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IN THE MARGINS OF JOURNALISM
Gender and livelihood among local (ex-)journalists in Sweden

Henrik Örnebring and **Cecilia Möller**

Research on journalists and journalistic work has focused on journalists with permanent, full-time employment. Given the rapid decrease of such employment opportunities, we argue that journalism research needs to pay more attention to those who those who have had to leave their jobs and either stopped doing journalism entirely, or who have switched to a freelance career (sometimes combining journalism with other work). This category of people is at once becoming more marginalized and "the new normal" within the occupation: In this paper, we furthermore focus on local (Swedish) journalists and ex-journalists. Based on a set of semi-structured interviews (n = 12) with ex-journalists who share the experience of having lost their permanent, full-time jobs, we use the concept of livelihood as an analytical tool. The concept of livelihood highlights the shift from journalism as a job practiced exclusive of other jobs to an activity conducted alongside other income-generating activities and makes it possible to analyse leaving the occupation from a context that incorporates the whole life situation of the respondents. This also contributes to the current wave of studies of journalism and job loss by adding qualitative data about individual experiences of job loss to the existing quantitative survey evidence.

Introduction

Journalism research has a long-standing interest in various aspects of journalists' work. Recently there has also been a sharp rise in scholarly interest in journalists' *not working*, i.e. the experiences and effects of job loss and job insecurity among journalists (Ekdale, MelissaTully, and Singer 2015; Heinonen, Koljonen, and Harju 2017; Nel 2010; O'Donnell, Zion, and Sherwood 2016; Reinardy 2010, 2016; Sherwood and O'Donnell 2016; Spaulding 2016; Usher 2010). The explanation for the spike in interest in journalists losing their jobs on the face of it seems simple, namely the mass layoffs of journalists mainly from the daily newspaper sector across the entire Western world. In many countries, these layoffs intensified in the wake of the global financial crisis in 2010, but as noted in regular surveys of the journalism job market (e.g. Pew Research Centre 2017) the decline in newsroom jobs started before the financial crisis. Even as the financial crisis has made the jobs crisis in journalism more obvious and more visible, one might still ask why this area has hardly been studied at all before 2010.

We argue that the previous lack of interest in job loss and job insecurity in journalism reflects a long-standing scholarly bias against studying what journalists do outside work (e.g. their lifestyles, personal networks, family situations, overall work and life situation) and conversely, an implicit theoretical privileging of the workplace setting. There has, for

example, been very little research on how journalists negotiate their work lives and their private lives, despite the fact that such factors also may have an impact on the ability of journalists to fulfil their of public/democratic function.

In this article, we remedy this by studying journalists who have left the occupation, either voluntarily or involuntarily, and analyse leaving the occupation from a context that incorporates their life situations as a whole. This also contributes to the current wave of studies of journalism and job loss by adding qualitative data about individual experiences of job loss to the existing quantitative survey evidence.

Beyond the Workplace: Journalism as Livelihood

In a previous paper (Örnebring, Möller, and Grip 2015) we argue that journalism studies have had a "workplace-centric" perspective on journalism. The main reason for this workplace-centric bias is the dominant status *professionalism* as an analytical concept. "Professionalism" implies that events and situations outside work do not and should not affect your job. If you aspire to be "professional," your work life and your private life should be clearly separated. Furthermore, professionalism is also commonly defined as the workplace performance of a societal role, strengthening the analytical focus on work practices and the workplace. In Steiner's study of female journalists' autobiographies (Steiner 1998), she argues that (journalistic) "professionalism" actively excludes "life outside work" as a relevant object of study or even discussion.

As an alternative to professionalism, we suggest that in the current era of increased precarity, *livelihood* is a better concept for analysing change and continuity within the occupation of journalism. The concept originates in development studies and anthropology and refers to the integration of income-generating activities with the life situation as a whole (Lipton and Maxwell 1992). "A livelihood encompasses income, both cash and kind, as well as the social institutions (kin, family, compound, village and so on), gender relations, and property rights required to support and sustain a given standard of living" (Ellis 1998, 4). Livelihood captures the difference between *having an income/employment* and *making a living*, where the latter is also dependent on one's family situation, social network, geographical location and so on.

The livelihood concept was originally and still largely is applied in contexts of rural development in the Third world (specifically regarding poverty issues), but there are also studies applying the livelihood concept in other setting settings (e.g. Schmidt-Kallert 2009). Regardless of their analytical focus, studies of livelihood always incorporate an analysis of a much broader social context that is common in journalism studies.

It may be considered unsuitable to use a concept originally applied to people living well below the poverty line in the global South in order to analyse a comparatively high-status, high-income occupation in the global North. No matter how severe the "crisis in journalism," even unemployed Western journalists still enjoy a better standard of living than, say, Rwandan farmers. However, we still think this concept captures elements of journalism that have hitherto been largely ignored by research. Many practitioners (particularly junior ones) in countries like the UK and Sweden experience a stressful "hustle" lifestyle (Örnebring 2016, 109–110) where permanent employment is an elusive prize and a precarious existence the norm. While journalists in Western countries are still well off in the grand scheme of things, this does not make their subjective experiences of precarity, stress and household tensions any less true.

The livelihood concept also allows for a different way of incorporating *gender* into our analysis. In the quantitative studies of job loss experiences in journalism cited earlier (e.g. Heinonen, Koljonen, and Harju 2017; Nel 2010; O'Donnell, Zion, and Sherwood 2016; Sherwood and O'Donnell 2016), gender perspectives are conspicuous in their absence. Issues like coping with unemployment, work/life separation, work/life balance, the importance of family/kinship networks for support, may affect female and male journalists differently; yet recent studies of job loss in journalism largely ignore this. Whereas in studies of livelihood, gender is often seen as a central factor affecting both standard of living and quality of life (e.g. Hart 1995). The intention here is not to reify existing gender divisions in journalistic work by contrasting a (male) norm of "professional" employment with a (female) necessity of "livelihood" strategies, but rather to allow for a critical analysis of the probable unequal distribution of "professional" (i.e. long-term, stable) employment opportunities. Journalism now exists under conditions of precarity which means that everyone in the field in some way has to adjust to a livelihood existence. The so-called standard employment relationship (i.e. full-time, permanent employment, often with significant benefits like social insurance and paid holidays) was primarily available to " … a relatively privileged group of disproportionately White, male workers in the global North" (de Peuter 2011, 419; see also Standing 2011, 9, 19).

For our analytical framework, we primarily draw on works that focus on the *livelihood strategies* people use to cope with uncertain and precarious material circumstances. The key object of our analysis is to identify how respondents use different *livelihood strategies* when leaving their profession. Livelihood strategies are used both in order to generate or adapt to changes in occupation/career, as well as to cope with changes in the overall life situation. Livelihood strategies provide insight to how people are "coping with or adapting to economic restructuring in all its complexity" (Oberhauser, Mandel, and Hapke 2004, 206), as a way of shaping one's own life, while considering other social relations and economic commitments. Previous studies in human geography have also emphasized the spatial and socio-cultural context of livelihood strategies. The preconditions and possibilities for livelihood vary between different places, including what is defined as "appropriate" work for men and women in different spatial settings (Möller 2012; Stenbacka 2001).

Olwig furthermore argues that livelihood strategies are shaped in the intersection between work, family trajectory and life history, and that family/life history aspects may be of particular importance when analysing livelihood in non-traditional contexts (i.e. in situations other than rural poverty) (Olwig 2002, 87).

Methods, Sampling and Empirical Material

In this study, we relied on expert advice and snowball sampling to find respondents with recent experience of losing or voluntarily leaving their jobs as journalists. Respondents were drawn from a single geographical area (a medium-sized Swedish city, pop. 90,000, with two daily newspapers, a public service radio and a public service television editorial office; the city has a well-developed journalistic job market compared to other cities of a similar size).

We conducted semi-structured qualitative interviews with 12 respondents (5 men, 7 women). Three respondents (1 man, 2 women) have never held a permanent job in journalism despite working in the field for 10+ years. They range in age from early 30s to mid-50s and all have relatively long (10+ years) experience as journalists. All respondents have

been anonymized. All respondents except one currently work as communication/PR officers; one respondent now works in sales.

The key themes included in the interview manual are personal narratives of professional background and the experience of job loss; experience of professional change/continuity; local identity and integration with the local area; professional identity; gender issues and issues of income/money/other resources). Interviews lasted between 45 and 65 minutes with 55 minutes being the median. Both authors were present for 8 of the 12 interviews.

Results: Livelihood in the Margins of Journalism

The interviews show that the process of leaving journalism is complex, revealing a range of different motives and paths for seeking new employment. The transition into a new occupation was described as being both voluntary and involuntary, triggered by a mix of individual choices and external factors beyond respondents' control. Losing your job was described as an important catalyst for change, both professionally and in relation to respondents' everyday lives. In terms of livelihood strategies, the decision to leave journalism was often described as conscious, rational and well planned (including weighing possibilities of alternative careers). However, these professional choices were also integrated with strategies for improving work–life balance, achieving personal aims, and realizing ideals of a "better life". In the following we discuss the results based on three themes: (1) Breaking up with journalism (2) Livelihood and place attachment (3) Phasing out of journalism.

Breaking Up With Journalism

The circumstances and processes surrounding job loss are complex and vary among the respondents. In some cases, job loss is involuntary, sudden and described as a "crisis," both personally and professionally. For Petra, being dismissed with short notice from her TV production job, also meant re-experiencing job loss, as this was the second time she lost permanent, full-time employment as a journalist.

> I was the only one crying in our small office. Because I … The others had worked there (TV-station) for a hundred years. A hundred years! (laughter). They hadn't made … They hadn't made my journey. I had given notice from *Newspaper X*, I had done those temporary jobs in Stockholm, I had lost my permanent job at *Newspaper X*. I knew what it meant, I felt, more than anyone else, to lose one's permanent work in journalism. How damn hard it is to get another one. And how the rug is pulled from under your feet. No, but they were much calmer. (Petra)

The immediate reactions and responses to losing one's job are highly emotional, and many respondents besides Petra described finding support among colleagues, friends and family. In other cases, the breakup from journalism was a much slower process, a decision that grew over a longer period. One of the respondents used the metaphor of journalism as "a sinking ship," where the managers were only waiting for the right moment to pull the plug. Thus, the main question was not *if* one should leave their profession, but *when*. Respondents provided examples of the deteriorating working conditions for journalists, including constant cutbacks, stress, long working hours, lack of professional development

opportunities and lack of support from colleagues and management. Fredrik, who at first decided to leave his job for a freelancing career but later left journalism entirely, claimed that it was his way of making a statement and reacting towards the journalistic work conditions.

> My tipping point was probably when I heard from a manager that "you don't have to do it well. You only need to make it good enough". And then, I left the meeting and said that "then I'm not supposed to do this", I cannot go to work knowing that I should do "good enough". And that's when I felt that it's not possible. That's not the way it's supposed to be (Fredrik, ex-freelancer).

Anna had to go on sick leave during her pregnancy, and then realized that she and her husband could not continue their joint freelance business.

> […] then it became apparent how vulnerable it was when one of us left the business, which meant that we needed to hire, and they we realized hot difficult and expensive it was to hire, so we spent all our money. The buffer we had worked up was gone and when we were meant to go back now after parental leave we just felt "no, we cannot cope", we're not able to go back to this to like chase and always work, and then we suddenly went from two to four kids. It's just not possible (Anna, ex-freelancer).

In Anna's case, the decision to leave the journalistic profession was made jointly within the family, based on a wish to adjust their working life to their family situation, a livelihood strategy for better work–life balance.

Other respondents also described having temporary positions as a female journalist as a challenge. The female respondents with children claimed that their pregnancy constantly was associated with uncertainty, since it was difficult to know what kind of work they would return to when they went on parental leave from fixed-term positions. Helena provided an example of coming to a job interview pregnant.

> At the end of my job at *TV station X*, when I was pregnant and still knew that if I go on maternity leave, then I won't have a job to come back to, so I applied for many jobs and attended interviews in the late stages of my pregnancy. And I should start work in May and I was giving birth in March, so they knew I couldn't start in May. They never asked when the baby was due or so, but they saw that I was pregnant (Helena).

It is worth noting that this sense of pregnancy affecting job security was so clearly expressed by respondents even in Sweden, known globally for its generous parental leave policies and strong employment protection laws. As an empirical side note, we quickly discovered in our study that Swedish news organization employers are quite adept at circumventing Swedish labour regulations, exploiting legal loopholes and using particular kinds of temporary employment.

Livelihood and Place Attachment

The decision to leave journalism was also often linked to *place-related strategies for livelihood*, revealing the spatial interlinkages between place, work and home/family, and the importance of the local community for guiding strategies of livelihood (Möller 2012: Scholten 2003; Schough 2001). The importance of place attachment and community

orientation was evident in the choice of alternative careers. Working as a PR/communication officer in the public sector was described as entailing a commitment to the public and the local community, as well as having similarities with being a journalist: "(…) since I'm a public sector communicator, my employer is the general public, and in the final instance, the tax payers (…) I see my job as part of the democratic machinery. I mean democracy is directly dependent on bureaucracy" (John).

Thus, working in PR/communication was perceived as allowing engagement in social and community-oriented issues, which also were crucial drivers of working in journalism. The respondents overall state that they retain their strong commitment to democratic values and practices, and that they now negotiate and balance it in their new roles as communicators.

All respondents stated that their wish to work and live locally and regionally was stronger than their ambition to continue their journalistic career in another part of Sweden:

> […] so when calling my mother, I was so sad because I lost my dream job and that I wouldn't ever get it back again. Because I knew, I knew that I wasn't willing to move. And my mum said "yes, of course you can, then you have to move". "Yes, but I don't want to move, I want to stay here. We live here, I like it where I live so I'm not moving". So, in some ways I had already accepted then that I would never work as a journalist again (Helena).

Helena and other interviewees described themselves as socially and culturally "rooted" in the local community, including social networks with friends and family, leisure and sport activities. A majority of the respondents had previous connections to the region or the city, for example, from growing up in the area, or having friends and family in the region. Living in a mid-sized city was also described as advantageous compared to larger cities, with better possibilities for commuting to work and managing their everyday lives and family activities.

Teresa worked as a freelance journalist in a major metropolitan area outside Sweden for many years, until she and her husband made the decision to move back to her hometown together with her family:

> Coming back to [region] now … or these past six years, it's a completely different way of thinking. Because it's only due to children and family, so to speak. So, it wasn't because I got a job here or wanted to work as a journalist in [region], it was only due to the security with family life. Because in [city] I couldn't make a living as a journalist. […] it was just enough for us to pay child care for our son (Teresa, ex-journalist).

Moving back "home" was described as positive, being closer to her parents, but after struggling to get a permanent job as a journalist, Teresa was instead studying to become a teacher. Even though she would consider work elsewhere in Sweden, her "rootedness" in the region through her family obligations also provided limited future work possibilities.

Phasing out of Journalism

All respondents state that they enjoy and are satisfied with their current jobs in PR/communication as well as with their decision to leave journalism. No respondent is planning to apply for new jobs in journalism, not even locally or regionally. Petra describes how she would decline a permanent job offer in journalism at this stage.

> I've got a new life, that's what I'm telling my journalist colleagues. […] Because I'm not in heart-attack-mode every day. I've got an eight-to-five job, and when I leave from here at five o'clock I don't think about work until the next day. And I'm off on weekends, and I have holidays, oh my god. / … / It's never this panic which you can find in the other business when the refugee center in Filipstad is on fire. I'm not in heart-attack-mode any longer (Petra).

The respondents describe their working environments in positive terms, as "softer" and "warmer" compared with the journalistic "raw" and "hard" working environment. Their salaries are uniformly higher than what they earned as journalists. Their occupational change has brought new perspectives on their previous working environment. The ideals and identities of the journalistic profession have traditionally been highly gendered, reflecting male norms of work (De Bruin and Ross 2004). Leaving journalism provided respondents with new perspectives on a work/life situation that previously was taken for granted. Distance from the working environment also provided an opportunity to question existing inequalities. Becoming a journalist was based on the assumption that you had to make personal sacrifices and investments in your career that may have consequences for family life. Even though journalism was described as a female-dominated sector, female respondents felt they had to work a bit harder than male colleagues did:

> Generally, I think it's harder for women, just as in other sectors, but I think women need to work harder to reach the same positions as men, they need to put their best foot forward a bit more. They need to do things a bit better, that's the experience I have. (Helena).

One of the male respondents stated that it was more like "confessing" to yourself that you could work in PR/communication, and that things like a well-functioning family life and having a "real job" (i.e. permanent, full-time employment) was more important than holding on to your identity as a journalist.

Leaving journalism has also included adjusting to new routines in their everyday life, providing more leisure time and time off work. Some of the respondents have invested in a new house as a way of settling in the city, and found new routines in commuting to work. The time away from journalism includes a process of reflection on their overall life situation, and the respondents say they have difficulties understanding how they have managed to cope with the stress and working conditions of journalism for so long.

Still, elements of nostalgia and challenges in adjusting to a new profession are still evident. Anna has only worked at her new job for a couple of months, and she describes it as a different everyday life to get used to, following more regular routines and not keeping up to date with what was happening.

> (…) now it's more that you go to work, you work your hours, you come home, feed all the kids, put them to bed and then work for a while, and then it's the same thing the next day. It's not this … It's not the same type of … I can't say varied, because it is, and it seems fine. Here at (organization) it seems very varied, but it's not the same type of pace I think in … . (Anna, ex-freelancer)

The respondents describe the transition as a slow process, learning and adjusting to new assignments, while leaving the old occupation behind. Being a journalist is described as a "lifestyle" or as a natural and embodied part of your personality. Some of the respondents

report still behaving as journalists, and that they miss the adrenalin of doing journalistic work.

> But for me, I lived with this job, around the clock. I still have difficulties in turning off the journalist in me. I'm just "Why is there a police car there?" and (click sound) it just triggers me, and mainly because I have never been a digging journalist. I … Oh, I hated the archives and the diaries and would never sit there. I was an event reporter. I was murder, robbery, fires, accidents, you know. (Petra)

Conclusion

As indicated by our phrases "breaking up" and "phasing out," leaving journalism is often a drawn-out process. Our study provides measures of qualitative corrective to the previous quantitative focus of studies of unemployment in journalism, which tend to use an operational definition of "job loss" as "redundancy," i.e. the operational (and therefore analytical) assumption is that job loss is something sudden and involuntary. While some of our respondents had this experience, it is also clear from even our limited material that "leaving journalism" is a much more complex decision. Thus, *livelihood* becomes a useful concept for grasping the processes of job loss and the transition into new professions. This involves a combination of both push (involuntary) and pull (voluntary) factors, emerging from worsening working conditions in the profession, while reflecting strategies for achieving a better work–life balance and everyday life.

Furthermore, while earlier research has generally emphasized the *strength* of journalists' professional identity, this characterization has rarely (if ever) been tested by comparing the strength of professional identity as compared to other possible identities. Our interviews show that, in fact, professional identity can come into conflict with *place identity* in the experience of job loss. That is, is it more important to stay in a locality where you can count on various social support structures, or is in fact the occupational identity so important that you are prepared to move in order to maintain it? In our sample, place identity won over occupational identity in every case. This kind of identity conflict/negotiation is so far entirely unexplored in studies of journalistic professional identity, and it is precisely the livelihood concept that allows us to see this and give us the opportunity to explore this further.

Finally, on the issue of gender: we argue that simply by analysing journalism in relation to respondents' life situation as a whole, the understanding of journalism as work/activity becomes more sensitive to gender-related issues. Some respondents noted specific gender-related issues related to the difficulty of finding stable employment (the "risk" of pregnancy). Almost all respondents—male and female—cited family-related issues as a key factor in leaving journalism and changing careers, in particular issues related to providing for one's children. Our data set is small and does not allow for broad generalizations, but for example, the issue of the unequal gender distribution of primary carer duties should at least be highlighted as a key issue in future research on unemployment and job loss in journalism. The (limited) insights provided in this article also further demonstrates the need for qualitative data as survey studies on the topic largely ignore gender altogether as an independent variable. Our study at the very least indicates that gender is a salient factor in explaining experiences of job loss, future career options and journalistic identity, even though we ofcourse need more data in

order to fully assess how gender (as both an identity and an opportunity structure) inter-relates with livelihood and identity.

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