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JOUR 410 Global Media Systems

10 April 2015

A Risky Business: The Rewarding but Precarious Occupation of Freelance Journalism

The word “free” in “freelance journalism” may seem attractive to developing reporters due to the job’s relative freedom from the bureaucracy of traditional news agencies, but freelancers also tend to be “free” from job security, economic stability and for freelancers working on foreign soil, personal safety.

Dr. Daniel Pawley, journalism professor and chair of Azusa Pacific University (APU)’s Department of Communication Studies spent three years freelancing full-time before deciding to pursue an educational route within journalism.

“You actually get to write what you want to write – most of the time,” Pawley said, citing the “romance” and the freedom of freelancing as aspects that attracted him to the field. “I think it’s really hard to make a living nowadays; most freelance writers I think talk about marrying rich; finding someone who has a job and a consistent salary coming in.”

Although the opportunities for freelance writers have broadened significantly thanks to developing news platforms such as online print publications, blogging and social media applications made to enhance the storytelling process, maintaining a steady source of income from freelance jobs remains a challenging feat at best.

“I think it’s much harder today than it used to be,” Pawley said. “I see people writing for WordPress...and I know they’re not making any money off of that...”

Pawley worked for a number of publications such as Christianity Today and Aramco World as a freelancer, and was also a freelance editor for books, including writing style guides. Pawley’s assignments as well as his overall career as a journalist have enabled him to travel all over the world, including the Middle East. Many of Pawley’s freelancing projects focused on English language literature and the Middle Eastern travels of well-known authors such as Mark Twain, Ernest Hemingway and George Orwell.

When Pawley first began freelance writing in 1984, he started earning approximately $700 per article but eventually earned as much as $1,000 for later articles.

Pawley explained that “getting paid on time,” was one of the main problems he faced while freelancing, stating that “[it] was a problem even when I was on contract....and I also did not have a lot of money in savings.”

There is no standard annual salary for freelance journalists, but according to the Editor’s Freelance Association, freelance copy editors can make anywhere between $30-$100 per hour, however journalists (rather than editors) may be paid per article or paid based on word count versus an hourly rate.

It may be argued that the relative freedom by which freelance reporters may choose their writing topics is a reason some decide to pursue freelancing careers. And although there is the appeal in the independence of working for oneself, Pawley pointed out the potential drawback of working *by* oneself.

“Unless you’re somebody who just loves to be alone all the time, it can be a struggle,” Pawley said, adding that he rented an office space specifically for the purpose of avoiding the loneliness that freelancing can bring. “I think writers really work best when they’re in some kind of community and they’re in interaction with people who are [always] talking about things...”

Pawley predicted that he will be retiring from teaching within the next two years after which he plans on focusing on a long-term freelance project he began in the mid-1980s, as well as taking on freelance assignments that have been offered to him since ending his freelancing career.

“[Freelancing] was satisfying in its own way...I met a *lot* of people, developed a lot of contacts that led to *contracts*; I got sent to a lot of places,” Pawley said. “I think it was mostly positive, but there again...You actually have to make more money than you would from a job...So it’s really very hard to do...I feel kind of proud that I stuck it out for three years, and it was a fun three years, but it was a very precarious three years too.”

If “precarious” is how Pawley describes his freelancing experience in the 1980s, the business of freelancing has arguably grown more so over recent decades.

In 2013, the Chicago Sun Times faced criticism after firing 28 full-time journalists and photographers with the intent of hiring more “digital-savvy” freelancers. While there may not necessarily be concrete evidence pointing towards a *dramatic* shift in hiring freelancers over traditionally employed journalists, PBS journalist Josh Stearns believes that one of the contributing factors of this shift is due to the increase of news outlets’ desire to hire freelancers to report on events (particularly in conflict zones).

Regarding a recent tweet he published on Twitter asking freelancers their thoughts on the future of journalism Stearns also wrote, “Indeed, for many of the freelancers who weighed in on Twitter, the future of journalism looked financially bleak as the price per story has dropped dramatically...However, for many, money was just one piece of sustainability...There are a hundred little ways that newsrooms support each other, but most fundamentally, they are built in a community that independent journalists don’t have.”

Columbia Journalism Review writer Alysia Santo has said that the arrangement made between conflict zone freelance reporters and their contracting news organization “leaves freelancers – who are taking personal risks on behalf of news organizations – liable for their own expenses if they’re injured or killed in line of duty.”

According to a Pew research study conducted in 2013, approximately 30 percent of the journalism workforce has decreased since 2000, but this may be due more to the financial unpredictability of freelancing full-time versus the physical dangers of reporting internationally.

Certainly the physical safety of reporters has become a point of concern for the journalism community within the last few decades. On a global scale, 61 journalists from the Associated Press (AP) were killed while reporting in 2014, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists.

In the case of freelancers specifically, it was reported by the International News Safety Institute that approximately one in 10 of the 1,000 journalists reporting stories between 1996 and 2006 who died during those years were freelance journalists.

But while one of the most common notions associated with freelance journalism tends to focus on the safety of reporters (especially for journalists covering international affairs), embarking on a freelance career involves the more common potential risks of a less-than-steady source of income as well as the downsides of *not* being hired on as a full-time journalist for a news organization.

In addition to the uncertainty of income and personal safety, Vaughan Smith, a former freelance journalist for Frontline News TV and founder of the Frontline Club (a media club promoting the safe practice of independent journalism and freedom of the press) has discussed some of the editorial risks freelance journalists run when venturing on the less predictable freelance journalism track.

“To work as a journalist employed by a broadcaster or publisher is to accept a compromise,” Smith writes in “International News Reporting: Frontlines and Deadlines.” “In return for job security, the comfort of institutionalized and logistical support and easy access to an audience, individual independent and editorial control are relinquished.”

In other words, freelancers may be at the mercy of the editorial leanings of the news agency for who they are writing a story. In such cases, Smith makes the suggestion that the term “freelance” is debatable, as it is often ascribed to both journalists who work under secure contracts and those who work more independently and may not have to relinquish copyright of their own work.

Alan Rifkin, a creative writing professor at Cal State Long Beach (CSULB), identified the financial and editorial aspects of freelance reporting as some of the most prominent challenges of the field.

“...by the year 2000, not only was print coming into danger but magazines were actually paying...less than they were 20 or 30 years before,” Rifkin recalled. “Whereas where the LA Weekly once paid $1 to $2 more or seven to eight thousand dollars for a cover story...Today, I’d be surprised if they’d pay that much... You might come away with $500 that you spent on a story for months if it turns out that they don’t like it.”

Rifkin wrote for a number of publications in the 1980s including LA Weekly, San Francisco Guardian, LA Times Magazine and worked under contract for Details Magazine and Premiere.

What attracted him to freelance writing was the ability to write on a variety of topics, such as the Human Genome Project headed by James Watson, the Lakers Championship Drive in 1984 and the discovery of 5,000-year-old mummy in the Italian Alps.

“It was serial bliss,” Rifkin said, describing the aspects he enjoyed most about freelancing, “just like immersing yourself in a whole new world every month or two and meeting new people and getting to write about what you’ve experienced, and getting to move on. I’m not sure if you can do that as a staff writer as well, especially if you get stuck in a certain beat. Since I was kind of a general interest freelancer, I got to just follow my curiosity for 20 to 30 years!”

But even with the “bliss” of freelancing came hardships. Besides financial difficulties, the changing world of media and communications has made it more difficult for freelancers to earn consistent paychecks and the occasional compromises freelancers make when working under an editor has also been a challenging factor.

While writing for LA Weekly, Rifkin wrote a piece challenging California State Assembly’s Sheila Kuehl’s pro-abortion stance. The publication refused to print Rifkin’s story unless a rebuttal accompanied it, but because no rebuttal was given, LA Weekly shut down the story entirely.

“...you’re always conscious of the unspoken spin they (the editors) probably expect from you,” Rifkin said. “And when I’ve departed from that, I’ve gotten in trouble.”

Like Pawley, Rifkin somewhat humorously suggested that future freelance writers consider financial stability in married life before embarking on a full-time freelancing career.

“Marry someone who has a job,” Rifkin said, “and care about the craft obsessively, because everything you write is your calling card, and I’ve gotten work from editors who saw stories that I lost money on because I wanted them to be beautiful. So even if you get an assignment for $100, treat it like you’re writing for The New Yorker.”

As both Pawley and Rifkin iterated, new and developing platforms for journalists have allowed more opportunities for journalists to communicate their stories. However, the question remains as to whether or not journalists in the profession are becoming “a dime a dozen.”