Flexible Working Schemes in Media and Communication Industries: A Shifting Landscape

Structured abstract:

As freelancing has expanded in media and communication industries, studies have captured the dynamics in these fields. However, what is missing is an approach to capture the similarities and differences of an increasing freelancing labour market across communication industries and journalism. The project presented here examines freelancing in media and/or communication industries according to two approaches: a first approach, where freelancing key features are explored in the case of media or communication industries overall, and a second approach, where studies focus on a particular industry (e.g., marketing, PR, journalism).

Our paper aims to identify the similarities and differences between freelancers working in media (journalism, specifically) and communication industries (public relations, advertising, and marketing). We followed the narrative literature review steps (Sarkar & Bhatia, 2021): 1) identify questions that would be answered in the review; 2) decide about the methodology of conducting the literature review search and appraisal; 3) conduct the literature search; 4) synthesize the evidence that has been gathered; write the draft (and redraft as needed).

Introduction

Working formats in media and communication industries have gone through drastic functional and cultural changes for the past decade. The rise of flexible working practices (part-time, job sharers, remote, transnational etc.) is a well-evidenced phenomenon, with most European employees (3 out of 4 on average) having access to some work-schedule flexibility. These trends and shifts have increased in importance and gained specific public awareness during the COVID-19 pandemic and the post-pandemic labour world in the media and communication industries.

Flexibility in working practices includes a variety of arrangements into which both employed and self-employed professionals enter. As Papalexandris and Kramar (1997) specified, flexibility includes job sharing (two professionals share one job and split the hours and the

income), working remotely (fully remote, blended/mixed work patterns etc), part-time (working less than full-time hours, usually by working fewer days), compressed hours (working full-time, but over fewer days), flexitime (the employee chooses when to start and end work, within agreed limits, but works certain 'core hours', for example, 10 am to 4 pm every day), annualised hours (the employee has to work a certain number of hours over the year but they have some flexibility about when they work), and staggered hours (the employee has different start, finish and break times from other workers).

Amongst all flexible working schemes, freelancing has had an increasing presence in communication industries at the European level. Freelancing operates through project-based work, where the worker has multiple clients or employers, is self-employed, or functions as a small business. Freelancers are spearheading the growth of independent work: they are the fastest-growing segment of the EU labour market, with about 11 million EU workers today. However, as some studies have evidenced, flexible workers tend to mix various flexible working formats; for communication industries, as Anton and Moise (2021) pointed out, freelance is sometimes complemented by part-time working contracts. Lastly, professional transitions have also been highlighted, where journalists have changed their professional field for public relations / corporate communication work, due to the increasing promotional nature of media and communication industries (Viererbl and Koch, 2021; Bourne, 2022). These dynamics of media and communication industries call for further investigation.

Journalistic work has become increasingly precarious (Chadha & Steiner, 2021), we see a steady increase in freelancers. Meanwhile, staff jobs in news organizations have been cut: for example, 8,000 journalism jobs were lost in 2023 alone in the UK, US and Canada (Tobitt, 2024). Freelancing in journalism has been described as 'one of journalism's few growth sectors' (Crowley, 2024).

Methodology

Our research questions, drawn from authors' previous research on the topic (Hellmueller, Acharya, & Lunga, 2023; Hellmueller, Cheema and Zhang, 2017; Moise and Anton, 2022; Anton, 2024 ; Moise, 2023), highlight two dimensions of analysis:

RQ1: What is similar and what is different between freelancing in media and communication industries?

RQ2: What is constant and what is emerging regarding freelancing in media and communication industries?

Given the fact that freelancing is a topic investigated both in social sciences and communication studies, the extant literature will be scoped implementing a conventional subject searching approach (Papaioannou *et al.*, 2010) and using databases including scientific publications from both fields. The type of literature review we employed is semi-systemic or narrative literature review (Snyder, 2019). Our aim is to synthesise the similarities and differences between freelancing in media and communication industries, building on the critique that previous scholarship does not address the specificities of freelancing in comparison between industries. Comparing and consolidating research on two such intertwined industries can provide insights into existing and emerging dynamics, establishing a check point for future research endeavours and providing a comparative overview showcasing practical implications relevant for the industries and practitioners. The narrative literature review "is designed for topics that have been conceptualised differently and studied by various groups of researchers within diverse disciplines and that hinder a full systematic review process (Wong et al., 2013)" (Snyder, 2019, p. 335), as it allows us to look at how the topic of freelancing has developed across different research disciplines and traditions.

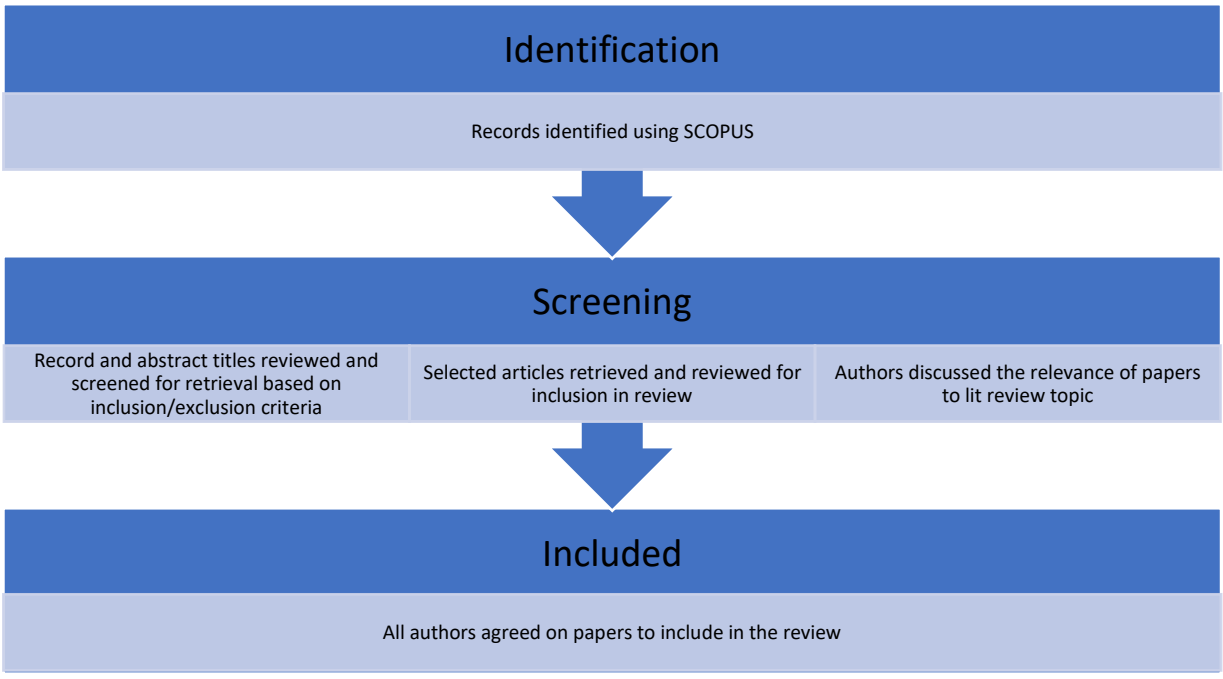

Fig 1. Adapted from Mewborn et al., 2023

In order to identify the similarities and differences between media (journalism) and communications (PR, corporate communication and advertising), we separated the process of identification, screening and review between the two disciplinary fields from the outset of our research.

Considering the field of freelancing is an evolving field of study, we applied generic terms in our search because focused terms would not yield sufficient results for further interpretation and analysis. For example, we used "freelance journalist" and "freelance journalism" rather than "freelance journalism" + "job precarity". Similarly, we used "freelance" and "freelancing" in combination with "communication", "public relations", "advertising", and "corporate communication". A test combining "public relations" and "self-employment" did not generate distinct results. We employed Harzings's Publish or Perish and ran several searches in Scopus, without limiting the year. Searching Scopus for "freelance journalism" in title, abstract and keywords limited to peer-reviewed journal outputs generated a total of 29 results (total of 38 including books, etc). Searching Scopus for "freelance journalist" in title, abstract and keywords limited to peer-reviewed journal outputs generated a total of 95 results (126 total including books, etc.) with some of these search results overlapping with the first search term. Using both search terms and combining them with the "OR" function generated a total of 112 journal articles without limiting publication date to a certain span of years. In the case of communication industries, we focused on searches combining "freelance" with the four fields of practice, as the combination with "freelancing" generated fewer results that completely overlapped with the more numerous results for "freelancer". Thus, the combined results were 141 papers, unevenly distributed: 7 for "freelance" + "advertising", 103 for "freelance" + "communication", 3 for "freelance" + "corporate communication", and 28 for "freelance" + "public relations". After eliminating doubled results and the papers that were false positives, we obtained 18 papers that were relevant to our study.

Items/discipline	**Keywords**	**No of results**	**Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria**	**No of papers selected**

Journalism	Freelance journalism, Freelance journalist	29 95 Combined terms search: 112	Eliminating doubled results	112
Communications	Freelance, Freelancing, advertising, communication, corporate communication, public relations	14 1 Combined search results	Eliminating doubled results	18

The type of analysis we conducted is thematic analysis, which allowed us to identify, analyse and report patterns in the form of themes within a text (Braun and Clarke, 2006). However, in order to give the reader a sense of how these themes have been circumscribed into different disciplinary traditions, we complemented the thematic analysis with a meta-analysis, looking at our selected papers and their themes in a chronological manner (Borman and Dowling, 2008). The value of such an approach is to map a field of research, synthesise the state of knowledge, and provide a historical overview or timeline of a specific topic.

Finally, the similarities and differences between freelancing in both types of industries will be then critically analysed following the dialectical relationship between precarity and joy (Gill, 2010) or pain-pleasure axis (McRobbie, 2007), also identified in more recent research into freelancers' habitus (Moise and Anton, 2022). Our paper will propose a review of the current literature, focusing on the feminisation of freelancing sector, the ethics of care approach to the relationship between freelancers and media organizations, the well-being, the self-promotion and branding and the constant dynamics from media to communication industries, will bring new perspectives in the current scholarship.

Results and discussion

Theme 1: *Freelancing as a key dimension of the labour market*

Most of the papers we reviewed include data that give a sense of the development of freelancing as a segment of the labour market which contributes to the overall economies

(global, national or regional). In such studies, freelancing is an equivalent to self-employment (Burke and Cowling, 2020; Damian and Manea, 2019; Öberg, 2024) or contingent work (Schwartz, 2018). The type of economy developed by freelancers is also included in the entrepreneurial business models and it is being described as a particular type of economy, distinguishable from the gig economy or sharing economies and having developed specific traits, as Öberg (2024, pp. 1-2) stresses out: "(1) creativity emerges between equal and inherently creative freelancers rather than being the result of individual traits; (2) such creativity arises when processes are appropriately formalised; and (3) the creative output is constrained by individual decisions and styles." The association between freelance economy and creativity is a recurring dimension in many studies, especially found in sociology of work or cultural policy management studies.

Sub-theme 1: The freelance online labour market

The studies published at the end of the 1990s and the beginning of 2000s highlight the value of freelancing for the gig economy, whereas the studies most recently published develop a singular focus on the online labour market that freelancers have definitely helped to emerge and develop. For Shevchuk and Strebkov (2023), the term "online labour markets" has been introduced to present a new economic model and whole labour markets, as distinct from particular websites. The online labour market sustained by freelancers is one of the major focus areas and sub-theme we identified in our review. The post-2010 studies, especially, extensively analyse the work that is transacted via platforms and delivered either locally (thus requiring the worker to be physically present) or remotely and the discourse is neutral, identifying both advantages and disadvantages. Amongst the benefits of online labour markets for freelancers are the decentralisation, meaning that accessing such type of work allows them to overcome local challenges (e.g. legislation, a reduced client base, local fees etc.) and engage in the emerging digital economy (Shevchuk and Strebkov, 2023). The digitalisation of work in specific sectors, such as ICT, business services, copywriting, editing and translation allowed women to access freelance type of work schemes, as Shevchuk identifies in the case of Russia, but the feminisation of the freelance creative and communications sectors has also been identified in other national spaces. The occupational diversification is also presented in a positive light; online labour markets were initially predominantly populated by programmers, website developers and other ICT professionals;

however, according to Shevchuk and Strebkov (2021), the shares of two particular occupational categories have grown steadily: engineering and business services (such as advertising, marketing and consulting). The platformisation of freelance work has also increased the need for diverse and specific skills, such as writing, copywriting, editing and translation skills, while the age of online freelance workers has also changed in time, more mature freelance professionals accessing digital platforms for accessing gig work.

The disadvantages are well evidenced, too; platforms have been criticised for heightening the fragmentation, commodification, casualisation and precarisation of work (Bergvall- -Kåreborn and Howcroft, 2014; De Stefano, 2016; Standing, 2016). Especially in regards to formalisation of agreements and the legalisation of transactions between freelancers and clients, Shevchuk and Strebkov (2023, p. 17) discuss the high degree of informal work relationships on Russian online labour markets, as "in practice, freelancers and their clients tend to avoid formal agreements and, consequently, paying taxes, due to factors such as small-scale operations, a need for agility and flexibility, virtual transactions crossing geographical and political borders, regulatory deficiency and costly litigation may contribute to informal agreements between freelancers and their clients."

Our review of relevant studies helped us in identifying two main formats of freelance work: full-time freelancers, meaning self-employed professionals who have chosen to make of freelancing their career choice and their singular source of income; secondly, the professionals who complement their main income and activity with freelance-sourced projects, therefore having hybrid careers. Shevchuk and Strebkov (2023) name them genuine freelancers *vs* moonlighters and the same authors remark that the gig economy is quite complex and nuanced, with multiple alternative work formats. Economic cycles appear to drive the report between full-time freelancers and part-time freelancers; during economic crisis, hybrid freelancers resurge, whereas economically stable periods are characterised by a stark increase of full-time freelance numbers (Berg *et al.,* 2018; Bögenhold and Klinglmair, 2016; Shevchuk and Strebkov, 2023).

Sub-theme 2: Dimensions of freelance work

A recurrent dimension we identified through our review is the relationship between creativity and collaboration in freelance work. We already mentioned that, in the competition between

different types of economy, the gig economy has always been valued for its high level of creativity. The common understanding in most of the studies is that less structured contexts provide greater opportunities for creativity (Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998). Therefore, the gig work or contract-based type of work is considered creative in nature, thanks to the less structured environment in which the professional works (non-organisational, lacking the structure and the routine of activities and tasks) and the types of tasks that freelancers are required to undertake, such as the generation of new and useful ideas (Gohoungodji and Amara, 2023). Öberg (2024) thinks that, in the freelance economy, creativity is a combination between environmental elements (e.g. processes being appropriately formalized) and individual decisions and styles. Summarising, in a knowledge-based work and economy, individuals' abilities to find alternative uses for their skills and to seek new ways to generate ideas is the distinctive mark of freelancers, compared to other types of workers.

Another important dimension is represented by nomadism; freelancers have also been considered as a type of nomad workers, due to their physical mobility. They are neither virtually at home, nor physically at the office; even though the place has not lost its significance (Pratt, 2000; 2002), Liegl (2014, p. 165) finds that mobility is constantly increasing, so much that the relevant scholarship considers conceptualising this reality as a "mobility turn" (e.g. Sheller and Urry, 2006). However, Liegl was more interested in analysing if the collaborative features of a freelancer's work are impacted by the increasing presence of digital nomadism. The main conclusion in Liegl's study is that on the contrary, "the discontinuity, the stop-and-go movements of their work are resources for successful working rather than unfortunate circumstances that have to be dealt with." (Liegl, 2014, p.167), the author describing even a whole dispositive of mobility, creativity and care of self.

Theme 2: *Organisation of freelance workers*

In order to address the idiosyncrasies of freelance work, especially the risks of fragmentation, commodification, casualisation and precarisation of work that we already mentioned, an emergent theme which started to be increasingly investigated is the organisation of freelancers. The sourced research in social studies has started to look at the ways in which freelancers from middle-income countries mobilise themselves to address systemic issues; Wood *et al.*'s study (2018) is representative of such a direction and perspective. Applied in the case of micro-workers, the study identified the main challenges to organisation and

strategies that micro-workers employ to organise themselves, such as the fragmented and distributed nature of micro-workers' activity. Micro-workers can be contracted by a multitude of globally dispersed clients and engaged in a diverse number of platforms, making it difficult for workers to identify targets for collective action.

The authors have identified ways in which microworkers do connect and mobilise. On Mturk, a crowdsourcing website, despite the rich network of overlapping forums and websites characterised by public or semi-public discussions and organised into threads, platformised microworkers rarely access freelancer unionised actions. Authors record predominant individualistic and functionalist approaches to engagement, where micro-workers use "their communication networks to obtain labour market opportunities and information, reduce social isolation, maintain professional norms, provide support and advice, and create feelings of community." (Wood *et al.*, 2018, p. 99). The reason for the lack of engagement with formal processes of unionisation might be, the authors reflect, the fact that freelancers do not see themselves as employees, their entrepreneurial focused identity disparagingly depriving them of the possibility for collective actions.

Theme 3: *Defining Media and Communications freelancers*

One challenge discussed in the literature is the heterogeneity of definitions for the concept of freelancer. While the definition of freelancers is not always evident in the introduction or the literature review of the selected articles, what we can witness is an implicit heterogeneity when selecting freelancers working in media and communications industries for research samples.

Multiple synonymic terms simultaneously circulate in the literature on freelancing and freelancers. Despite the terminological variety ("freelancers", "independent contractors", "contract professionals" and "consultants", Cappelli and Keller, 2013), all these terms define autonomous service providers who, depending on the disciplinary tradition, are depicted as the heroes of neoliberal economies, i.e. entrepreneurial "free agents" (e.g. Sundararajan, 2017) or, contrarily, the victims of neoliberal economies, i.e. precarious "logged labour" (Gandini, 2019; Huws, 2016). Codagnone *et al.*'s (2019) point is that such conflictual views are ideologically charged and insufficiently grounded empirically; however, critical studies from sociology and cultural studies, empirically grounded and investigating freelancers in media industries, have shown that the precarity is very present in the case of new media workers

and has acute manifestations, such as casualty, low pay, lack of access to benefits, insurance and pension schemes, and attendant worries about becoming ill, having an accident or having to work into old age (Gill, 2010).

Another powerful figure in the post-2010 studies is represented by the nomad digital worker, "a mobile knowledge worker equipped with digital technologies to work 'anytime, anywhere' (Kleinrock 1996), who was first reported on by Makimoto and Manners in 1997—is an iconic character of the present day: roaming the urban and inter-urban landscape, she sets up her laptop or PDA wherever she stops—cafés, airport lounges, in planes or trains. In popular discourse, the digital nomad features as footloose, working 'here, there, everywhere', carrying her office in her laptop (see however Su and Mark 2008)." (Liegl, 2014, pp.163-164). Liegl clearly mentions the professional and occupational categories that embody this new urban, cool figure: writers, (graphic) designers, academics, programmers, or public relations professionals.

Sub-theme 1: Particularities in defining freelance journalists

The implicit understanding of what a freelance journalist is ranges from "freelancers who have sufficient experience of producing foreign reporting" (Zhang and Jenkins, 2023, p. 1219) highlighting the increasingly important and to some extent invisible role that freelancers play in international and global news construction. One facet of this definition of freelancers as producers of foreign news includes the invisible or underground journalistic labour that is evident in the global news production. Studies have shown how the journalism industry downplays the power of increasingly important actors, keeping them least valued and most hidden (Kotišová and Deuze, 2022). These types of invisible journalistic labour (Palmer, 2019) referred to as "fixing" are integral to the practice of freelance journalism, yet hardly acknowledged as such. The discussion about fixers and freelancers brings to light the impact of race and gender identities, including the post-colonial contexts in which local-foreign news is produced. Blacksin and Mitra (2023) refer to it as "local-foreign news work" to acknowledge that fixing can be an umbrella term for various types of journalistic as well as journalism-adjacent labour.

Other research projects note the difficulty of identifying freelancers for their sample: in the Worlds of Journalism Study, one of the largest projects globally to investigate the state of journalism, Lauerer and Hanitzsch write that "[f]reelancers were hard to identify in most

countries" (2019, p. 53). This further explains why survey research and quantitative studies are rare when investigating freelance journalists. Most of the research projects are qualitative studies, based on interviews with freelancers (Mathisen, 2019; Marin-Sanchiz *et al.*, 2021; Norback and Styhre, 2019; Salamon, 2020).

Sub-theme 2: Communications freelancers, between "creative workers" and "(new) media professionals"

The difficulty to appropriately present findings uniquely applied to communications freelancers comes from the scarcity of such studies. The previously presented results are sourced from papers published in journals belonging to sociology of work, human resources, business management or new technologies. These studies included communications freelancers amongst their participants or respondents, however, the focus was not on freelance professionals from subsequent communications industries: public relations, advertising, corporate communications. Another reason for this difficulty is the inclusion of communications freelancers in broader professional terminologies, such as "new media workers" (Gill, 2010), or "creative workers". The latter option has a longer tradition in freelance scholarship than the former.

Public relations and advertising are recognised as creative communication practices, the scholarship in the case of both disciplines being quite extensive on the subject (e.g. Bowman *et al.*, 2018; Daymon, 2001; Estanyol and Roca, 2015; Green, 2009, to name a few). If we investigate closer the creative nature of public relations, according to one of the most recently published studies, Estanyol (2023) emphasises the fact that the problem-solving ability is the key skill that the majority of public relations scholars focus on when it comes to pinpointing the nature of creativity: "innovative ideas and fresh approaches are needed to solve complex problems or to make a public relations program unique and memorable" (Wilcox *et al.*, 2014, p. 34). Additionally, other scholars mention the "focus on personal qualities such as creativity, lateral thinking, flexibility, articulateness, persuasiveness, common sense, and integrity is important" (Pieczka and L'Etang, 2006, p. 276). As for the areas in which communication freelancers use their creativity, Moise and Anton (2022, p. 34) made a comprehensive list of 30 areas of practice: App and software development, Branding, Celebrity PR, Content and copywriting, Corporate communication, Crisis communication, CSR, Digital marketing (ads, SEO , etc.), Events, Fundraising, Graphic design, Human resources, Influencer marketing,

Internal communication, Journalism, Law, Lobby, Management, Market research, Marketing, Media relations, Photography, Podcasts, Public relations, Sales, Social media, Strategic communication, Translation and transcription, Video editing, Web design and development.

It is therefore clear that creativity is a core dimension of communications practices and industries. Looking at communications freelancers and capturing the beginnings of freelancing in the UK public relations, Tench *et al.* (2002, p. 313) describe the public relations freelancer as a consultant and a conventional freelancer: works on a temporary basis, contracted for a specific task, project, advice or external independent opinion, with multiple (regular) clients and contracted for their services. The segmentation of the labour market determines the authors to introduce the distinction between core workers (e.g. permanent staff employees) and peripheral workers (e.g. freelancers, part-timers and employees on other flexible working schemes). Employers of communication freelancers are either communications agencies/firms, who outsource specific tasks and activities, or direct clients, meaning the organisation who is the subject of the brief. The rise of freelancers in creative industries is explained by Tench *et al.* (2002) through a broader lens, the decrease in the attachment and loyalty relationship an employee has with their employer, whereas the freelancers' view is that the need for freedom, autonomy, equity, exciting challenges and career advancement leads them to take such a decision. Even much more recent studies on communications freelancers (Moise and Anton, 2022) evidence the same individual reasons for full time / permanent employees to transition to freelancing; the need for control and agency over their own creative process and output is greater than the safety and stability provided by an employer.

Sub-theme 3: Networked occupational communities

Another recurrent sub-theme emerging from both general and specific types of studies is represented by the informality of a freelancer's lifeworld. We did mention this dimension previously, from the perspective of work arrangements and the organisation of work, especially mediated by digital platforms and online labour markets. However, this time, we will refer to informality as a more comprehensive framework, as we will discuss further. Luik and Aritonang (2022) looked at the informality of media freelancers in Indonesia; as we already mentioned, communications freelancers are often included in the term of "media

freelancers", mostly in studies published in media journals. Luik and Aritonang's study included in its methodology participants from communications professional areas, such as content creation and social media management. Therefore, we can consider its results relevant to the communications freelancer category and its sub-groups (e.g. public relations, advertising, corporate communications etc.). The study introduces a broader framework of informality, discussing the personal and social dimensions.

The globalisation of jobs and the rise of platformised freelance work gives communications freelancers the opportunity to access other work spaces. Building a professional personae through the use of social media platforms for their business purposes helps communications freelancers to understand followers' preferences and engage with followers for increasing the possibility to secure freelance jobs (Luik and Aritonang, 2022). Complementarily, the social dimension of online media leads to a blend of professional and social dimensions; therefore, the social aspects of freelancers' informality can be seen in their commitment to using online social platforms and spaces for reputation building. Luik and Aritonang's findings echo other study's observations; Moise and Anton (2022) investigated the professional virtual communities used by communications freelancers in two countries (UK and Romania) and they found that the online spaces offer communications freelancers both learning and socialisation opportunities, replacing the type of peer review and culture which usually full-time employers foster. The authors have found out that for beginner communication freelancers, such professional virtual communities function as knowledge exchange spaces, whereas for more experienced freelancers, best practice sharing (contracts, client management) and industry dynamics (price trends, legal updates) are essential functions. Lastly, the main reason for which most of the communication freelancers use such online spaces is the value of peer production; "From generating knowledge as a community to acting as a pressure group, advocating for freelancers' rights, the two communication freelancers' communities create new content and resources that can be either used by the community members or by external actors. Peer production is the vital mechanism that makes community members (re)engage within the group and contribute to the participatory ethos." (Moise and Anton, 2022, p. 41)

Sub-theme 4: Communications freelancers and well-being

In the public relations literature, we also identified a focus on the well-being of freelancers. Fielden *et al.* (2003) have started from acute, systemic issues (e.g. costs of downsizing, privatisation and mergers, increased sickness rates, and decreased job satisfaction), to further investigate the relationship between freelancers and well-being. As full-time employment became increasingly stressful, there was no study up to that date that investigated the link between occupational stress and gender. The results are revealing: the organisational sources of stress have decreased with only three exceptions (poor briefing, steep learning curve and keeping up to date with developments), the personal sources of stress have also decreased, especially factors such as demands on personal life, a lack of social support and isolation. The study concluded that freelance working in the public relations / communications industry affords an opportunity to address some of the balance lost in traditional employment between professional and private life (Fielden *et al.*, 2003, p. 193).

Theme 4: *Acceleration of Risk and Precarity in Freelance Journalism*

Our literature review reveals a common thread when discussing freelance work in journalism: When journalists work independently from a news organization and while enjoying the autonomy of their work, they are at the same time exposed to certain risks and precarities. Numerous studies revealed the negative effects on worker short- and long-term health when working irregular work schedules. While the pandemic intensified this precarity, freelance journalists find themselves without any institutional support, even as passion for journalism keeps them going (Lukan and Zajk, 2024).

In a comprehensive survey conducted by the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) across 77 nations in April 2020, it was revealed that a significant portion of respondents encountered various hindrances, obstructions, or intimidations while reporting on the coronavirus crisis. A subset of freelance journalists faces even greater precarity, particularly those operating in conflict zones, under authoritarian regimes, and among women, who contend with heightened levels of both online and offline abuse (Ewen, 2023). This precarity often stems from the structural deficiencies inherent within the freelance journalism profession, which is conceptualized as an informal labour sector subject to market forces and lacking in employer or state-mandated duty of care (Gollmitzer, 2024). Moreover, freelance journalists frequently find themselves marginalized within the hierarchical framework of

news production, relegated to the lower rungs of decision-making processes. Within the freelance journalist category, as defined by prevailing journalistic paradigms, certain roles—such as fixers, photographers, or videographers—are relegated to subordinate positions, necessitating a more 'flattening hierarchy in journalism" (Josephi and O'Donnell, 2023, p.139).

Sub-theme: Women and Freelancers in the Global South

The literature review shows that women's sense of precarity is compounded by experiences of sexism and sexual harassment. Journalists in the Global South face far more intense precarity than those in the Global North (Chadha and Steiner, 2022) and women predominate as freelance journalists around the world (Sanchiz and Valero-Pastor, 2023) while the journalism industry downplays the power of increasingly important actors, keeping them least valued and most hidden (Kotišová and Deuze, 2022).

In this sense, the literature review highlights that women have a prominent presence in freelance journalism (Templeman, 2016). Banning (2005) describes the most common freelancer in the United States as "a 49-year-old white woman who lives in a large city, has an advanced education, is married and has at least one child". The predominance of women is also evident elsewhere, such as Sweden (Norbäck and Styhre, 2019) or New Zealand (Hannis, 2008), although it is also clear that this is a very heterogeneous profession. In Germany, the proportion of men is higher than that of women (Koch and Obermaier, 2014).

Conclusions

This study explored the complexities of freelancing within the media and communication industries, addressing four main research questions. Our discussion showcases the findings related to these questions and their implications. **We will summarise them in the following table, with a further discussion in what follows.**

Similarities	Distinctions
High levels of autonomy and flexibility	Freelance journalists are increasingly moving to communication roles

High level of creativity and innovation	N/A
Freelance workers in media and communications fields engage in project-based work	Communication freelancers access global markets and opportunities
The blend of precarity and satisfaction	Journalists often face higher levels of precarity and risk; Communication freelancers experience a more stable environment
The feminisation of freelancing	N/A
Need for continuous skill development and networking	N/A
The reliance on digital tools and platforms	For communication freelancers: the rise of digital nomadism, where freelancers work from various global locations
Increasing focus on well-being and mental health among freelancers	N/A

RQ1a: Similarities between freelancing in media and communication industries

Freelancing in both media and communication industries exhibits several commonalities. Firstly, freelancers in both sectors operate under high levels of autonomy and flexibility, which supports creativity and innovation. This flexibility allows freelancers to juggle multiple projects and clients simultaneously, fostering a dynamic work environment. Additionally, freelancers in both fields often engage in project-based work, which requires them to be very adaptable and skilled in time management and self-promotion strategies and techniques. These shared characteristics highlight independence and the ability to manage diverse tasks as key dimensions of the nature of freelancing.

A recurrent theme across both industries is the blend of precarity and satisfaction, navigating between the joy of creative freedom and the pain of job insecurity. This aligns with Gill's (2010) pain-pleasure axis, illustrating the complex emotional landscape of freelancers who balance the independence of their work with the uncertainty of their income. Furthermore, the feminisation of freelancing is notable in both sectors, with a growing number of women entering these fields, attracted by the flexibility that freelancing offers. This trend underscores the changing demographics of the freelance workforce and its implications for gender dynamics in the labour market.

RQ1b: Differences between freelancing in media and communication industries

Despite these similarities, differences are very much evident between the two sectors and revolve around stability (communication freelancers experience more stability than media freelancers), risk exposure (media freelancers face greater physical and financial risks), and the nature of work (communication freelancers work in more structured, creative roles, while media freelancers work on short-term, deadline-driven content creation).

Media freelancers, particularly journalists, often face higher levels of precarity and risk. They are frequently exposed to physical dangers in conflict zones and systemic challenges such as lack of institutional support and legal protection. Freelance journalists must navigate a volatile environment where the pressures of meeting deadlines and securing consistent work can lead to significant stress and burnout. The lack of formal employment structures further exacerbates these challenges, leaving journalists without the safety nets typically available to full-time employees.

Conversely, communication freelancers, including those in public relations, advertising, and marketing, typically experience a more stable environment with less direct exposure to danger. They often work in structured corporate settings or with diverse clients in safer conditions. These professionals are more likely to benefit from steady contracts and longer-term engagements, which provide a degree of financial stability and professional security not always available to their media counterparts. Additionally, the professional transitions observed, where journalists are increasingly moving to communication roles, reflect the

broader industry trend of convergence and the promotional nature of media work (Viererbl and Koch 2021; Bourne 2022).

These differences also influence the way freelancers use tools and platforms in their work, although their respective actions are not different from those of their employed counterparts. Communication freelancers rely heavily on digital tools and platforms for collaboration, client management, and remote work, also enabled by the rise of digital nomadism. While freelance journalists also use digital tools, they are often more focused on content distribution platforms and online publications to find clients and publish their work. Freelance journalism has a heavier reliance on networking for work opportunities but lacks the longer-term, platform-based work common in communication freelancing.

RQ2a: Constants in freelancing in media and communication industries

Certain constants remain across freelancing in both industries. The necessity for continuous skill development and networking is paramount for all freelancers. This constant is underscored by the need to stay relevant and competitive in a rapidly changing digital landscape. The role of online platforms in facilitating freelance work remains a critical aspect, providing freelancers with avenues to find work, showcase their portfolios, and connect with potential clients. The literature consistently highlights the importance of adaptability and resilience, traits that are essential for sustaining a freelance career in both media and communication sectors (Moise and Anton, 2022).

Moreover, the reliance on digital tools and platforms has become central to freelance work. Freelancers in both fields use various online platforms to manage their work, communicate with clients, and market their services. This digital dependency is a constant that shapes the daily practices and professional identities of freelancers. The use of social media for self-promotion and professional networking is particularly prevalent, as it allows freelancers to build their personal brand and reach a wider audience.

RQ2b: Emerging trends in freelancing in media and communication industries

Emerging trends reveal a shift towards more digital and remote working arrangements. The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the adoption of digital tools and remote work, making

these an integral part of the freelancing landscape. The shift to remote work has allowed freelancers to transcend geographical boundaries, accessing global markets and opportunities. This trend is particularly significant in the communication industry, where remote collaboration tools have become essential for coordinating with clients and teams across different time zones.

Another emerging trend is the feminisation of the freelance workforce, with a significant number of women entering freelancing, particularly in communication roles. This shift is attributed to the flexibility that freelancing offers, allowing better work-life balance (Shevchuk and Strebkov, 2021). Additionally, the rise of digital nomadism, where freelancers work from various global locations, is increasingly prevalent, driven by advancements in technology and digital connectivity (Liegl, 2014). Digital nomadism reflects the changing nature of work, where physical presence is less important, and productivity is measured by output rather than location.

Furthermore, there is an increasing focus on well-being and mental health among freelancers. Studies indicate that while freelancing offers flexibility, it also brings challenges related to isolation, stress, and work-life balance. The importance of mental health support and community-building initiatives is gaining recognition, with more freelancers seeking out networks and support systems to cope with the psychological burden of freelance work.

Theoretical implications

The findings from this study have several theoretical implications. The observed similarities and differences in freelancing across media and communication industries support the theoretical framework of flexible work practices, highlighting the growth of freelancing within the labour market and its dual nature as both liberating and precarious. The constants observed reinforce the necessity for ongoing professional development and adaptability, critical components of the gig economy. The emergent trends align with the theories of digital labour and the evolving nature of work in a globalised, technology-driven world. The feminisation of freelancing and the rise of digital nomadism challenge traditional notions of work and career, suggesting new directions for future research and policy development.

Additionally, the increasing focus on mental health and well-being among freelancers introduces a critical dimension to the discourse on flexible work practices. It highlights the need for supportive structures and resources that can help freelancers navigate the emotional and psychological challenges of their work. The findings align with emerging theories that recognise the emotional labour involved in managing the uncertainties of freelance work. It calls for a reconsideration of the role of emotional resilience and community-building in sustaining freelance careers, particularly in precarious fields such as journalism.

Practical implications

Organisations within the media and communication industries should establish clear guidelines and support systems for managing freelancers. This includes setting fair payment terms, timely payment practices, and formal contracts that outline work expectations and legal protections to reduce the precarity freelancers experience. Given the findings on freelancer isolation and burnout, the companies can prioritise well-being by offering access to mental health resources, peer networks, and wellness programs specifically tailored to freelancers, benefiting from resources such as online support groups, freelance community networks, and dedicated mental health services. Additionally, flexible working conditions should be promoted as a standard offering for freelancers, also enabling organisations to capitalise on the flexibility of freelancing and attract top talent by offering project-based work that allows for better work-life balance. Particularly, flexibility is crucial in attracting women and other under-represented groups who value autonomy and better work-life integration. Furthermore, in order to combat the precarious nature of freelancing, particularly in journalism, companies should not only focus on internal supportive actions and structures, but also advocate for industry standards around fair pay, gender equality, and support for freelancers in conflict zones or under-represented regions. Freelancers in journalism often face higher risks and precarity, making fair compensation and protection essential to their well-being and productivity. In conclusion, freelancing in media and communication industries is characterised by both similarities and differences, all under the influence of economic, technological, and social trends. These dynamics both influence the lived experiences of freelancers as well as have significant implications for theories of work,

creativity, and digital labour. The insights we generated through this study can inform future research and policy-making, as well as the development of support systems for freelancers.

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