertainment	3.6	6.3	0.0
Health	3.6	0.0	8.6

Religious affairs	1.2	2.1	0.0
Other	8.3	6.3	11.4
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

Question: *In which department or field do you usually work?*
(open response)

As Meyen and Springer (2009: 149ff.) found, freelance journalists have more freedom in their work. Our data also shows that 68.1 percent of the freelance journalists feel they have a great deal of or even complete autonomy over *decisions regarding story selection* and 72.6 percent regarding decisions on which *aspects of a story should be emphasized*. Interestingly, the employed journalists felt they had significantly more autonomy regarding both the selection (75.3%) and the representation (83.9%) of stories.

3.3 Journalists see themselves as communicators

The focus now shifts to how journalists view their own profession. They undoubtedly see their role as a neutral communicator as key, agreeing most with the aspects *Reporting things as they really are*, *Contextualizing and analyzing current events*, and *Being an impartial observer* (Table 4). The employed journalists see this role as even more important than the freelancers do (*Being an impartial observer*: 82.8%; *Reporting things as they really are*: 91.6%).

Meyen and Springer also confirm how important the communicator role is for freelancers (2009: 97): *Explaining and communicating complex situations* (91%) and *Providing the audience with the most neutral and precise information possible* (90%) were the statements most commonly agreed with in 2009 - although our data (Table 4) indicates that these aspects may have lost some of their importance for freelancers in recent years.

The same goes for the role as provider of entertainment and advice, with more than half (57%) of those surveyed in 2009 stating that they hoped to “entertain the audience” (Meyen/Springer 2009: 97). The difference between freelance and employed journalists is larger here: While employed journalists see *Offering content that attracts the largest possible audience* (77.4%), *Providing advice, help, and orientation for everyday life* (68.0%), and *Providing entertainment and relaxation* (54.9%) as important, this is only the case for around a third of the freelance journalists, especially for the latter (Table 4). This finding is especially remarkable given that German journalists overall consider their role as providers of entertainment and advice more important than they did in 1993 (Steindl et al. 2017; Weischenberg et al. 2006: 110ff.).

Table 4: *Role perception*

	n	"extremely" or "very" important (percent)	Mean	SD
Reporting things as they really are	134	86.6	4.43	0.85
Contextualizing and analyzing current events	136	83.1	4.26	0.94
Being an impartial observer	137	81.0	4.23	0.95
Promoting tolerance and cultural diversity	136	65.5	3.75	1.17
Educating the audience	136	58.8	3.68	1.09
Acting as a storyteller for world events	136	58.8	3.55	1.17
Providing advice, help, and orientation for everyday life	134	56.7	3.57	1.09
Offering content that attracts the largest possible audience	135	55.6	3.54	1.06
Providing information that enables people to make political decisions	137	54.0	3.40	1.33
Motivating people to become involved in politics	137	45.9	3.21	1.34
Advocating social change	131	39.7	3.10	1.18
Giving people the opportunity to articulate their views	136	37.5	3.07	1.20
Providing entertainment and relaxation	136	35.3	3.54	1.06
Scrutinizing business	134	32.9	2.83	1.39
Scrutinizing the government	134	32.1	2.84	1.35
Influencing public opinion	135	25.9	2.81	1.12

Forming a counterbalance to the government	132	22.0	2.37	1.26
Supporting national development	133	15.0	1.25	0.54
Shaping the political agenda	134	12.7	2.24	1.11
Communicating a positive image of the government	135	0.7	1.25	0.54
Supporting government policy	135	0.0	1.35	0.60

Question: *How important do you consider the following aspects in your work? Scale: 5 = extremely important; 4 = very important; 3 = somewhat important; 2 = less important; 1 = unimportant.*

There are differences when it comes to the critique and scrutiny role, too. *Scrutinizing the government* (37.2%), *Scrutinizing business* (34.6%), and *Giving people the opportunity to articulate their views* (48.9%) are more important to employed journalists. In contrast, freelancers see *Shaping the political agenda* (9.2%) and *Advocating social change* (27.3%) as more relevant (Table 4).

4. Conclusion: Black box revisited

Taking another peek into the black box reveals plenty of insights into the profession of freelance journalism. Just like their regularly employed colleagues, freelancers are increasingly highly educated, politically left-leaning, and set great store by the role of classic information journalism. For those for whom freelance journalism is their main job, at least, these findings put into perspective fears of deprofessionalization and diminishing boundaries in journalism. However, any future studies should pay more attention to the over 100,000 amateur journalists and those for whom freelance journalism is merely a sideline. The field is crying out for studies that examine the prospects of those working freelance as their main or additional job. Questions include why they choose (or are forced) to work freelance, what impact this situation has on their work and their lives, and how the two groups differ, especially with regard to how they view their professional role.

One difference is that freelancers feel they have slightly less autonomy than regularly-employed journalists. This may be down to the fact that freelancers have to adapt to the needs of their clients. After all, if they are to earn money, they need to satisfy the media houses who purchase their work.

It is no surprise that most freelancer journalists serve multiple editorial offices and media services at once. However, the increase in the number of freelancers who supplement their journalistic income with additional jobs is interesting. Combined with the relatively low pay they receive from

journalism, this once again raises the question of the increasingly precarious nature of the work (Gollmitzer 2011).

The media sector today is unthinkable without freelance journalists (Buckow 2011) – a fact that goes hand in hand with the need for more research into freelance journalism. After all, despite some efforts in this field, huge deficits remain. We see an increased need for more detailed studies on the employment situation of journalists in general and freelancers in particular.

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Footnotes

[1] The unregulated nature of journalism means that the number of freelance journalists in Germany can only be estimated. This is partly due to the problem of defining exactly what makes a freelance journalist, or indeed a journalist at all. The Federal Employment Agency (2010), for example, gives

the title of editor not only to those undertaking predominantly journalistic jobs, but also to those employed to work on fictional stories or as technical writers or assistants. It is therefore no wonder that the figures vary widely. The Federal Employment Agency (2017: 120) currently counts around 200,000 people in "journalistic professions". Counting only those entrusted with journalistic activities as their main job, however, produces a figure of around 41,250 journalists in Germany (Steindl et al. 2017).

[2] The English-language questionnaire and initial descriptive results for Germany in international comparison can be found on the project website at <http://www.worldsofjournalism.org/>.

[3] In addition to these criteria and depending on the media type, the media services had to be published sufficiently frequently, achieve a minimum coverage, and have a sufficiently large editorial team. A wide range of sources was used to determine the population (e.g. information from journalists' professional associations, annual reports, media house websites, directories and databases). Non-journalistic media, such as music broadcasters and amateur and association media, were excluded from the outset. More detailed information on the methodology can be found in Steindl et al. (2017).

[4] Because the study was only interested in those for whom journalism is their main job, the number of freelance journalists quoted at the beginning is reduced to around 9,600. Those working as journalists as an additional job were not included in the study.

Translation: Sophie Costella