

STATE OF FREELANCE JOURNALISTS IN SOUTH AFRICA

**REPORT COMMISSIONED BY THE SOUTH AFRICAN EDITORS'
FORUM (SANEF) AND THE HENRY NXUMALO FOUNDATION
(HNF)**

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Executive Summary

Introduction

Freelance journalism has become increasingly prominent in the media industry, especially in South Africa. This trend has been accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which normalized remote work. Long before the pandemic, freelance journalism was already being driven by a media crisis marked by declining revenue, reduced advertising income, and significant job losses. This crisis forced many skilled journalists and media professionals into freelancing. Despite the profound transformations in media labour, there is limited research on the state and working conditions of freelance journalists. In response, the South African National Editors Forum (SANEF) and the Henry Nxumalo Foundation (HNF) commissioned a study to better understand the current state of freelance journalism in South Africa. This is an executive summary of the report that outlines the challenges and opportunities of freelance journalism in the country.

Objectives of this report

The objectives of the research are to:

- Examine the working conditions of freelance journalists in South Africa.
- Explore the industry conditions giving rise to the status quo of freelance journalism in South Africa; and
- Provide possible remedies to alleviate challenges and consolidate opportunities for freelance journalists in South Africa.

Methodologies of the report

The report drew on key informant interviews with freelance journalists and media editors and credible document analysis.

Findings

The findings from the research are broadly structured around eight themes as follows.

- Freelance journalism in South Africa
- Working conditions
- Relationship with mainstream media
- Associational life
- Safety and wellbeing
- Training & Skills building
- Technology and Generative AI
- The future of freelance journalism

Theme 1: Freelance journalism in South Africa

The study categorizes freelance journalists into four groups.

- The first group includes seasoned, typically white and male journalists who have built successful freelance careers in mainstream media and the corporate sector over time. They have been 'in the game' for several years, some dating back to the apartheid era, and have built considerable journalistic capital as freelancers.
- The second group consists of journalists who have been retrenched in the past decade.
- The third group comprises recent graduates from colleges and universities who are not being absorbed into newsrooms.
- The fourth group includes freelance journalists employed by the emerging community and local media sector some of whom are in the far-flung rural communities.

The experiences, perspectives, and expectations of journalists in these four categories vary. Significant differences in both attitudes and practices were observed between established freelance journalists and newcomers to the field. In examining the nature of freelance journalism across various categories, it is crucial to understand the professional identity of freelance journalists and their motivations for pursuing this career path.

In terms of **professional identity**, freelance journalists in South Africa, as elsewhere, often juggle multiple roles, such as content creators, social media managers, and brand strategists, in addition to their journalistic duties. This overlap of responsibilities has the potential to blur the traditional boundaries of journalism, leading to what has been termed 'interrole conflict'. This conflict arises when the expectations and demands of different roles in a person's life are incompatible or clash. This situation often creates cognitive dissonance as freelancers struggle to balance their dual responsibilities as both entrepreneurs and journalists. The opposition between these roles can result in a crisis of professional identity.

The **motivations** for journalists to become freelancers are many such as flexibility, independence, professional growth, opportunity for creativity and global reach. However, this research found that most journalists interviewed became freelancers not out of choice. There are geographical, financial and newsrooms conditions that have driven most journalists to be freelancers such as:

- The Covid 19 pandemic exacerbated newsroom layoffs and intensified the ongoing crisis in mainstream media, dashing hopes of many journalists returning to full-time journalism.
- Some mainstream newsrooms ceased recruiting journalists even before the pandemic. As a result, graduating journalists have not been able to find positions in newsrooms, as hiring has largely been frozen.
- There are some freelance journalists who joined the profession because of geography as they live in areas outside the major cities, where applying for a job is very difficult.
- Because many freelance journalists ended up in their roles involuntarily, they often lack the proper strategies and negotiating power needed to thrive in the media industry. This is worsened by the fact that most South African Journalism Schools, do not offer any training that can prepare graduates for this eventuality. South Africa's Journalism Schools prepare students for the world of newsroom work, not freelancing.

Theme 2: Working conditions

Freelance journalists stated that they face numerous challenges that make their working conditions difficult. With many journalists entering the freelance space, the freelance market is becoming highly competitive. In addition, freelance journalists juggle multiple jobs and do self-promotion, administrative work, and budget planning on top of their primary work of being a journalist. Almost all the freelancers interviewed expressed that they face many challenges, and this includes those freelancers who are in entrepreneurship. While the editors interviewed acknowledged the many difficulties freelance journalists face in the country, they also underscored the broader crisis affecting the media industry, both in South Africa and worldwide. The following are some of the key working challenges that they face:

- **Low rates**
 - While the South African Freelancers Association (SAFREA) offers benchmark rates to assist content creators and freelance service providers in setting fair and reasonable prices across different media industries, these rates have remained unchanged for several years. Freelance rates in mainstream media are particularly low, leading many seasoned freelance journalists to shift towards the corporate sector. Freelancers often face delayed payments, with some newsrooms taking months to settle compensation even after the work is completed. Some freelancers sometimes settle for even lesser rates because potential hirers cannot afford the going rate. Editors acknowledge that freelance rates are generally low, although this varies between newsrooms. Independent contractors in the broadcasting sector, particularly in technical departments, receive better and more competitive rates. Editors also mention that the low rates paid by the media are not intentional but are a consequence of the financial constraints faced by the media industry
- **Financial Instability and Uncertainty**
 - Freelance journalists frequently experience financial instability due to the irregular and unpredictable nature of their work. This instability can cause considerable stress and uncertainty regarding their career prospects. Many respondents emphasized the challenge of "delayed payments," noting that they often receive their earnings much later than anticipated and must engage in persistent follow-ups to secure payment. Editors share this perspective, acknowledging that freelancers frequently experience delays in receiving payment, and that these delays can significantly disadvantage freelancers when their payments arrive late.
- **Issue of contracts**
 - Many of the interviewed participants mentioned that they do not have formal contracts with the media houses they are affiliated with. Freelance journalists, particularly those working for broadcast stations, operate under fixed or ad-hoc contracts set by the stations. In some instances, there are no contracts at all. It is just an instruction to cover a specific event in a specific location, and invoice later. The issue of contracts is quite complex, as some newsrooms do not offer contracts to certain categories of freelance journalists, while others prioritise providing formal agreements.
- **Resource Constraints**
 - Freelance journalists often lack access to the resources and infrastructure typically available in newsrooms, such as updated software, modern computer equipment, and essential office amenities like reliable internet connections. Investigative freelance journalists face financial constraints that limit their ability to conduct in-depth

investigations, and the high-risk nature of their work is compounded by a lack of legal support.

- **Administrative overload**
 - Freelance journalists frequently collaborate with multiple organisations simultaneously, necessitating careful management of their ongoing and upcoming assignments, along with tracking payments for each. This demands strong organisational and administrative skills, which many of the freelancers interviewed currently lack. While successful entrepreneurial freelancers often employ accountants and administrators to help manage these tasks, many others do not have such support.
- **Job Satisfaction**
 - Some freelance journalists expressed contentment with their work, appreciating the flexibility and independence that freelancing offers, despite the uncertainty of their circumstances. Some of the more experienced freelance journalists mentioned that they have no intention of returning to mainstream journalism.

Theme 3: Relationship with mainstream media

Building a healthy working relationship with mainstream media is crucial for freelance journalists. While some respondents stated that they had a good relationship with the mainstream media, quite a few respondents pointed to challenges and frustration.

- **Limited communication**
 - Many freelance journalists reported experiencing poor communication with mainstream media, often not receiving any feedback on their submitted stories. In some instances, journalists only discovered that their stories had been published after the fact, as newsrooms did not make any effort to inform them when their work went live. Editors interviewed stated that limited communication between freelance journalists and mainstream media could imply that certain freelancers, particularly younger ones, may lack proactivity in establishing long-term relationships with editors or fully grasping the editorial requirements and expectations of mainstream media.
- **Not feeling valued**
 - Most freelance journalists interviewed expressed feelings of being undervalued. Freelance journalists in peri-urban and rural areas feel excluded from the journalistic field and believe they are left to navigate challenges on their own. The editors interviewed recognized that the exploitation of freelance journalists is an escalating issue in the media industry, particularly within the context of an increasingly unstable work environment and emphasized the need for a wider conversation on this matter. They highlighted the importance of acknowledging the contributions of freelance journalists, emphasizing that they are vital and play a crucial role in the news production ecosystem.
- **Professionalism**
 - Senior freelance journalists working as sub-editors for large print media entities have expressed concerns about the decline in professionalism across the industry due to the increasing presence of less experienced staff in newsrooms. This situation has made their work more challenging and demanding, often without fair compensation for their efforts. Additionally, many freelancers feel that mainstream media do not adequately address their needs, such as timely payments, compensation for extra expenses, and inclusion in journalism events and newsroom meetings. This lack of professional

attention has led to apathy among freelancers, negatively affecting overall professionalism.

- **Safety and protection**

- Freelancers feel that they are not given adequate protection even when contracted by a newsroom to cover a specific story. This was especially true of freelancers contracted on sensitive investigative stories. When threatened and abused by malign individuals/ targets of their investigation, newsrooms often abandon them.

Theme 4: Associational life

Associational life refers to the diverse ways individuals come together in organizations, associations, and groups to pursue common interests and objectives. These associations can be formal, like professional organisations, unions, and NGOs, or informal, such as online communities. Freelance journalists, in particular, can benefit from engaging in associational life by joining professional associations, unions, and online communities that offer networking opportunities, professional development, and various forms of support.

- **Networking**

- Freelance journalists face various challenges in networking, which is essential for their success but can be exhausting and relentless. Many are not members of professional bodies, and networking is particularly difficult for those living outside major cities like Johannesburg and Cape Town, where fewer media outlets limit local opportunities. Older freelancers tend to maintain smaller networks due to time constraints. Those in peri-urban areas struggle with unreliable internet access, which hampers their ability to engage in virtual networking, access digital resources, and interact online effectively. Editors stressed the need for freelance journalists in the country to unite and form effective network spaces.

- **Professional bodies**

- The unionisation movement in the media sector in South Africa is weak. The South African Freelancers Association (SAFREA), which serves as the industry body for freelance journalists, has been found to be ineffective in representing their interests. Among the few freelance journalists who belong to a professional body, most are associated with SAFREA and the South African National Editors' Forum (SANEF).

- **Self-promotion and job-creation strategies**

- Many freelancers, especially the young ones tend to rely more on informal job acquisition methods, such as word of mouth, offline networking, and online networking, rather than formal strategies like pitching to editors, using job boards, or subscribing to industry email lists. Entrepreneurial job creation strategies, such as writing paid posts, collaborating with other journalists, and editing, are also less common among them. They lack a "unique selling point" and could benefit from mentorship in this area to enhance their marketability.

Theme 5: Safety and wellbeing

Given their precarious working conditions, lack of institutional support, and exposure to a variety of risks freelance journalists' safety and wellness are vital concerns. Physical safety, legal threats, the stress of meeting deadlines, the uncertainty of income, late payments can all lead to mental health.

- **Safety**
 - Freelance journalists face significant concerns about their physical safety, with many avoiding assignments that could put them in danger. Those who do undertake risky stories, particularly in investigative journalism, often bear a disproportionate burden of harassment. Furthermore, freelancers who experience harassment generally receive minimal support from the media organizations they work for. Some freelancers choose to focus on writing for the corporate sector to avoid such risks.

- **Wellness and a sense of belonging**
 - Freelance journalism offers benefits like creative variety, flexible hours, and the ability to work from home. However, the absence of a steady income often results in substantial mental and financial stress. Many freelance journalists report feelings of professional isolation and stress, largely due to job uncertainty and financial instability.

Theme 6: Training & Skills building

Freelancers face significant challenges in staying updated with industry trends and skills. The majority have not participated in any training or upskilling programs in the last five years, leaving them unfamiliar with new journalistic practices like data journalism, climate change reporting, and solutions journalism. Moreover, opportunities for professional growth are scarce, and freelancers often have to invest their own resources to remain current in their field. Freelancers face a 'skills gap' as they fall behind in essential journalistic competencies.

Theme 7: Technology and Generative AI

Experienced journalists generally see AI as a beneficial tool, believing it cannot replicate the unique human qualities of talent, creativity, or skill that journalists possess. Younger freelance journalists have mixed feelings about AI; while they recognize its advantages, they also worry about its potential impact on their job security. Additionally, many freelance journalists are not well-informed about the use of AI in news writing due to limited access to relevant technology and software.

Theme 8: The future of freelance journalism

The freelance journalism landscape in South Africa presents both opportunities and challenges. While there are numerous openings in political journalism, corporate editing, ghostwriting, paid blogging, entertainment, and sports writing, the sustainability of freelance journalism is under threat due to the ongoing crisis in the media industry and the country's worsening economy. The viability of freelancing is closely tied to the survival of mainstream media. As the media sector transforms, freelancers must adapt, update their perspectives on the changing newsroom environment, and remain flexible to succeed in an evolving industry.

The discussion of these themes is succeeded by a concluding analysis of the findings and their implications, along with a series of recommendations as follows:

Recommendations

For newsrooms and media houses

- **Fair Pay and Improved Rates:** Enhancing payment rates for freelance journalists is essential to ensure they receive fair compensation for their work. This will not only sustain their livelihoods but also uphold the quality of journalism.
- **Contracts:** Mainstream media institutions should provide written contracts for all freelancers, in line with labour regulations. These contracts should clearly outline entitlements and payment schedules to safeguard the professional relationship between freelancers and media organizations.
- **Integration of Freelancers:** Freelancers should be fully integrated into newsrooms, fostering a sense of belonging and eliminating any feelings of isolation from their full-time colleagues.
- **Support Systems for Freelancers:** Mainstream news organisations should offer support to freelance journalists who face threats or challenges due to their work. This support is vital for building trust and ensuring their safety, empowering freelancers to cover stories that might otherwise go unnoticed by mainstream media.

For SANEF and media associations

- **Support SAFREA:** SANEF should advocate for the revitalization of SAFREA, helping it become a dynamic and robust association. By backing SAFREA, SANEF can present a united front in representing and advancing the interests of journalists across the board.
- **Lead integration efforts:** SANEF can take the lead in integrating freelance journalists into the mainstream by creating platforms that actively encourage and facilitate their involvement.
- **Promote entrepreneurial journalism:** In partnership with journalism schools (J-Schools), SANEF can champion initiatives aimed at fostering entrepreneurial journalism, which is seen as a viable solution to the current challenges affecting the journalism industry.
- **Develop an accreditation system:** SANEF should work with relevant stakeholders to create an accreditation system for freelance journalists, establishing clear criteria to differentiate them from bloggers and citizen journalists.
- **Support platform-based journalism:** Collaborating with SAFREA, SANEF can raise awareness about platforms like Substack, Medium, and Patreon that enable freelance journalists to monetize their work directly through subscriptions and memberships.

For SAFREA

- **Increase visibility and awareness:** The research shows that many freelance journalists are unaware of SAFREA, despite its critical role in supporting the careers and working conditions of freelance journalists, writers, photographers, and editors. SAFREA should implement a program aimed at raising awareness of the organisation within the freelance community.
- **Build a member directory:** Create and maintain an up-to-date database of members, including their skills, portfolios, and contact details, to make it easier for clients to connect with freelancers.
- **Facilitate networking opportunities:** Host regular networking events and meetups, particularly for freelancers outside Johannesburg and Cape Town, to help build connections with potential clients.
- **Develop an online community:** Establish a digital platform, such as a forum or social media group, where members can exchange experiences, offer advice, and share job opportunities.
- **Launch a mobile app:** Create a mobile application that provides easy access to SAFREA resources, job listings, and networking opportunities from anywhere.
- **Offer workshops and webinars:** Regularly organise skill-building workshops and webinars to enhance freelancers' professional development. SAFREA should invest in training that keeps freelancers current with the latest tools and techniques in journalism.
- **Introduce a mentorship program:** Develop a mentorship initiative, pairing experienced journalists with emerging talent to guide and support their career growth.
- **Provide legal support:** Offer members access to legal advice and services for resolving contract disputes, handling copyright matters, and addressing non-payment issues.
- **Support mental health:** Make mental health resources available, including counselling services and workshops on stress management and well-being for freelancers.

For freelance journalists

- **Support SAFREA:** An association is only as strong as its members. Freelance journalists should engage actively with SAFREA, contributing ideas to ensure the organization addresses their needs. It is vital for freelancers to voice their concerns and collaborate with other stakeholders.
- **Peer Support Networks:** Freelance journalists should form local networks. Building a strong community can foster support, where members can share resources, knowledge, and opportunities, helping mitigate the challenges of working in isolation.
- **Training:** Freelancers should seek out and engage in training opportunities to enhance their skills and knowledge.

- **Upskilling:** Freelance journalists need to continuously improve their skills to stay relevant in the ever-evolving journalism landscape. By developing unique selling points, they can market their specific skills and experiences more effectively.

For Journalism Schools

- **Integrating Freelancing into Journalism Courses:** Journalism schools should include freelancing principles in their curriculum. As traditional media outlets face high turnover rates and job cuts, many graduates are likely to pursue freelance careers. Preparing them for this reality is essential.
- **Entrepreneurial Journalism Courses:** Journalism schools should also offer training in entrepreneurial journalism. Collaborating with organizations like SANEF, which has in-depth knowledge of journalists' day-to-day experiences, can provide valuable insights and resources for such programs.
- **Refresher Courses:** Journalism schools can offer Short Learning Programmes to help freelancers upskill and stay current with the latest trends in journalism practices and newsroom technologies.

I. Introduction

Freelance journalism is increasingly becoming a growing practice and culture, taking up a significant portion of employment across different industries. In the media industry, particularly in journalism, freelancing is not a new phenomenon and has a long history. The concept of freelance writers, including journalists, dates to the early days of journalism itself. But digital technologies, such as online publications, blogs, and digital news platforms, have generated new opportunities for freelancers. The barriers to entry have been lowered, thereby enabling a greater number of individuals to contribute content and reach a broader audience. The COVID-19 pandemic led to a widespread shift toward remote work, which, in turn, helped to 'normalise' freelancing. However, even before the pandemic, the ongoing media crisis—marked by poor revenue generation, declining advertising income, and other challenges—had already resulted in significant job losses across the industry. This crisis forced thousands of highly skilled journalists and media professionals into freelancing. The media crisis remains complex and not fully understood, but there's widespread agreement that the transformations in media labour have been profound. In light of this, the South African National Editors Forum (SANEF) and the Henry Nxumalo Foundation (HNF) commissioned this research to explore and understand the current state of freelance journalism in South Africa.

Focusing on the state of freelance journalism is crucial because freelancers play a vital role in sustaining democracy. They often provide unique and diverse perspectives, covering a broader range of topics and viewpoints than staff journalists, who may be constrained by the editorial policies of specific publications. This diversity enhances the representation of public opinion and concerns, which is essential for a healthy democracy. The report aims to highlight key issues rather than provide exhaustive solutions concerning the future of freelance journalists in South Africa. Currently, limited research has examined the state and working conditions of freelance journalists, making this report an initial step in addressing that gap.

2. Aims and Objectives

We can summarise the aims and objectives of the consultation as:

- To examine the working conditions of freelance journalists in South Africa.
- Explore the industry conditions giving rise to the status quo of freelance journalism in South Africa; and
- To provide possible remedies to alleviate challenges and consolidate opportunities for freelance journalists in South Africa.

3. Context

To effectively address these objectives, it's essential to first explore the media landscape in South Africa, along with the rapidly changing media and journalistic ecosystems both globally and locally. Within this context, the conditions and status of freelance journalists in South Africa can be examined.

3.1 Media in South Africa

The South African media landscape is highly concentrated with a few key players dominating both print and broadcast sectors. The print media sector is dominated by Media24, Arena Holdings, Independent Media, Caxton, and M&G Media. The first four media companies operate several national and regional newspapers and magazines. Like other media conglomerates elsewhere, these five companies operate within the logic of market fundamentalism that privileges profit maximization. The public broadcaster, the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), the private television company, e.tv and Multichoice, the satellite television service, are the three primary actors in the television broadcasting media. Radio is dominated by the SABC, Kagiso Media and PRIMEDIA Broadcasting. The country also has a vibrant, albeit struggling local and community media sector. The introduction of extensive media reforms in South Africa following the end of apartheid resulted in the emergence of community media as part of the expansion of communicative spaces. South Africa implemented a three-tier broadcasting system that is comprised of public service, commercial broadcasting, and community broadcasting as part of these reforms. Thus South Africa boasts community media in print, radio and television.

The advent of the internet has revolutionized the media industry, with digital media experiencing substantial growth and popularity. Online news sites such as *News24*, *IOL*, and *Daily Maverick* are widely used sources of information. Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram are popular social media platforms that are extensively utilized for the distribution of news and facilitation of public discussions.

3.2 Changing media and journalistic ecosystems

The increase in freelance journalists in South Africa comes amid a larger transformation of the media industry globally. The production, distribution, and consumption of news have all been significantly changed by digital media, thus leading to sector restructuring and business models that are prioritising cost-effectiveness and new organizational structures.¹ The traditional economic model for news outlets is no longer feasible. In addition to advertising, print and online publications in the country, including the *Daily Maverick*, *News24*, *Mail and Guardian*, *The Sunday Times*, and *Business Day*, are currently experimenting with alternative digital revenue streams,

¹ Picard, R. G. (2014) "Twilight or new Dawn of Journalism? Evidence from the Changing News Ecosystem." *Digital Journalism* 2 (3): 273–283.

including memberships, paywalls, and subscriptions.² These business models have gained popularity because they offer a more stable source of income while also offering viewers exclusive content. However, while some of these news outlets have been successful in these new subscription models, many consumers are unwilling to pay for news, leading to financial instability for the news entities. Previously, news producers were in charge of the news ecosystem, but today digital platforms and consumers operate as news distributors, transforming the conventional practice of newsmakers. The platformisation of news has led to the decline of advertising revenue and the creation of a competitive environment, thus leading to downsizing and reduction of newsrooms and mass layoffs.

The COVID 19 crisis has also created a precarious job situation for many journalists around the world. In South Africa the pre-existing and long-term structural decline in print media was accelerated by the pandemic, which had a detrimental impact on the already fragile operations.³ The *South African Media Barometer* report (2021) outlines the detrimental effect of COVID 19 on the media. The pandemic resulted in significant decreases in both circulation and advertising, which in turn led to the closure of news outlets, job losses, and pay cutbacks. Caxton & CTP Publishers & Printers discontinued its magazine division, which had an impact on at least ten magazines. Some of these publications, which have been in circulation for decades, are well-known in the country.⁴ Numerous closures and restructurings were also announced by Media24 in its newspaper and magazine portfolio, affecting close to 1000 staff members. The *Sunday Sun* and *Drum* magazine, among others, discontinued their print editions and transitioned to an online platform. The print edition of the popular tabloid *Daily Sun* was reduced to four provinces: Gauteng, Limpopo, Northwest, and Mpumalanga. Associated Media Publishing (AMP), a prominent independent media organization in South Africa, irrevocably ceased operations. The *Business Insider South Africa* closed in 2023 after five years of operating, although its staff were reallocated into its parent organisation.⁵ In June 2024, it was reported that Media24 announced the upcoming closure of the print versions of *City Press*, *Daily Sun*, *Rapport* and *Beeld* in October 2024.⁶

The left-leaning news outlet *New Frame* also closed in 2023, leaving many journalists out in the cold. Additionally, the pandemic had a significant impact on the small independent newspaper sector. Job losses were also experienced in the broadcasting sector. The SABC implemented

² See State of the Newsroom (2018): Structured and Unstructured by Allan Finlay. Retrieved at https://journalism.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/State-of-the-Newsroom-report-2018_updated-20190709.pdf, accessed 2 June 2024

³ Rumney, R. (2022) The State of the Media two years after the pandemic-induced media crisis – an update to SANEF's 2020 Covid-19 interim report and some cross-cutting issues. Presented at the Sanef AGM in June 2022.

⁴ Also see Alan Finley "Newsroom in Review", in *State of the Newsroom 2020*. University of Witwatersrand.

⁵ <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2023/south-africa>

⁶ Neesa Moodley (13 June 2024) Media24 to phase out City Press, Beeld, Daily Sun and Rapport newspapers, say reports. The Daily Maverick, retrieved at <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2024-06-13-media24-to-phase-out-city-press-beeld-daily-sun-and-rapport-newspapers-say-reports/> accessed 24 June 2024

organizational restructuring as part of its turnaround strategy, which resulted in the termination of 621 positions.⁷

There is also an increasing trend among newsrooms to reduce salaries in order to preserve profitability. For example, in March 2023, Independent Media, the proprietors of numerous prominent national newspapers and the well-known IOL website, informed their employees that they would only receive 75% of their salary. The company cited "declining revenues and increasing cost structures" as the reason for this decision.⁸

3.3 Freelance journalism in the gig economy: some reflections

Journalists on the shop floor have borne the brunt of these crises. This has resulted in an expanded sector of freelance journalists and writers, in addition to journalists who chose to work as freelance journalists. For thousands of journalists being churned out from Journalism Schools, job stability has become elusive. Many media organizations now rely on freelance journalists and short-term contracts rather than full-time staff, offering less job security and fewer benefits. The advent of artificial intelligence in newsrooms for tasks like reporting on financial results or sports scores and content has reduced the need for entry-level journalists. Freelance journalism labour in South Africa and elsewhere has been affected by the gig work culture, characterised by short-term, flexible jobs often facilitated through digital platforms. Although the gig work culture has immense opportunities, it also leads to greater labour precarity, risk and poor working conditions.⁹ Freelance journalism can be reflected upon, as part of emerging gig labour cultures. For a start, freelance journalism is now characterised by increased casualisation and informalisation of the profession. Issues of flexibility have always been part of freelance journalism. However, digital platforms have added to this flexibility in the sense that journalists can now write for several news outlets, at their own pace, and perhaps, for different rates. This can help freelancers by making their work more adaptable and more flexible to work that ever. But there are also several drawbacks, and these include having no paid holiday or sick leave, fluctuating wages, stress, and loneliness. In economies of the global south, Africa in particular, where jobs are scarce, freelancing can present even more serious challenges.

⁷ Public Media Alliance (2021) SABC completes retrenchment process and transitions to new structure. Retrieved at publicmediaalliance.org/sabc-completes-retrenchment-process-and-transitions-to-new-structure/#:~:text=The%20South%20African%20public%20broadcaster,-for-purpose%20structure., accessed on 11 June 2024

⁸ News24 "Iqbal Survé's Independent Media unable to pay full salaries as shareholders cut purse strings", retrieved at <https://www.news24.com/fin24/companies/iqbal-surves-independent-media-unable-to-pay-full-salaries-as-shareholders-cut-purse-strings-20230325>, accessed 2 June 2024

⁹ D Moyo and A Munoriyarwa (2024) Gig Labour and the Future of Freelance Journalism in South Africa and Zimbabwe. In Edited by Hopeton S Dunn, Massimo Ragnedda, Maria Laura Ruii and Laura Robinson (eds) *The Palgrave Handbook of Everyday Digital Life*. Springer

4. Approaches & Methodology

The methodology for this assessment is a blend of qualitative approaches - key informant interviews, document analysis and desk-based research.

4.1 Document analysis and desk-based research

The research used document analysis and desk-based research to develop a well-rounded understanding of the subject matter, drawing on both specific insights relating to South Africa and the broader context. Sources included documents on the state of media and newsrooms in South Africa and internationally, the evolving media industry, the nature of freelance journalism, and related academic literature.

4.2 Interviews and sampling

The interview respondents included freelance journalists, photographers, and former journalists who have transitioned into corporate writing and editors from major media outlets. Freelance journalists' participants were identified using a combination of purposive sampling and snowball sampling. Initially, snowball sampling, where participants refer to others, was used to find participants from different regions of the country. Additionally, SANEF posted a recruitment advertisement on their website, and SAFREA referred a few journalists to the research team. SANEF also provided the researchers a list of possible editors to interview. (see *interview guide as Appendix A*).

Despite the researchers' efforts to engage as many freelance journalists as possible through these various approaches, they were only able to interview 27 freelance journalists. Additionally, only 5 editors were interviewed (see *Appendix B list of participants interviewed (anonymised)*). Although the views in this report cannot be generalized to the broader sector of freelance journalism and editors, they do provide important insights and a robust evidence base into the state of freelance journalism in the country. Given the lack of similar research on this topic, this report is pioneering in exploring the state of freelance journalism in South Africa, making its insights valuable.

4.3 Data analysis and interpretation

The transcribed interviews were triangulated with the results from document analysis and desk research. The research utilised thematic analysis to identify themes, statements, and meanings from the interview transcripts and the examined documents. The thematic analysis moved beyond simple descriptions, exploring the deeper meanings expressed by respondents about freelance journalism in South Africa. The report highlights the importance of amplifying the voices of the freelance journalists interviewed, using numerous quotes from them to convey their

lived experiences. This approach allows readers to gain a deeper insight into the realities faced by freelance journalists. Accordingly, the qualitative findings are paired with a discussion that interprets and provides context to the respondents' viewpoints. The perspectives of editors are crucial in understanding the complex dynamics that shape the work environment in newsrooms, particularly concerning freelance journalists. Editors' insights provide valuable context to the challenges that newsrooms face, which, in turn, affect freelance journalists.

5. Presentation of Findings

This section discusses the study's findings which are structured into 8 thematic areas as follows:

- Freelance journalism in South Africa
- Working conditions
- Relationship with mainstream media
- Associational life
- Safety and wellbeing
- Training & Skills building
- Technology and Generative AI
- The future of freelance journalism

The discussion of these themes is succeeded by a concluding analysis of the findings and their implications, along with a series of recommendations. The findings predominantly depict a bleak and challenging situation for freelance journalism. It is important to stress that this report focuses on and prioritises the perspectives of freelance journalists, as it seeks to convey their experiences. While the editors interviewed acknowledged the many difficulties freelance journalists face in the country, they also underscored the broader crisis affecting the media industry, both in South Africa and worldwide. The editors recognized the value in providing freelancers a platform to voice their concerns.

5.1 Freelance Journalism in South Africa

As stated earlier, In South Africa, freelance journalism is not a recent phenomenon. Historically, the South African media sector has mostly relied on the contributions of freelancers. Nevertheless, due to the increasing digitization and financial challenges experienced by the mainstream media in recent years, several journalists have been compelled to work as freelancers, frequently against their will. During interviews, it was discovered that most of the respondents were compelled to become freelancers due to external factors beyond their control.

It is also crucial to recognize that, due to South Africa's history and the socio-economic landscape following apartheid, freelance journalism is influenced by factors such as race, class, and gender. Based on interviews and secondary research, freelance journalists can be categorized into four distinct groups:

Category 1	Category 2	Category 3	Category 4
Journalists who worked in the newsrooms into the early years after the end of apartheid and over the years decided to leave to freelance;	Journalists who have been retrenched in the last decade or so.	Entry level journalists emerging from colleges and universities and are not being absorbed in the newsrooms.	Freelancers working for community or local media.

The *first category* consists of seasoned journalists, typically white and male, who have established successful freelance careers in both mainstream media and the corporate sector. Many of them have been able to utilize their pensions to start freelancing writing and editing businesses. The *second and third category* includes a diverse group of journalists—ranging from experienced professionals to mid-career and entry-level individuals—who have been laid off from newsrooms across the media landscape. The fortunes of these journalists vary. More experienced journalists have been able to transition into the corporate sector while continuing to write for mainstream media both within and outside South Africa. In contrast, less experienced and entry-level journalists are facing difficulties. Additionally, young journalist graduates are struggling to secure positions in newsrooms and are grappling with their professional identity. The savvier individuals have successfully built careers as content creators across various social media platforms. The fourth category group consists of freelance journalists employed by the community and local media sector. The state of local and community journalism in South Africa is not well researched, resulting in limited awareness of journalists' working conditions.

The experiences, perspectives, and expectations of journalists in these four categories vary, making an intersectional approach essential for future research in this area. Significant differences in both attitudes and practices were observed between established freelance journalists and newcomers to the field.

5.1.1 Professional identity

The journalists interviewed were diverse in the work they did, prompting the researchers to explore how these freelancers define themselves based on the nature of their work. In the digital era, journalistic identity has significantly evolved, resulting in a blurred line between traditional journalism and content creation. The research found that many freelance journalists frequently wear numerous hats, serving as content creators, social media managers, and brand strategists in addition to being journalists. Many freelancers interviewed said that they represent themselves as writers to broaden the range of job opportunities available. Freelancers also find it increasingly

difficult to earn enough from doing journalism alone and take on secondary jobs or assignments, including in public relations.

The confluence of responsibilities has the potential to erode journalism's conventional boundaries. It also leads to what has been termed 'interrole conflict', which occurs when the demands and expectations associated with different roles in a person's life are incompatible or clash.¹⁰ Some researchers say that freelancers may face interrole conflict when they must do other non-journalism media work. A cognitive dissonance arises from the freelancer's attempt to balance their two distinct responsibilities as an entrepreneur and a journalist. The two roles are in a state of opposition because of this, leading to a crisis of professional identity. Two respondents put it like this:

I started working for a private entity to increase my income. I don't find the job fulfilling, but it pays well. I would love to go back to mainstream media if I found a job that paid well as this company I am working for (Writer & editor, Johannesburg).

Being a freelancer means freedom to take other writing jobs that pay better, but it is not always easy balancing the two. You are still attached to your calling as a journalist but freelancing as a journalist does not pay well (Writer and media entrepreneur, Johannesburg).

A senior news editor at the public broadcaster stated that this dual role of freelance journalists can also be detrimental to the identity of the news media outlet. He said:

One drawback of working with freelancers is that they often work for multiple news media outlets and other companies, which can stretch their time and make them less committed to your organisation. Permanent staff, on the other hand, are well-versed in the company's guidelines and understand that they cannot engage in PR or promote commercial or political interests. With freelancers, there are periods when they aren't working for you, and during those times, you have no control over their actions. They might be reading the news one moment and promoting a supermarket brand the next. This can confuse the audience, who may not realise that the person is a contractor rather than a permanent employee (Senior news editor, public broadcaster).

The editor went on to state that broadcaster may lose some control over journalistic integrity, as freelancers might face pressure to cater to external clients or personal interests, potentially diluting the unique voice or stance of the broadcaster. This situation can blur the line between independent journalism and other forms of content creation, further undermining the media entity identity.

5.1.2 Motivation for freelancing in the journalism space

As stated in section 3.3., the world of work is fast changing, especially post COVID-19 leading to the rise of what has been termed 'atypical labour', which refers to employment arrangements

¹⁰ Obermaier, M., & Koch, T. (2015). Mind the gap: Consequences of inter-role conflicts of freelance journalists with secondary employment in the field of public relations. *Journalism*, 16, 615–629

that deviate from the standard full-time, permanent jobs with fixed hours.¹¹ Journalists are increasingly becoming members of the freelance workforce, which is a subcategory of atypical workers. Freelancing in the journalism space offers a variety of motivations for individuals seeking a dynamic and fulfilling career. There are many reasons why many journalists choose to freelance such as flexibility, independence, professional growth, opportunity for creativity and global reach. There are geographical, financial and newsrooms conditions that have driven most journalists to be freelancers. The report will start with the newsroom conditions that have driven uptake to freelancing.

The pandemic has exacerbated newsroom layoffs and intensified the ongoing crisis in mainstream media, dashing hopes of many journalists returning to full-time journalism. However, the situation has been even more dire for community newsrooms, struggling long before the pandemic hit. One community newspaper respondent said,

Some of us were laid off before the pandemic. Our newsrooms had always survived on the bare minimum... Soon, we became the victims. and we started freelancing for them as well. It was hard to change from being full-time to freelance...and for some of us our packages were not large enough to venture into some form of media entrepreneurship (Community media journalist, Mpumalanga)

In addition to lay-offs, some mainstream newsrooms ceased recruiting journalists some time ago. As a result, graduating journalists have not been able to find positions in newsrooms, as hiring has largely been frozen. One respondent said,

When we applied for internship at...after my graduation at... there were more than 5 000 applicants for not more than 30 positions...this underlines how the crisis of newsroom recruitment has shaped the uptake of freelance journalists... you could imagine that all these people have not been absorbed in newsrooms over the years...and they keep competing for the few jobs that newsrooms have been able to sustain over these years (Print media journalist, Pretoria)

A senior editor painted a picture where the mainstream media is reluctant to hire new staff on a permanent basis. This stems from various industry trends and financial pressures. The economic challenge facing the media industry has led many outlets to prioritise flexible hiring models, such as contracting, freelancing, or part-time roles, rather than committing to the long-term costs associated with full-time employees, such as salaries, benefits, and pensions.

Newsrooms are increasingly constrained. In fact, many are now operating with half the staff they had five or ten years ago yet expected to maintain or even increase output. privately owned media specifically, aim to keep employee costs low to ensure their financial statements look appealing. The leaner the workforce, the more attractive the business becomes to potential buyers, as it appears more marketable or sellable. As a result, management is often reluctant to expand staff,

¹¹ Deuze, M., and L. Fortunati. 2011. "Atypical Newswork, Atypical Media Management." In *Managing Media Work*, edited by M. Deuze, 111–120. London, SAGE.

viewing any increase as a potential liability. Instead, they prioritise trimming the workforce to present a more streamlined operation for future sales or investment (Editor at Large, private broadcasting company).

The rise of freelancing in South Africa can thus be attributed to the prolonged periods of non-recruitment of journalists, which may have largely gone unnoticed. As newsrooms continue to refrain from hiring, they increasingly contribute to the growth of freelance culture and practices. There are some freelance journalists who joined the profession because of geography. Several freelancers noted that they live in areas where, as one noted,

You cannot apply for jobs consistently...it is a far-flung rural area... applying for a job is very hard...I started applying when I graduated...but I realised that I was not consistent enough because of connection issues and access to data... I then decided to take freelancing as a pastime. Here I am, I have cloaked many years of freelancing. (Multimedia journalist, Durban)

This is not one isolated incident. Several other journalists noted that home areas,

Make it impossible to keep applying for full-time journalism jobs. You end up thinking, why don't I write from here. I have been doing that for newspapers that cannot reach this place. It is even very lucrative when there are events happening around... you can pitch for many newsrooms... and you can also start developing networks and connections... (Print media journalist, Giyani).

Respondents were asked how long they had been working as journalists. They were then asked how long they'd been working as freelancers. The inquiry aimed to determine whether respondents were freelancers by choice or necessity. In this research, it was found that many of the respondents interviewed were forced into freelance journalism, with some noting that their freelance colleagues faced similar circumstances. This is a crucial point because it indicates that many freelance journalists ended up in their roles involuntarily. Consequently, they often lack the proper strategies and negotiating power needed to thrive in the media industry.

"It was not by choice. I was retrenched in Oct 2017. I went straight into freelancing. I now have a company involved in all forms of writing: editing, copyediting, writing for both academic and commercial companies" (Writer and media entrepreneur, Johannesburg).

"I was retrenched. This was not my choice. I was one of the top financial journalists and editors, but I was let go." (Freelance Sub editor, Johannesburg).

"I was retrenched. I would return to the mainstream media that paid me well because I believe I deserve it. However, I've grown accustomed to the flexibility that freelancing offers, which is the main, if not the only, advantage of freelancing." (Writer, editor and, media entrepreneur, Johannesburg).

But for some few journalists, the conditions inside the mainstream media and the reality of the media industry made them leave full-time employment and become freelance journalists.

Due to the uncertainties happening in the private television industry with all the layoffs that started in 2016 made me leave and become a freelance (Broadcast and multimedia journalist, Johannesburg).

No amount of money could make me sacrifice my peace of mind. I would never take a full-time job in this industry; it's awful. I decided to leave due to the toxic nature of the sector and the uncertainty of the industry (Broadcast producer, Johannesburg).

No. I will not go back to mainstream media. I once worked there and it's uncertain with all the changes taking place. I would rather do something else (Print media journalist, Durban).

The problem with the SA journalism sector is that globally the industry is changing at a rapid pace. Because the people sitting at the top of these media houses resist to pay attention to these changes, when the changes catch up with them and they realise what is happening, what tends to happen is that there is a great instability and uncertainty in the sector. So, signing a permanent contract puts you in a dangerous condition when you can be retrenched at any time. It becomes incredibly difficult to gauge whether you will be in employment 3 months from now. It's safer to be a freelancer. Freelancing gives you control. I might not be able to have a stable salary at the end of the month, but I am able to plan my life (Multimedia journalist, Johannesburg).

These views point to the negative working environment in some newsrooms and the uncertainty of the media industry. As stated earlier, the media industry is undergoing rapid changes, leading to instability that fosters a sense of uncertainty among media professionals. This may mean that the uncertainty being faced by freelance journalists may also be felt by journalists in full time employment in the mainstream media.

Even some editors within mainstream media have started noticing that some journalists now prefer working as freelancers because of the working conditions in the mainstream. However, the number of freelancers who are not willing to take a permanent post is, according to freelance journalists, still very low. One senior news editor at a mainstream new organisation said,

I always ask freelancers if they would want to take a permanent post. In few instances, some freelancers have expressed satisfaction in their current status as freelancers. I think this has to do with the freedom that they enjoy and their ability to take several gigs at the same time, and therefore make money. But the majority want to join the mainstream. (Senior Deputy news editor, print/online media).

In the broadcasting sector, particularly in the technical department, independent contractors often prefer freelancing as it allows them to work for multiple broadcasting stations. One Senior news editor at the public broadcaster had this to say:

Many freelance journalists in the broadcast sector prefer not to take full-time positions because they value the flexibility of working for multiple entities. For example, a technical director might work the morning show from 4 am to 9 am at one station, and then head to another television

station by noon to produce another show. In my experience, despite having 130 vacancies at some point, it was rare for freelancers to apply for permanent roles. The reasons are clear: full-time positions are less flexible, and come with deductions for pensions and other benefits, which freelancers typically prefer to avoid. I once tried to offer a permanent position to a technical director who was working with us, but he declined because he earned significantly more as an independent contractor. Tragically, he later died in an accident. At his funeral, his family blamed me for not providing benefits like a funeral policy, but they didn't understand that it was his choice to work as a freelancer (Senior news editor, public broadcasting)

This point was buttressed by three independent contractors working for broadcasting stations interviewed for this report. Being independent allows them the flexibility to offer their specialised skills to multiple broadcasting stations, rather than being tied to one employer. They manage their own schedules, select the projects that interest them most, and often take on more diverse and challenging assignments.

5.2 “You are at the mercy of the next gig”- Working conditions of freelance journalists

Freelance journalists stated that they face numerous challenges that make their working conditions difficult. With many journalists entering the freelance space, the freelance market is becoming highly competitive. In addition, freelance journalists juggle multiple jobs and do self-promotion, administrative work, and budget planning on top of their primary work of being a journalist. Almost all the freelancers interviewed expressed that they face many challenges, and this includes those freelancers who are in entrepreneurship. The following are some of the key working challenges that they face.

5.2.1 Low Pay Rates

Many respondents noted that rates have remained stagnant for years. Freelance rates in journalism can be a minefield, especially for younger or inexperienced journalists who are uncertain about how to set their prices. This uncertainty often leads to undercharging and undervaluing their work, resulting in financial disadvantage. Respondents praised SAFREA for helping freelance journalists with up-to-date information on rates. SAFREA provides benchmark rates used by freelancers across different media sectors to help content creators and other freelance service providers establish fair and realistic pricing for their work. Generally, respondents agreed that the rate for freelancing in the mainstream media are very low and this is the reason why many of the seasoned freelance journalists have crossed over into the corporate world. The respondents also stated that rates have not gone up in a very long time.

“The rates are fairly low, making it difficult to gauge what they should be due to the scarcity of opportunities. X (one of the Big Four) is offering rates 30% below the industry standard for editing and sub-editing. However, freelancing has its perks: you get to be your own boss, avoid office politics, and bypass corporate culture” (Freelance Sub-editor, Johannesburg).

“The rates for freelance journalists are low. The freelancing landscape has seen significant changes over the years, and many of us have noticed shifts in the industry that impact our earnings. Although we are passionate about journalism, we are forced to do work elsewhere, even though most of it is unfulfilling” (Writer & Copy writer, Johannesburg)

Rates are stagnant since I joined. But sometimes in terms of reward, it is better than the peanuts some journalists get in the fulltime mainstream (Photographer, Johannesburg)

The rates in the industry are too low, and the tax cut for freelancers is quite hefty at 25%. For instance, if a photographer is commissioned for R10,000 and 25% is deducted, how much would they have left? (Broadcast journalist, Johannesburg).

Being a freelancer is flexible, but it pays less especially if you do not put a huge amount of effort over a month. Rates are very low, so you need a lot of stories in order to have a reasonable amount of money at the end of the day... Sometimes you do not get a story accepted over a period of time or a low number of your stories are taken up which means you have little to cash in on (Print media journalist, Giyani).

Freelance rates have not gone up for some time. This speaks to an industry-wide problem of bargaining for freelancers. One freelancer noted that,

In 2009 X was paying R3 per word. I worked for them from 2019 as a freelancer. That rate has not changed up until today. I still get the same rate and we are talking of a rate that was in place 15 years ago. There are very few newsrooms that are willing to pay the SAFREA-negotiated rate...most of them take us for granted...and they pay whatever they want to pay...whenever they want to do it (Photographer, Johannesburg).

It's hard. The income fluctuates. It is not stable. The financial benefits are not great, especially when you work for mainstream media. Freelance journalists don't get paid well. R1200 per shift when I sub-edited for X (One of the Big Four) a few years ago. The rates have dropped. There is a bleeding of talent from X. (Sub-editor and independent writer, Cape Town).

Even with low rates, payment issues persist. Many freelancers have noted that these already low rates are often not paid on time. Many noted that these delayed payments make it difficult for freelancers to manage their personal and professional expenses. Hence, this impact on their ability to take on more work since they need to cover travel and other expenses. One respondent noted,

You know sometimes you can go for months without receiving your money for the other previous stories.... International news organisations do pay much earlier (and much better) than our local newsrooms...`you find it hard to chase the next stories when you have not been paid for the others...but at the same time, you cannot stop...because ...you need the money (Print media journalist, Pretoria)

As I said above. We are not accepted as journalists: we are paid late: We are not even invited to newsroom functions even for papers we have written a lot for (Print media journalist, Giyani).

Negotiating for rates within newsrooms also seems to be a challenge as noted below:

The biggest challenge of being a freelancer is negotiating your rates. The media houses want you to do the best job, but when it comes to payment, the media house has the ability to determine whatever rate they want to give and mess up your life. It's always a problem because we don't know what rate people are charging. The company never discloses their rate card. You only find out when you have already signed the rate. After the struggle of negotiating your rate, you end up taking whatever they are offering you because you need to eat. I once worked for a broadcast station where I discovered that the rate they gave had been undercut by 40% (Broadcast producer, Johannesburg).

SAFREA admitted that rates in the industry are low, and this needs attention.

Yes, rates paid to journalists are generally low. As you see it, each freelancer negotiates their own rates. We have not yet reached a level where we can bargain for the majority of the journalists. These are some of the issues we need to tackle to make SAFREA appeal as an umbrella board to most, if not all freelancers (Chairperson of SAFREA).

A senior editor with extensive experience in both leading print and broadcast media companies confirmed that payment rates have remained consistently low over the years. He recalled that when he was a young man, his father mentioned in 1999 that a family friend, who worked as a freelance reporter for a local newspaper, was earning R1 per word. He further said:

So one can write a 300 word article and get 300 rands. And at that time, I mean, I was very, always very good with language and literature. So I just reasoned the fact that I can just write and paid 300 rand, even not anywhere close to whatever allowance I would ever receive. Yes. I took a decision there and there that I'm going to be a journalist. To be paid just to do what I do anyway and love. I told myself this has got money, my God. And then that was it...Fast forward to 2016, years later, when I had climbed the ranks and become editor-in-chief. I saw a freelancer's claim for just R1 per word—the same rate that was paid years back in 1999. It was shocking and honestly, quite appalling. But yes, it was just ridiculous. And I do believe that there are still some places who pay such ridiculous rates even now. As an editor, I wanted to change that, but my hands were tied. The reality is, after 2012 or 2013, with digitization and declining revenues, no editor could grow revenue. All you could do was try to stop the decline. Raising freelance rates significantly would have meant breaking the budget, risking my job. The system was flawed, but there was little I could do to fix it. The least I could do was to at least increase some rates up to two rand a word, and there were people I was paying three rand. But the reality is that it was a very careful juggling act where I had to move money from different budget line items to try and make that happen (Editor at Large, private broadcasting company).

Another editor mentioned that the low rates paid by the media are not intentional but are a consequence of the financial constraints faced by the media industry.

We accept that the rate we pay is minimal. But the reality is that newsroom budgets have been cut drastically due to dropping revenues. At times we are simply not able to increase the amounts. I emphasise - this is the economic reality of newsrooms. It is not a scheme to exploit freelancers... I think we need to develop a model where freelancers think harder about doing content as well as also to assist to generate revenues. This would allow us to partner on a

revenue split model, rather than the traditional, pay per word model. (Chief in Editor, print media).

Raising rates for freelance journalists is indeed a crucial step toward ensuring they are fairly compensated for their work. However, raising rates can also have unintended consequences that may jeopardize these very journalists. Media outlets, especially smaller ones with tight budgets, may reduce the number of stories they commission or turn to AI-generated content. This could result in fewer opportunities for freelance journalists, particularly for those just starting their careers or those who cover niche topics that might not be seen as high priority by publications. One editor stated

Something will have to give, because if we agree to a basic norm or a basic standard to say, no one should be paid, the base is R2.50 per word, depending on experience and it's scalable and it's all negotiated by newsroom. That's a good guide to start with. But will it lead to more freelancers getting more work? I don't know. Because others would say, no, no, don't use more freelancers now because it's becoming more expensive (Editor at Large, private broadcasting company)

These points are crucial as they highlight that the low rates paid to freelance journalists are part of broader media sustainability challenges affecting the entire sector. While editors recognize that the current rates are insufficient to sustain a livelihood, they emphasize the need for collective efforts to support journalism through various funding initiatives. The well-being of freelance journalists is closely linked to the overall survival of the media industry, and solutions for media sustainability and viability must encompass the entire journalism sector.

5.2.2 Financial Instability and Uncertainty

Freelance journalists often face financial instability due to the nature of their work, which can be sporadic and unpredictable. Many of the respondent stated that this financial instability can lead to significant stress and uncertainty about their career.

“The problem with a freelance contract is that its call based. So, there is uncertainty as one is not aware when they would be called. You don't know how much you will make as sometimes you are paid less and sometimes more. It makes planning difficult... payments are so unpredictable. It's a gig profession. You are at the mercy of the next gig. The unpredictability for me makes it very uncomfortable. (Broadcast journalist, Johannesburg).

Facing financial pressure and uncertainty about when my next paycheck will arrive has been a major challenge for me this year. The erratic nature of my earnings, which come in small amounts, has exacerbated the situation. Even where I have negotiated slight increases, earning per story - which is how I tend to charge, rather than per word if I can choose - is a nightmare. To make a decent monthly income, I need to complete an overwhelming number of stories. Despite always working, there's a significant disconnect between my efforts and my earnings, leaving me perpetually trying to catch up financially. (Freelance Sub-Editor and Writer, Johannesburg).

Many respondents found “slow payments” challenging. Payments often come very late, requiring extensive back and forth to chase them down. However, more established media houses generally pay on time.

“When I worked for X (one of the newspapers from the Big Four), it was like a dream come true. Everything was great, and they always paid on time. However, that work is becoming scarce. Mainstream media is struggling financially and having difficulty breaking even. There are fewer opportunities for freelance work. Finding steady work has become challenging, with contracts being rare and financial benefits minimal.” (Print media journalist, editor and ghost writer, Durban).

“The basic stories pay very little. And they're quite short, but that doesn't mean there is little work. Payment doesn't always come on time. There are little rewards because you are in charge of your overheads, medical aid etc. Yes, there are contracts with the big media houses if you are on retainer, but many don't give contracts.” (Writer and media entrepreneur, Johannesburg)

According to one respondent, the more experienced a journalist is, the quicker the media house is likely to pay them and respect them

“I have had good relations with mainstream media because I am aggressive and demand my rights. I don't settle for less. Because I have my own company, I am in a better position to negotiate. I have a lawyer. (Writer and media entrepreneur, Johannesburg).

The only power I have as a freelancer is saying no to extra shifts that come at short notice. Because I am good at my job and have years of experience, I say no and stand my ground. I have put strong boundaries. I refuse to be exploited. You have to be strong in this industry. You either sink or swim. It's one of the two (Broadcast producer, Johannesburg).

Some editors share this perspective, acknowledging that freelancers frequently experience delays in receiving payment, and that these delays can significantly disadvantage freelancers when their payments arrive late. One editor implored, “It is important that whoever employs freelancers should pay them timeously, pay them properly, and decently...by not doing this, newsroom will end up creating problems for freelancers including welfare issues...” (Senior news editor, print media). According to the editors, delayed payments severely disrupt the steady flow of news from freelancers, leaving them financially strained and unable to work efficiently.

On the issue of the welfare of freelance journalist, one editor lamented at the financial challenges and instability facing freelance journalists, linked to the issue of low rates discussed above

If you're paying somebody 100 a word and they write you four articles, they go and research, they take taxes, what is the cost of transport? What is the cost of data? You keep on spending. A freelancer spends whole day to cover a protest and they write you 500 words, and all they get is 500 rands. That's eight hours. Divide that 500 rands by eight hours. (Editor at large, private broadcasting company).

The editor went on to say that this situation can lead to burnout and hinder the ability of freelance journalists to produce high-quality, in-depth journalism. Addressing this issue requires both advocacy for fair compensation and systemic changes in how media outlets value and remunerate freelance work.

One editor emphasised the need to come up with a new model to compensate freelance journalists

We should develop a model that encourages freelancers to focus more on creating high-quality content while also helping them generate revenue. This approach would enable us to collaborate through a revenue-sharing model, rather than the traditional pay-per-word model (Editor-in-Chief, print media).

This idea for a new model of working with freelancers, based on a revenue split rather than a traditional pay-per-word system, is quite innovative. It encourages freelancers to invest more thought and effort into creating content that not only meets quality standards but also has the potential to generate long-term revenue.

5.2.3 Issue of contracts

The lack of contracts for freelance journalists causes several challenges and vulnerabilities, including the previously noted financial instability and uncertainty. Contracts generally include payment conditions such as rates, deadlines, and late payment penalties. In the absence of such agreements, freelancers have less negotiating power to assure timely and full remuneration for their work. There are also intellectual property issues. Contracts frequently define who owns the rights to the work produced. Without such agreements, there may be disagreements over the ownership and usage rights of articles, images, and other journalistic content. This lack of clarity might result in the unlawful use or distribution of a journalist's work.

Many of the interviewed participants stated that they don't have contracts with the media houses they are attached to.

Our relationship with media houses is based on a very informal arrangement. There are no contracts or agreements with them. This places us in a vulnerable position (Print media journalist, Giyani).

The unpredictability of freelancing for me makes it very uncomfortable. The inconsistency of the income. There are also many risks. You are exposed. There is no medical aid, no pension (Broadcast television, Johannesburg).

We typically don't receive contracts; we just work. If you insist on having one, you might not get hired by some newsrooms, as they may think you're planning to sue them later or they're simply not comfortable with contracts, but of course there are other newsrooms where signing a contract is standard practice (Print media journalist, Durban).

As self-employed workers, freelance journalists are not eligible for benefits packages provided by the media houses they work for. They are required to provide their own medical aid and other

benefits, if they are financially capable. Additionally, they are not entitled to sick leave, annual holiday leave, maternity leave, and a pension plan.

Another group of freelance journalists, especially those who work for broadcast stations, operate on a fixed or ad-hoc contracts determined by the stations.

An editor clarified that it is not accurate to say they don't provide contracts for freelance journalists. They explained that, in their newsroom, the availability of contracts depends on the type of collaboration with the freelancers.

Our work with freelancers takes various forms. Some freelancers operate under formal agreements, which clearly define the roles and responsibilities of both parties, including the rates. These agreements also state that freelancers are free to work for other organisations concurrently. Additionally, we work with freelancers who submit their work to us on a proposal basis or those whose services we commission. These latter two arrangements are more ad hoc in nature (Editor-in-Chief, print media).

The issue of contracts is quite complex, as it appears that some newsrooms do not offer contracts for certain categories of freelance journalists, while others place a strong emphasis on providing contracts. This situation has been worsened by the fact that some of the most established news organisations make little use of freelancers. Two mainstream news organisations' editors admitted thus,

“We only make use of freelancers in exceptional circumstances. The reason is that we are shifting our business model to focus more on skilling our permanent staff to avoid the need for freelancers, which saves us money...” (Senior Deputy News Editor, print/online media)

Another editor also added the same, noting thus,

“Freelancers are no longer a big component of our news production model. We only schedule them when they plug a hole somewhere in the news production process...” (Managing News Editor, private broadcaster).

This means that mainstream media is slowly reducing the use of freelancers. As they are increasingly overlooked, concerns about their contracts fade from the priorities of news organizations. Consequently, freelancers risk becoming invisible in the news production process, which could negatively impact their welfare as they are pushed down the hierarchy and deemed less important. Another editor admitted that

There are very few scheduled times that they can use freelancers, and the most visible policy around hiring freelancers is the number of times this can be done...of course I think we pay them a fair remuneration, but we only focus on how many times we are allowed to use them per set period (Managing News Editor, private broadcaster).

Lack of clear contracts also lead to the exploitation of freelance journalists as pointed out by two senior news editors.

There is also the issue of the overworking of freelancers by newsrooms. During my time as an editor at X, one of the Big 4 print media companies, we had a significant number of freelancers. Due to staff shortages or cost-saving measures, there was a tendency to overburden these freelancers, sometimes contracting them for more than 12 hours a day. This situation essentially made them full-time employees, but without the corresponding benefits. When it came time to terminate their contracts, some freelancers would take legal action, arguing that they had been working as permanent employees. ... when freelancers agree to a contract, it's important they fully understand the terms to which they are committing. They should be mindful not to allow themselves to be exploited (Senior news editor, public broadcaster)

Some freelance journalists become so essential that they are practically treated as permanent staff. They become indispensable, needed daily. There are also freelancers who are regularly required for every weekend on top of weekdays assignments, which creates a setup where you have your core weekday staff and a separate team for the weekends. These freelancers are often overworked and burdened with minimal benefits. From a legal standpoint, they could potentially have a valid claim to permanent employment due to the nature of their continuous work (Editor at Large, private broadcasting company).

The editors acknowledged that the exploitation of freelance journalists is a growing concern in the media industry, especially in the context of an increasingly precarious work environment and there is a need for a broader discussion on this issue.

5.2.4 Resource Constraints

Many freelance journalists lack resources and infrastructure support available in newsrooms. This includes access to updated software, latest computer equipment, and sometimes even basic office amenities like reliable internet connections. Managing data and communication costs can be a burden for freelancers, particularly when dealing with large volumes of information or needing to communicate securely over long distances. These expenses can quickly add up and strain limited budgets.

Because I have a business, I need to have resources. There are certain requirements. So, one day last year, my computer stopped working properly. I went and bought a laptop that same day because I can't do without it. Luckily, I had the money. I will beg borrow steal the money to go get another laptop. I have a paid Otter & Zoom account. I also have a lot of newspaper subscriptions. Only one local. And I'm convinced that I write better because I read these overseas publications. (Writer and media entrepreneur Johannesburg).

"There are many constraints. Technology is moving fast – technology and resources become outdated. It is difficult for us to buy new cameras, update our software, to learn new skills etc." (Sub-editor and independent writer, Cape Town).

For freelance who want to work on investigative stories, lack of resources can hinder their work. Investigative journalism often requires substantial resources for research, fact-checking, and legal verification. Respondents in this field stated that they lack the financial backing to pursue in-depth investigations. In addition, due to the high risk of this form of journalism, they also lack legal

support. Many of the freelance journalists interviewed stated this lack of legal support from the mainstream media they work for.

I was once harassed, and my family threatened. I did not get any support from the media organisations I freelanced for then. I only help form my neighbours and friends. They took my family in. Even the paper that had published the story that created trouble for me, never asked what was going on despite my numerous communications with them... (Print media journalist, Mpumalanga).

For freelance photojournalists, access to state-of-the-art cameras also remain a major challenge. Those in the mainstream, are often provided with state-of-the-art cameras and everything else they need. Freelancers often struggle acquiring the latest technologies. One freelance photojournalist said,

I don't remember the last time I bought a camera...I want it, but I cannot afford it. The rates are low...I do freelance photo for many news organisations, but still, the rates are small. They will never allow me to self-sustain and acquire the new cameras that I want. Yet, you know the irony is that the between camera you have, the better photos you can take, and then the better the rate you can negotiate for your photos (Male, photojournalist, Durban).

To do my job well, I need latest technologies like a good camera, a good working laptop and an iPad etc. I just can't afford them. (Print media journalist, Durban).

I lack modern equipment like cameras, a good phone etc. I cannot afford these. I have to make do with old equipment, which often don't work well (Print media journalist, Giyani)

As a freelance broadcast, I need equipment to produce good quality programmes that I can pitch to broadcast station, but I don't have these (Broadcast journalist, Northwest).

Acquiring the necessary technologies for freelance photojournalists and broadcast journalists in a low-wage labour market presents a formidable challenge that has profound implications for the practice and quality of journalism. Overall, the inability to access necessary technologies can limit the professional development of freelance journalists. They may miss out on learning and mastering new tools and techniques that are becoming standard in the industry.

5.2.4 Administrative overload

This search for work often becomes constant, whether work is plentiful or scarce and this can be tiring and overwhelming. Freelance journalists often work with multiple organisations at the same time, making it essential to track their current and pending assignments, as well as the payments for each. This requires organisational and administrative skills. Most of the successful entrepreneurial freelancers have accountants and administrators to assist with these issues, but many do not.

“Freelancers handle all aspects of their business, including invoicing, contracts, taxes, and health insurance. This administrative work can be time-consuming and emotionally draining.”
(Freelance Sub-editor & Independent writer, Cape Town).

“Being a freelance journalist is a challenging experience. The stress and uncertainty are constant, with no guarantee of steady work. Managing my own taxes, overhead costs, and accounting adds to the chaos. Life becomes incredibly difficult under these conditions.” (Print media journalist, editor and ghost writer, Durban).

Individual freelancers must shoulder the entire workload themselves. This encompasses gathering news, following up with sources, and writing and editing their stories. One respondent noted how heavy this burden is for them,

You do almost everything for yourself. With the current cuts in newsrooms, you have to supply a clean copy as well...this enables the paper to cut short processes of sub-editing... you will also be doing that for your own reputation so that you keep getting these gigs (Multimedia journalist, Durban).

Given the current circumstances, it is unrealistic to expect freelancers to afford administrative assistance to alleviate their workload. At present, they are living from paycheck to paycheck and cannot afford such a "luxury."

5.2.5 Job Satisfaction

Not all perspectives were negative. Some freelance journalists we interviewed expressed satisfaction with their work. Despite the precariousness of their lives, they mentioned that they liked and enjoyed what they do. They stated that they like the flexibility and independence that freelancing affords them. They would not go back to work fulltime in the mainstream media, even if the opportunity presented itself.

I decided to pursue freelancing due to the current instability in media houses, where full-time positions are no longer secure, and retrenchments are common. As a freelancer, I'm not tied to a single organisation, and this allows me the flexibility to work across both radio and television. I enjoy this arrangement (Broadcast editor, Johannesburg).

To me being a freelancer means freedom...I have the freedom to choose which stories to pursue and which outlets to pitch my work to. This independence allows for a diverse range of topics and projects (Writer and sub-editor, Cape Town).

I love being a freelancer. It's the flexibility, passion, innovation that I love. (Writer and editor, Cape Town).

These freelancers stated that they appreciate the autonomy in setting their own schedules, choosing projects that align with their interests, and having the freedom to balance work with personal life. Their views align with broader trends in the gig economy, where workers increasingly prioritize non-monetary benefits like work-life balance and creative freedom over traditional job security.

5.3 “We are just casual labours”: Relationship with mainstream media

Building a healthy working relationship with mainstream media is crucial for freelance journalists. While some respondents stated that they had a good relationship with the mainstream media,

quite a few respondents pointed to challenges and frustration. One respondent referred to this relationship as 'walking on eggshells' because one never knows how things will turn out.

5.3.1 Limited communication

Many respondents expressed frustration with editors who fail to read or respond to communications. Some said they 'just find their stories published' without receiving communication. In some cases, journalists only became aware that their stories had been published after the fact. Newsrooms did not attempt to notify them when their stories were published. The following respondents stated:

I sent stories to...and an invoice to their secretary. I think I waited for more than two months or three. Then one day I was attending a function, not even related to my work...then an old colleague came to congratulate me for my stories...That is when I knew my stories had been published...I then had to pursue my payment with the newspaper...imagine if I had not attended that function. Who was going to inform me? (Print media journalist, Mpumalanga).

Sometimes editors take us for granted. You send a story, and you get no feedback. You wake up one day and you see your story published. This can be demotivating. (Print journalist and writer, Johannesburg).

One respondent noted that he could go for months without getting even an email response from one of the newsrooms he freelances for. He said this,

A simple email, which only requires a yes- go ahead, or a no-don't, sometimes get no response at all... Sometimes you email the editor informing them about certain costs that may arise when you cover a story they had instructed. When you follow up, you get no response at all...(Print journalist, Pretoria).

The media houses ignore us a lot. Even our payments are delayed. Sometimes you run late paying bills. But we cannot complain openly. You get cut off and have nowhere to send your stories (Print journalist, Giyani).

Another respondent who has a freelance contract with a big private news broadcast station said that he does not get feedback and encouragement on his progress:

As a freelancer, I have noticed a lack of effort from the editorial team or bosses to provide feedback on my progress over time and discuss the direction of the show. I've never had a conversation where they say, "We've tracked your progress and believe you are the right person for this specific direction. We propose a particular show for you." Instead, it's always been a case of, "You're available as a freelancer, here's your monthly roster, we expect you to be here and work with the team and resources we provide, and the rest is up to you." I find this approach somewhat awkward at times. (Broadcast journalist, Johannesburg).

The same issue was echoed by another broadcast journalist/producer who said

There is no support available, and you have to figure things out on your own. For instance, if a cabinet briefing is taking place, there is no communication on how things should proceed. You

are held to high standards, but you must navigate everything yourself without support. Many editors will tell you "don't do that, do this" without providing proper guidance. It's a lot of work without any support (Broadcast producer, Johannesburg)

Some editors believe that it is the responsibility of freelancers to establish effective communication channels with mainstream media. They feel that freelancers have made minimal efforts in this regard, and there is room for improvement in communication. One editor said,

“Freelancers should speak out more and establish channels of communication with editors and senior newsroom people... this is important if the issues about their contracts and conditions of services are to be heard and understood. They should learn to speak out more...”. (Deputy News Editor, print /online media).

This perspective suggests that some freelancers, especially the young ones might not be proactive enough in building lasting relationships with editors or in understanding the editorial needs and expectations of mainstream media. Improving communication can help freelancers stay in editors' good graces, increase their chances of getting assignments, and foster long-term collaboration.

5.3.2. Not feeling valued

Most of the freelancers, especially the younger ones expressed not feeling valued by the media houses they work for. This emerges from the challenges discussed above.

We are not valued. We are treated like casual labour. We are not accepted as journalists...we are not even invited to newsroom functions even for papers we have written a lot for. You are not even proud to mention it in public that you work as a freelance journalist... (Print journalist, Giyani).

I don't think they (mainstream media) value us. They are only interested in our stories. I don't think they see us as part of them (Print journalist, Durban).

The research also shows that challenges between freelancers who work in the print media and those in the broadcast sector are different. It seems that freelancers in the broadcast sector, although work with some form of contracts, bear the brunt of the challenges outlined in this report.

The crisis facing the media in SA has focused on the print media, but there is a bloodbath taking place in the broadcasting sector. Apart from the SABC developments that are covered in the news, the challenges facing journalists in the private broadcast sector remain unknown. This is because the journalists don't really have a platform to express themselves. The broadcasting sector is toxic to the core. It's traumatizing working in this industry (Broadcast producer, Johannesburg).

The broadcasting industry is so small. You are often treated badly, but you cannot afford to sever your ties. Being a freelancer in this sector is like walking on eggshells. The media houses

might not renew your contract, or they might give you less days just to be spiteful. Its toxic. (Multimedia journalist, Johannesburg).

Being a freelancer in the broadcast industry is incredibly challenging. This industry will push you to your limits, take everything out of you, and then demand even more. Then they will spit you out. You are the one who sacrifices everything. Whatever life force remains in you, they will take it out. They really push you hard. The working conditions are terrible with a capital T, to say the least (Broadcaster producer, Johannesburg).

When asked about the working conditions in the broadcasting sector, editors noted that the industry is high-pressure and demands quick thinking. It requires highly specialized skills, and a lack of these skills often results in collusion with producers, contributing to what can be perceived as a toxic environment. One editor also mentioned that while some freelance journalists fully understand the terms of their contracts, others struggle with discipline.

When freelancers agree to a contract, it's important they fully understand the terms to which they are committing. They should be mindful not to allow themselves to be exploited and should recognize that, as independent contractors, they do not receive the same benefits as permanent employees. Unfortunately, some have shown up to work drunk or late, and when they are terminated for such behaviour, they often complain. However, they must realize that carelessness can jeopardize their work. As independent contractors, maintaining discipline is essential. (Senior news editor, public broadcaster).

The senior editor acknowledged instances of exploitation within the broadcasting sector, admitting that certain "bad managers" do indeed treat freelancers with disrespect.

Freelancers are at a disadvantage when dealing with poor managers, especially since they often lack labour protections. Freelancers have shared with me their experiences of facing unscheduled changes or even threats of contract termination when they disagree with a manager. This behaviour is unacceptable. I confronted a few managers and called out these actions as corrupt. Unfortunately, poor management can easily lead to the exploitation of freelancers. Another challenge is that while freelancers are contracted with a clear mandate, some managers exploit their vulnerability by assigning additional tasks beyond the original scope, leading to further exploitation (Senior news editor, public broadcaster).

The feelings of being under-valued expressed by most of the interviewees is echoed by Herman Lategan, a South Africa freelance journalist in an opinion piece called "The use and abuse of freelancers" that was published in *The Media*. He says that "Freelancers often have to beg to be paid". He goes on to say:

After speaking to other freelancers, some high-profile veterans, who have written for decades and were household names, they confirmed, that they, too, often must beg for their money. Excuses are plentiful. The person who must sign for the payment is away. The system of payment is a month after publication, which in a magazine's case could take three months as they work so far in advance... experiencing financial abuse as a freelance journalist, especially when payments are consistently delayed, can be a chronically frustrating and demoralising

ordeal. The feeling of uncertainty and powerlessness that goes with such situations can take a toll on both your professional and personal well-being. As a freelance journalist, your income is directly tied to the work you produce. When your hard work, dedication, and creativity culminate in articles or pieces that are published, you rightly expect to be compensated on time. When those payments are delayed, it can feel like a betrayal of the mutual understanding between you and your editor, where the buck stops...the impact of overdue payments extends beyond just financial stress. It can lead to a cycle of anxiety and worry as you try to manage your bills, rent, and daily expenses while waiting for the funds that are rightfully yours. Constantly dealing with delinquent payments can erode your sense of self-worth and professionalism.¹²

The editors emphasized the significance of recognizing the value of freelance journalists, as they are essential and play a crucial role in the news production ecosystem.

Look, the advantage of working with freelance journalists lies in the ability to quickly expand your team to meet immediate needs without getting bogged down in bureaucratic processes. This flexibility is particularly beneficial given the current challenges facing media companies, such as declining advertising revenues, reduced investment, and the increasing pressure on journalists who are expected to do more with fewer resources (Editor at Large, private broadcasting company)

Freelancers are the backbone of our media industry Their flexibility, specialized skills, and ability to adapt to various projects make them invaluable in today's fast-paced media landscape... If the television station I work for didn't rely on freelancers, all my shows would collapse. (Senior news editor, public broadcaster).

The advantage of working with freelance journalists is that they sometimes bring specialised skills and fresh perspectives that can fill gaps in our team's expertise, especially for specific projects or niche topics. Freelancers often have more flexibility to cover stories on short notice or dive deeper into particular subject areas. They also provide a fresh set of eyes on an issue, enhancing the diversity of content and perspectives offered to our readers (Editor-in-Chief, print media)

Editors also pointed to the need to have flexible labour laws that recognise the unique needs of freelance journalists.

The labour law must be flexible to better recognize and accommodate freelance journalists in the media industry. Freelancers often work under different conditions compared to full-time employees. Flexible labour laws could address these unique circumstances by offering protections and rights tailored to freelancers (Senior news editor, public broadcaster)

Tailoring labour laws to better accommodate the growing freelance journalism workforce would help create a fairer and more secure working environment.

¹² Herman Lategan (October 2023) "The use and abuse of freelancers". The Media. Retrieved at the <https://themediainline.co.za/2023/10/the-use-and-abuse-of-freelancers/accessed> on 20 June 2024

5.3.2 Professionalism

Three senior freelance journalists who sub-edit for two of the Big Four media groups lamented the lack of professionalism throughout the industry due to the juniorisation of newsrooms. This has made their work difficult and strenuous, often for pay that is not commensurate with the amount of effort they put in.

“I sub-edit for a major mainstream conglomerate (one of the Big Four). The mainstream media outlet I work for is prompt with payments and maintains a professional atmosphere. However, the quality of reporting is poor, and there is a significant lack of mentoring and leadership. Young journalists are often left to navigate their roles on their own” (Freelance Sub editor, Johannesburg).

Editors also confirmed the general decline in the quality of news writing in South African media. However, they attribute this to the current state of the market rather than the work of freelancers. This trend impacts freelancers more significantly than other journalists.

We train our new journalists to do what we want them to do...We offer in-house training. Freelancers are not included in these in-house trainings, which means they are left behind in terms of gaining news skills and being capacitated...” (Senior Deputy news editor, print/online media).

Many freelancers feel that mainstream media do not adequately address their needs, such as timely payments, compensation for extra expenses, and inclusion in journalism events and newsroom meetings. This lack of professional attention has led to apathy among freelancers, negatively affecting overall professionalism. One respondent summed it up thus,

Sometimes you work on a long project, complementing journalists in the newsroom...but you will be surprised that you won't even attend a single newsroom meeting to brief colleagues where you part of the project is... I think this is important and our colleagues in the mainstream should should view this as essential... (Print journalist, Giyani).

An editor expressed concern about the unprofessional behaviour exhibited by certain freelance journalists, noting that this is a recurring issue he has observed in numerous newsrooms and another editor expressed challenges with capacity of some freelance journalists

Unfortunately, some have shown up to work drunk or late, and when they are terminated for such behaviour, they often complain. However, they must realize that carelessness can jeopardize their work. As independent contractors, maintaining discipline is essential (Senior news editor, public broadcaster)

We frequently face challenges with reliability. Some freelancers either lack reliability, while others struggle to deliver the requested work due to limitations in their capacity or skill set (Editor-in-Chief, print media)

Resetting the relationship between freelance journalists and mainstream newsrooms is crucial for the long-term sustainability of freelance journalism and the restoration of mutual trust. Freelancers emphasize that this reset must be a collaborative effort and not an attempt to place blame on mainstream media. They recognise the pressures faced by newsrooms, which may contribute to some of the existing issues.

5.3.3 Associational life

Associational life encompasses the various ways by which individuals unite in organisations, associations, and groups to pursue shared interests and goals. These associations can be formal, such as professional organizations, unions, and NGOs, or informal, such as online communities. It goes without saying that freelance journalists can benefit from associational life by joining professional associations, unions, and online communities that provide networking opportunities, professional development and support in various forms.

5.3.3.1 Networking

For freelance journalists, a robust network can be the difference between a struggling career and a thriving one. Networking is therefore crucial for freelance journalists to build connections, find job opportunities, and stay updated with industry trends. By connecting with editors, publishers, and fellow journalists, freelancers can stay informed about job openings and assignments that might not be publicly advertised. Networking can also help with the potential mental isolation of freelancing and provides a support system where freelance journalists can discuss challenges, seek advice, and find emotional support.

All respondents pointed to the importance of networking and belonging to industry associations, but to the surprise of the research team, few were members of any professional body, and some found networking challenging for many reasons. Respondents stated while they are aware that freelance journalists need to constantly network with editors and colleagues, promote themselves, build a social media following, and market their work, this process that can be both exhausting and relentless.

Networking is beneficial, but it can also be exhausting. Most freelance journalists simply do not have time to socialise with other freelance journalists, build a social media following and promote their work. (Print journalist, Pretoria).

COVID-19 also cut off many of the freelance journalists from their network connection. The younger freelance journalists stated that they use social media platforms as a networking tool to establish connections with other freelancers, combat isolation, and generate story ideas, but the older ones stated that they tend to keep smaller connections and do not often have time to network with a broader group of people in the industry. One of the older respondents stated:

We typically don't use social media for self-promotion and are generally skeptical of it. Instead, I prefer to network with a small, familiar group where we meet and exchange ideas (Freelance Sub-editor and writer, Johannesburg)

Freelance journalists living outside Johannesburg and Cape Town often face several challenges in networking effectively. Since most media companies are in these two regions, the other areas often lack the media-centric networking events that are more common in the big cities. Smaller towns typically have fewer media outlets, which limits local opportunities for professional collaboration and exposure.

I have recently relocated to Durban, making it more difficult to network with mainstream media professionals. Most media professionals are based in Johannesburg, where it was easy to connect with them in coffee shops or by visiting their offices. Now, building and maintaining a network of contacts, which is crucial for finding story leads and securing assignments, has become harder. While there are media outlets in other towns, they are largely invisible. Our work relies heavily on professional relationships with editors, other journalists, and sources, most of whom are concentrated in Johannesburg or Cape Town. (Print journalist, editor and ghost writer, Durban).

Freelancers in peri-urban areas face unreliable internet access that is crucial for virtual networking, hindering online interactions, networking opportunities and access to digital resources. Consequently, they sometimes feel peripheral players in the journalism field. One freelance noted,

I know very few people in the field of journalism. I would wish to know many. But there are no opportunities for me to do so. I think we need more networking events that allow us to connect with others in the freelance world, as well as in the mainstream media... (Multimedia journalist, Durban).

The network challenges facing freelance journalists in peri-urban areas can significantly hinder their networking opportunities and growth. Since virtual networking is a key aspect of freelancing, unreliable connectivity can lead to missed work opportunities, difficulty collaborating with clients, and limited access to digital tools and resources for their work.

5.3.3.2 Professional bodies

Respondents were asked if they belonged to any industry associations or professional bodies, and the majority were not members. Among those who were, the main affiliations were with SANEF and SAFREA, the only industry body for freelance journalists in South Africa. However, most respondents did not have a favorable opinion of SAFREA.

“Although I am a member of SAFREA, I am not very active. The main benefit of membership is that I can reference their rates when quoting for work, which helps in negotiations with mainstream media. Often, clients try to lower your rates and show little respect for the value of your work. However, the SAFREA rates are standardized and aligned with market rates, providing a strong basis for fair compensation. (Print journalist, editor and ghost writer, Durban).

“Freelancers are not represented enough in associations. The Media Workers Association or journalists’ unions don’t really represent freelance journalists. It’s a lonely profession in many ways.” (Freelance Sub-editor and writer, Cape Town)

“No. I used to be a member of SAFREA, but I drifted off. I didn’t see any value from being an active member. But they do good work in terms of providing information on rates” (Freelance Sub-editor and writer, Johannesburg).

“I was a member of SAFREA, but I left because I found it too chatty and not effective. (Sub-editor & write, Cape Town)

“Yes, I’m a member of SAFREA, though I find it pretty useless. Membership costs R550 a year, but there are occasional benefits. For instance, I once secured a whole series of great jobs through them, so the R550 annual fee has been worthwhile for me. The main reason I recently renewed my membership is for access to their rate survey. However, I think they are quite old-fashioned. I dislike their reliance on emails instead of utilizing a Facebook group or other social media platforms. They also have a hierarchical structure that I find off-putting.” (Writer and media entrepreneur, Johannesburg).

SAFREA conceded that the organisation is facing challenges, but there are some reasons for these challenges:

I think as SAFREA we have tried hard to bring together freelance journalists. But we are just trying to give the organisation some life. The Covid pandemic hit hard...and it was difficult in the pandemic years to bring journalists together...you would also understand that freelancers work under a lot of pressure...it is very hard to bring them together...some we do not even know of their existence. Remember it is a field where you can just join and use your skills...I think SAFREA should do a lot more to make the organisation serve a majority of the freelancers (Chairperson, SAFREA).

Some respondents stated that they were members of SANEF but decried the visible presence of the organisation in smaller towns. One respondent stated:

I am a member of SANEF, but I live in the North-West and there is no presence of the organisation here. SANEF should spread in other provinces. (Broadcast journalist and editor, North West)

An editor in one of the big private TV stations said although he has been an assignment editor for years, he only got to know of SANEF recently. He stated the need for SANEF to conduct an educative and public awareness drive to make themselves known in newsrooms and among the freelance journalism community.

I have never been a member of any association. It never crossed my mind to join a media association until recently when I considered joining SANEF. For a very long time, I didn’t know the existence of SANEF despite holding an assignment editorial position for several years (Broadcast journalist/editor, Johannesburg).

Globally, over the years there has been a decrease and decline of presence and influence of labour unions within the media industry and South Africa is no exception. Journalist associations in South Africa have largely collapsed such as the Forum of Black Journalists, South African Union of Journalists (SAUJ) and the Professional Journalists Association (PJA). Factors contributing to the

decline of journalists' unions are economic, technological, and political. For instance, the job losses in the traditional media resulting from the rapid technological changes have created a climate of insecurity that weakens collective bargaining power. Since freelancing and gig work are becoming more common, the union protections that they had have disappeared.¹³ Journalists within mainstream newsrooms are encountering reduced job security, lower wages, and poor working conditions in the absence of union protection. For freelance journalists, the situation is even dire as they face worse precarious work conditions.

There has emerged a 'unionization movement', especially since the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States and elsewhere.¹⁴ There has been a stronger need to have a voice and a community because so many journalists are working from home and are cut off from one another. Among the respondents for this report, it was noted that many of them are in favour of some sort of unionism to protect their rights.

Freelancers are not represented enough in the existing associations. The Media Workers Association or SANEF don't really represent freelance journalists. It's a lonely profession in many ways. There is a need for an organisation that protects the rights of freelance journalists. (Writer & sub-editor, Cape Town).

Its sad that unions are dead in this country. We need a strong union to negotiate and improve freelance journalism. We also need a sensitive union that negotiates for better payment conditions and fight for recognition of freelancers. (Print media journalist, Durban).

We need a union of some sort for freelancers. Isolation, lack of protection and limited information are really bad for freelance journalists. You don't know where to go or turn to (Broadcast journalist & editor, North West).

I don't even know if the union represents us. I don't feel represented. If they had represented us, they could have spoken about these working conditions (Print journalist, Giyani).

We need a strong union to negotiate and improve freelance journalism. We also need a sensitive union that negotiates for better payment conditions and fight for recognition of freelancers (Print media journalist, Durban).

Since SANEF caters for editors, there is a sense that it does not cater to the needs of journalists. One key issue brought by one respondent relates to lack of identity and affiliation for freelance journalists.

Not being attached to any media house brings problems when you are trying to do a story. Most people or organisations want you to show proof that you are doing a story for this media

¹³ IFJ (2023) Journalist Unions in the Digital Age: Organising for Growth. Retrieved at https://www.ifj.org/fileadmin/user_upload/unions_and_digital_media_final_ENG.pdf, accessed 29 June 2024

¹⁴ Fu, A. (2021, July 16). "Not just a wave, but a movement": Journalists unionize at record numbers. Retrieved from <https://www.poynter.org/business-work/2021/not-just-a-wave-but-a-movement-journalists-unionize-at-record-numbers/accessed> 29 June 2024

house or that. There is a need for accreditation or press cards for freelance journalists. These are some of the issues SANEF should look into (Broadcast journalist/editor, North West).

The above point points to a critical issue. Freelance journalists often face challenges when trying to gain access to sources, events, or information, primarily because many people and organizations are wary of providing information to those who do not have an established media affiliation.

The editors all stated that freelance journalists need to defend their rights by being more organised. They highlighted the importance of collective action and structured advocacy in the journalism industry. By organising, whether through unions, professional associations, or other collective efforts, freelance journalists can more effectively advocate for fair wages, job security, and better working conditions. This also includes negotiating contracts, pushing for industry standards, and creating a support network to address common issues.

5.3.3.3 Self-promotion and job-creation strategies

Being part of professional bodies and networking hubs help freelance journalists to promote themselves and create job opportunities. Respondents agreed that to secure future work, they must consistently market themselves and their writing to current as well as prospective clients to maintain their prominence in a competitive industry. Job creation strategies that were more entrepreneurial such as writing paid posts, collaborating with other journalists and editing were less common among the black freelance journalists. Informal methods (mainly word of mouth), offline networking and online networking were the main methods used to get jobs. Formal strategies such as pitching to editors, job boards and industry email lists were less popular, especially among the journalists who have recently become freelancers. One journalist said,

We work under intense pressure... we tend to forget that self-promotion is important... I agree, but we have neglected this part. And some of us do not have these self-marketing and promotions skills...we have to find help, and mostly, it is paid for. (Print journalist, Giyani)

Some journalists interviewed stated that they are not given a byline, thus making it difficult to showcase their work.

“No, I don't have a website, and that's disgraceful. There are two main reasons for this. First, I never seem to have the extra money to spend on it. Second, much of what I've written doesn't have my byline, so I wouldn't be able to use it to market myself. I do network extensively and get work through my connections.” (Freelance sub-editor and writer, Johannesburg).

Some editors think freelancers need to do more to self-promote themselves. For instance, there is a thinking that the South African freelance landscape is skewed in favour of the print media. One editor summed it up as,

You will notice that there are many freelancers for print media than for broadcasting – radio and television. The question is: everyone can write a story about an election. Every journalist can write a news article from a political press statement. What is your unique selling point as a

freelancer? This is very important for freelancers to think about and market themselves (Senior Deputy news editor, print/online media).

There is a prevailing view amongst some editors that freelancers cannot even identify what one editor called “unique selling points”. According to the senior news editor, “The key question is: what skills or qualities do I have that the mainstream lacks but would find valuable? Once our freelance colleague’s figure this out, it becomes much easier for us to find them and offer them opportunities”. (Managing news editor, private broadcaster).

5.4 Safety and Wellness

Given their precarious working conditions, lack of institutional support, and exposure to a variety of risks freelance journalists' safety and wellness are vital concerns. Physical safety, legal threats, the stress of meeting deadlines, the uncertainty of income, late payments can all lead to mental health.

5.4.1 Safety

Among the freelancers interviewed, a few expressed concerns about their physical safety. Most respondents generally avoid stories that could put them in dangerous situations, while some focus mainly on writing for the corporate sector. However, the few who mentioned harassment painted a worrying picture of the threats freelance journalists face. One respondent chronicled how he was arrested for a story he had written. The story became a global issue (the story is not disclosed here to protect the journalist). He was threatened, and he received death calls. He specifically stated:

I wrote a story that became a headline for a whole week, the media house that commissioned the stories ran the story in serial parts. But when I was threatened and I told them, there was silence. No one checked up on me, no one said anything... I was dealing with the consequences alone. (Print media journalist, Durban).

This was confirmed by another respondent who said,

I once covered a story about state for X newspaper (the nature of the story is not disclosed to protect the journalist). Some politicians threatened me... they sent people to my house with guns. They threatened my family...but the newspaper that I had given the story did not do anything to protect me. (Print media journalist, Mpumalanga).

The media houses don't value us. They don't even cover you if you get injured on the job (Print media journalist, Giyani).

One editor talked at length about the issue of safety and legal protection for freelance journalists.

The issue of legal support for freelancers is critical. Freelancers are particularly vulnerable when they publish a story and face legal threats from powerful individuals. Unlike staff journalists, freelancers often have no claim to protection from the newsrooms they work with and must

handle such challenges on their own. This leaves them in a precarious situation. It's a very difficult, difficult situation. That's why organizations like SANEF are conducting studies on this matter. Take, for example, a freelancer in [X province], who is being sued by the police commissioner. In this case, SANEF stepped in to provide assistance. However, this isn't the reality for every freelancer, and many may not even be aware that SANEF can offer help. Moreover, SANEF doesn't have a fully-fledged legal fund to defend all freelance journalists (Editor at Large, private broadcasting company)

Freelance journalists need protection like that provided to their mainstream counterparts. They do seem to bear, rather disproportionately, the burden of harassment especially where they venture into investigative journalism.

5.4.2 Wellness and a sense of belonging

The affective and emotional dimensions of journalistic work is under-studied and discussed in South Africa. Most of the people we interviewed explicitly expressed feelings of stress, lack of belonging, feeling of powerlessness in relation to economic and technological developments seen as out of one's own hands.

Many respondents emphasized the need to address mental health. Despite the perks of being a freelance journalist, such as creative variety, flexible hours, and the freedom to work from home, the lack of a fixed income can lead to significant mental and financial stress. One respondent noted:

I have been freelancing for many years. I know no other job. Sometimes when the media houses pay late, I struggle paying my bills and taking care of my family. It can send you into a serious mental turmoil knowing that you are failing to provide (Print media journalist, Mpumalanga).

The isolation and uncertainty of freelancing can take an emotional toll (Writer and editor, Johannesburg).

Additionally, professional isolation can be a significant disadvantage, as many freelancers work from home. They often work alone and witness their families struggling as well. One respondent said:

When you work from home, you see your family's daily struggles...And this is depressing when you know the job you have is not doing enough to provide for the family. This is the only skill I have. And it is depressing to realise that sometimes the skill is not serving the family as you want it. (Print media journalist, Mpumalanga).

SANEF has also expressed concern with issues of mental health among journalists who are being retrenched. It noted that "as the media industry continues to bleed, and more strain is

put on the quality of journalism, we should also equally worry about the mental wellness of our journalists". SANEF has partnered with the SA Depression and Anxiety Group.¹⁵

5.5 Training & Skills building

In a traditional work environment, journalists typically have access to free in-house training and other training opportunities to enhance their industry knowledge and skills. In contrast, freelance journalists must take charge of their own professional development. Freelance journalists are responsible for any upskilling that may be required to meet new trends in journalism such as data journalism, climate change reporting, financial reporting and many of the people interviewed stated that they simply do not know where to go to find this kind of training. The most significant challenge for freelance journalists is determining which professional development opportunities to prioritize, given their limited budget and time.

I completed two invaluable freelance courses that profoundly influenced my thinking, even though I don't frequently use the specific skills they taught. One course was a one-day session by Tiffany Markman, once introduced to me as "the most successful freelancer in South Africa." I've also attended numerous talks by her through SAFREA. The other course, a six-week online bootcamp by Rebecca Weber based in Cape Town, had participants from around the world and was recommended by the same freelancer who introduced me to Tiffany. However, it's important to note that freelancers often don't have time for such courses, as time is money in the freelance world. (Freelance Sub-editor & writer, Johannesburg).

Training is useful, but I have not attended any. I just don't know where to look for these opportunities. (Writer and editor, Johannesburg).

I haven't attended any training workshops in a long time, mainly because I haven't looked for them. I'm not sure who offers these programmes, and as a freelance journalist, taking time off for a course is difficult. I can't afford to lose valuable work time, and when you're trying to make ends meet, attending multi-day training sessions isn't feasible. (Print journalist, editor and ghost writer, Durban).

Respondents were asked to whether they had attended any course dealing with new journalistic practices and approaches such as data journalism, climate change reporting, solutions journalism. Most of them had not.

I haven't received any training in these trends and am not very familiar with them. I haven't been trained in SOEs or data journalism. X (one of the Big Four) hasn't provided much training in these areas either. However, LinkedIn does offer some training courses. (Freelance nSub-editor, Johannesburg)

¹⁵ <https://sanef.org.za/sanef-calls-for-better-treatment-of-staff-as-journalists-face-retrenchments/> accessed 20 June 2024

Journalism is changing. We need to be trained in new journalism practices. We are behind in these new trends...I don't know these type of journalism practices you are talking about [data journalism, solutions journalism]. I have never heard of them. (Print media journalist, Giyani).

A lot of freelancers in the industry are not exposed to training. The media company expects that freelancers should be upskilling themselves. This is crazy because the media company pays you little and exploit you and yet they expect you to upskill yourself (Multimedia/broadcast journalist, Johannesburg).

Opportunities for training and professional growth are limited for freelancers. Many have to invest their own time and money to stay updated with industry trends and skills.

Editors interviewed stated that it is crucial for freelancers to explore new ways of acquiring skills and continuously upgrading themselves to meet the evolving demands of the modern journalism ecosystem. Key skills that freelancers may consider learning include fact-checking news content, detecting deepfakes, and identifying misinformation and disinformation in media narratives. Additionally, mastering the use of generative AI for investigative journalism can be invaluable. Being equipped with these cutting-edge skills ensures they remain competitive and appealing to potential employers, increasing their opportunities for future assignments.

Sometimes you might want to hire a Freelancer. Before you even make that decision, you should first look at available competences within your specific newsroom. There is no point if there is already talent... But the duty of the freelancer is to make themselves attractive in terms of skills and talent and experience... Once you come across a highly skilled freelancer, it will be very difficult to turn your back. You know you are finding talent. Skills make it hard for newsrooms to ignore freelancer (Deputy news editor, print/online media).

As the journalism landscape evolve, freelancers should also evolve with it...Sometimes you find out that their skills are no longer aligned to certain newsroom strategies. Newsroom strategies are changing, to meet the challenges of the industry. What this means is that even the skills required keep changing as well. They (freelancers) need to keep this in mind" (Managing news editor, private broadcaster).

Before deciding to hire a freelancer, it's important to first assess the existing skills and competencies within your newsroom. There's no sense in hiring externally if you already have the necessary talent in-house. On the other hand, freelancers have the responsibility to make themselves stand out by showcasing their skills, talent, and experience. When you come across a highly skilled freelancer, it becomes very difficult to overlook them, as their abilities speak for themselves. Exceptional skills make it hard for newsrooms to pass up on freelancers. (Senior Deputy news editor, print/online media).

Editors have expressed significant concerns about the imbalance in the skill set of freelancers, with a heavy focus on print media. One editor noted, "Finding experienced freelancers in television is challenging. Television stations often have to hire freelancers at the producer level, and such professionals are not easy to come by" (Managing news editor, private broadcaster).

5.6 Technology and Generative AI

The growth of technology, notably generative AI, presents numerous significant threats to freelance journalism. This report concentrates on the economic category, despite the fact that these concerns manifest in a variety of ways. Generative AI is capable of producing news articles and content at a faster pace and at a lower cost than human journalists. This efficacy has the potential to decrease the demand for freelance those, as media companies may opt for AI-generated content to reduce expenses. The influx of AI-generated content also has the potential to lower the rates that freelance journalists can charge. With the availability of AI tools that can generate a substantial volume of content at a rapid pace, the market may become saturated, which can make it more challenging for freelance journalists to secure assignments and distinguish themselves.

The research team included this aspect in the interview questions to get the views from South African freelance journalists on how they feel AI is affecting them. Many experienced freelance journalists view AI as a beneficial tool rather than a threat. They argue that for freelance journalists and writers to thrive in the competitive market, exceptional writing skills are essential. They believe that AI tools can never replicate the human touch and can never replace the talent, creativity or skill sets held by journalists. Journalism is not just about reporting facts; it's about storytelling, empathy, and human insight. AI-generated content may struggle to replicate the human elements of compelling journalism.

“I am still traditional, so I don't use a lot of technology. For instance, many freelancers are using AI a lot for writing and editing, but I don't. I don't feel threatened by it. Maybe because I just haven't used it.” (Freelance Sub-editor & writer, Johannesburg)

“Using AI to edit my work isn't a threat at all. What AI can never provide is a unique voice and nuance. For serious writers, AI is not a threat” (Freelance Sub-editor, Johannesburg)

“AI has its advantages, but it often falls short in capturing the nuance and unique voice that makes a story compelling. It tends to miss the flow and context that are essential for rich storytelling.” (Writer & editor, Johannesburg)

Other freelance journalists had mixed feelings about AI technologies. They appreciated some of its benefits but were also concerned about its impact on their jobs.

The freelance industry has become more competitive, especially after Covid. Obtaining editing and writing services is challenging due to the rise of AI. Now, freelance journalists find themselves competing with these technologies. (Print journalist, Editor and ghost writer, Durban).

I embrace the use of AI as a welcome development in our field. As an assignment editor and mentor to younger journalists, I emphasize the importance of preserving the essence of journalism while using AI ethically. While I appreciate the fantastic capabilities of AI, sometimes I am worried about the extent to which it will evolve. (Broadcast journalist, /editor Johannesburg).

Freelance journalists, while embracing AI, need to be trained in its use. There is clear evidence that most of them know the basic AI tools but have not yet familiarised themselves with advanced AI tools like those that analyse news sources, detect deception and reveal source networks. This has to do with access, which they evidently do not have. The challenge being that they have not been in newsroom where some of these technologies are gradually becoming familiar. Secondly, some of them work in rural communities, with very little access to technology to even start thinking about AI at this stage. One of the respondents in rural Limpopo stated:

These new ways of doing journalism are escaping us. We do not have access to the technologies. We would, of course want to embrace them, as long they help us do news reporting, quickly and cheaply...but our question is access...so far, we do not have access to any of these technologies (Print media journalists, Limpopo).

The younger emerging freelance journalists fear that AI could replace human journalists for routine news reporting, leading to fewer job opportunities.

5.7 How they see the future

5.7.1 The Upside

As newspapers continue to wrestle with diminishing resources, they have, in part, turned to freelance journalists to help fill holes in content production. Once kept at arm's length by the very news organizations they served, freelancers are part of a rise in media entrepreneurship that is renewing "journalism's relevance and reinvigorate[ing] stagnating business models".¹⁶

Respondents noted that there are numerous opportunities for freelance journalists, and the outlook is not entirely grim. Political journalism, corporate editing, ghostwriting, and paid blogging are viable options for freelance writers in the country. Additionally, the entertainment and sports sectors consistently seek skilled and passionate writers. While many freelancers are hesitant to adopt an entrepreneurial approach to job-seeking, those who do have reported significant success.

If you're at an entry-level position, there are still opportunities in various sectors, such as political writing. Given South Africa's politically charged atmosphere, this field remains promising. To succeed, find and hone a unique voice since the industry is crowded. Additionally, sports, music, and entertainment sectors also need journalists. Another promising avenue is international work, especially with the rise of remote working opportunities (Writer and Editor, Johannesburg)

Furthermore, some respondents see opportunities within international news organisations that keep drawing journalists from Africa. They see themselves as capable of filling these gaps and making a name for themselves. One respondent said,

¹⁶ AE Holton (2020) Intrapreneurial Informants. *Journalism Practice*,

I started freelancing part-time for an international news agency. Now they pulled out completely. I have been handling all their news in this...I think in terms of experience, I have benefitted and grown, I have also benefitted financially. They do pay me. I know there are several such cases around me...her in South Africa (Print media journalist, Mpumalanga).

Furthermore, freelancers see an opportunity for personal growth in their job. They reckon that they can still grow professionally, outside newsrooms, and do not see the profession dying any time soon. One of them said,

Freelancing is not going anywhere. We will get used to it, and we will help reshape it in the digital age, and despite current problems. In fact, the biggest opportunity for us freelancers is how to reshape it for our benefit and those of future generations (Print media journalist, Mpumalanga).

Freelancers can still benefit from being ‘multidimensional’ in terms of skills. If they sharpen their skills, it means they will always be needed. One editor said,

“Recently we hired freelancers to cover elections for us, from different locations. It was a mixture of both experienced and famous freelancers, and younger ones... we trusted their judgments, their skills, and their sources...” (Managing news editor, private broadcaster).

5.7.2 The downside

Some respondents expressed concern that given the ongoing crisis in the media industry and the country's worsening economy, the sustainability of freelance journalism in its current form is increasingly uncertain. As long as mainstream media remains in jeopardy, the position of freelancers grows more precarious with each passing day.

The future of South African media appears bleak, with the current situation being particularly tragic. Newsrooms have been decimated, leaving the industry severely depleted. The juniorization of newsrooms, along with cross-cutting and retrenchments, has taken a significant toll. While freelancing remains a constant, it does not pay well, though it provides a lifeline for many. Older journalists, with their pension funds, can manage, but young journalists are in trouble, facing retrenchment at an early stage in their careers (Writer and editor, Johannesburg).

It's hard to say for certain, but the profession might not be sustainable due to the emergence of new forms of journalism such as podcasting and TikTok journalism. The situation is fluid. (Freelance Sub-editor and independent writer, Cape Town).

I think it will be hard. Budget cuts and resource constraints have led many mainstream media outlets to reduce their staff. The market has become flooded. It is difficult to say (Freelance Sub-editor & independent writer, Cape Town).

We need to have a conversation about payments conditions for it freelance journalism sustainable. Currently, anyone can join any job if they are offered one and quit freelancing... I am not sure. Many freelance journalists are demoralised, and most will quit (Print journalist, Durban).

The editors interviewed believe that a broader discussion on the future of freelance journalism in the country is necessary, as this topic has not yet been addressed. Additionally, several critical issues and challenges facing this sector remain unaddressed. Such discussions are crucial for fostering a healthy, vibrant, and sustainable freelance journalism sector.

The biggest threat comes from the decline of the mainstream media. As an editor aptly puts it,

The decline of mainstream media houses is a serious threat to freelance journalism...it means that freelancers will be allocated an even smaller budget, and this means less money for them..." (Senior Deputy news editor, print/online media).

As long as the mainstream media remains under threat, the position of freelancers becomes increasingly precarious. A senior news editor remarked that the future of freelance journalism is inextricably linked to the survival of journalism itself.

The status and future of freelance journalism are part of the broader, intricate challenges facing the media industry. Addressing the issues freelancers face cannot be done in isolation; we must consider the sustainability of journalism as a whole. The key question is, "How do we sustain journalism?" To answer this, we must explore a basket of solutions, including national journalism funds, direct support from private wealth, concessions from the government regarding licenses and taxes, and more. In fixing journalism, we must ensure that all aspects, including the challenges facing freelance journalists, are addressed. We cannot focus on one area while leaving others neglected because, ultimately, our goal is to preserve journalism. Media companies and news organizations may come and go, but what truly matters is the survival of journalism itself. As journalism undergoes this challenging transformation, whatever form the newsroom of the future takes, it must continue to fulfil the essential role that journalism plays in society (Editor at Large, private broadcasting company).

He went to state that Journalism requires sustainable funding, and it's essential for everyone to recognize that the current model is broken. To support journalism, we need to establish national funding mechanisms, encourage donor contributions, and invite government involvement. Private sector support, high-net-worth individuals, and civil society must also play a role in ensuring the future of journalism. Together a model that sustains this vital institution can be created.

6. Reflection

In this reflection, three issues need to be discussed- (1) contribution of freelancers to democracy (2) how journalism can be reimagined, broadly to accommodate emerging practices and possible future trends, and (3) the centrality of journalism's duty to care for a robust public sphere and a successful journalism industry. Freelance journalists make an important contribution to the media landscape by reporting on stories that are not widely covered and offering distinctive perspectives. Some of them reach deep into the rural areas to afford peripheralised communities a voice, narrate their everyday experiences, and include these communities into the broader society by giving their voices a space.

The challenge for everyone who cares about South African journalism is how to integrate freelancers' contributions more effectively into the broader media ecosystem. To achieve this, it is important to recognise that they have an impact in the news ecosystem. Once this is acknowledged, their work is recognised and valued. The report highlights that freelancers' work plays a crucial role in contributing to the mainstream media, making it essential to address their working conditions. Ignoring these conditions not only undermines their contribution to democracy but also poses a potential threat to it.

To ensure that freelancers' contributions to democracy remain robust, two critical issues need to be considered. These can be framed as reflective questions for policymakers, journalism advocates, institutions, and representative journalism organizations.

The first question is: How can we reimagine journalism to better uphold its democratic ideals? It's essential to recognize that fostering a vibrant and democratic journalism is a shared responsibility among all stakeholders.

The second question is: What should the duty of care for journalists entail, and who bears this responsibility? These are vital considerations that require deeper reflection from policymakers and journalism institutions.

6.1 Contribution to democracy

Although freelance journalism traditionally involves writing stories for mainstream media, the research shows that many freelance journalists are leveraging their skills to earn income from other sources. This trend raises concerns about its potential impact on journalism and, consequently, on democracy. The loss of journalists to other fields can lead to a decline in the quality, depth, and credibility of news reporting, which in turn affects an informed citizenry essential for a vibrant democracy. The freelance terrain in South Africa is full of senior and seasoned journalists, who are now mostly writing for corporate entities and academic institutions. They carry institutional knowledge that is crucial for maintaining standards and mentoring younger reporters and their departure leads to a knowledge gap, affecting the quality of training and editorial oversight.

6.2 Reimagining freelance journalism

As mainstream media outlets continue to cut jobs as a result of some of the changes discussed throughout this report, the ranks of freelance journalists are inevitably growing.

In the South African context, it's crucial to recognize that the declining fortunes of the mainstream media are likely to affect the freelance journalism industry. Despite the challenges mentioned in this report, freelance journalism still provides a degree of professional security compared to the instability presently found in the mainstream media. Once journalists commit to freelancing, their primary concerns are managing time and resources and securing payments after completing assignments.

With the ongoing transformations in the media sector, the freelance industry must adjust its practices, grasp the shifting landscape, and realign its expectations and demands. Freelancers often hold outdated views of mainstream media, rooted in the traditional newsroom model. However, as newsrooms evolve, freelance journalists must stay flexible, continually rethinking their profession and approach to their work.

The responsibility of rethinking journalism doesn't rest solely with freelancers. Mainstream media institutions need to reconsider how they collaborate with freelancers and make freelance journalism effective. It's clear that mainstream media institutions, currently experiencing significant job losses, are seeing some of their most experienced journalists transition to freelancing. This shift suggests that the future of mainstream journalism will heavily rely on a vibrant freelance industry. Thus, it is essential for mainstream media to extend support to freelancers, who will likely play a pivotal role in the future of journalism. Both parties must find ways to mutually benefit each other, ensuring neither feels subordinate. This understanding of mutual dependence is crucial.

6.3 Journalism and the duty to care

In this report, professional isolation emerges as a recurring theme. Freelance journalists often feel disconnected from their peers in mainstream newsrooms. This sense of isolation extends beyond just being physically or socially separated. It underscores a collective responsibility to support freelancers, a responsibility that everyone who values journalism should share. This duty of care encompasses several dimensions, one of which is self-care on the part of the freelancers themselves. However, practicing self-care is easier said than done. In a profession where income depends directly on one's output—a "hunting and gathering" occupation—self-care is frequently neglected as journalists strive to maximize their time and resources to generate significant income.

The consistent theme of isolation raised throughout the interviews should be understood within the broader context of how society and journalism organisations care for freelancers. The journalists' experiences of isolation, delayed wages, and stagnant rates for over a decade reflect more on societal attitudes than on the capabilities or willingness of freelance journalists to unite and advocate for better working conditions.

There is a broader question regarding the care provided to freelance journalists who cover sensitive stories, often putting them in the crosshairs of powerful people capable of causing them harm. As some interviewees have indicated, they have faced threats to their lives and families with no assistance from journalism companies or media support organisations. But there are questions that need addressing. Who should be responsible for ensuring their safety? Additionally, how are other countries addressing the protection of freelance journalists?

7. Recommendations

7.1 For newsrooms and media houses

- **Fair Pay and Improved Rates:** Enhancing payment rates for freelance journalists is essential to ensure they receive fair compensation for their work. This will not only sustain their livelihoods but also uphold the quality of journalism.
- **Contracts:** Mainstream media institutions should provide written contracts for all freelancers, in line with labour regulations. These contracts should clearly outline entitlements and payment schedules to safeguard the professional relationship between freelancers and media organizations.
- **Integration of Freelancers:** Freelancers should be fully integrated into newsrooms, fostering a sense of belonging and eliminating any feelings of isolation from their full-time colleagues.
- **Support Systems for Freelancers:** Mainstream news organisations should offer support to freelance journalists who face threats or challenges due to their work. This support is vital for building trust and ensuring their safety, empowering freelancers to cover stories that might otherwise go unnoticed by mainstream media.

7.2 For SANEF and media associations

- **Support SAFREA:** SANEF should advocate for the revitalization of SAFREA, helping it become a dynamic and robust association. By backing SAFREA, SANEF can present a united front in representing and advancing the interests of journalists across the board.
- **Lead integration efforts:** SANEF can take the lead in integrating freelance journalists into the mainstream by creating platforms that actively encourage and facilitate their involvement.
- **Promote entrepreneurial journalism:** In partnership with journalism schools (J-Schools), SANEF can champion initiatives aimed at fostering entrepreneurial journalism, which is seen as a viable solution to the current challenges affecting the journalism industry.
- **Develop an accreditation system:** SANEF should work with relevant stakeholders to create an accreditation system for freelance journalists, establishing clear criteria to differentiate them from bloggers and citizen journalists.

- **Support platform-based journalism:** Collaborating with SAFREA, SANEF can raise awareness about platforms like Substack, Medium, and Patreon that enable freelance journalists to monetize their work directly through subscriptions and memberships.

7.3 For SAFREA

- **Increase visibility and awareness:** The research shows that many freelance journalists are unaware of SAFREA, despite its critical role in supporting the careers and working conditions of freelance journalists, writers, photographers, and editors. SAFREA should implement a program aimed at raising awareness of the organisation within the freelance community.
- **Build a member directory:** Create and maintain an up-to-date database of members, including their skills, portfolios, and contact details, to make it easier for clients to connect with freelancers.
- **Facilitate networking opportunities:** Host regular networking events and meetups, particularly for freelancers outside Johannesburg and Cape Town, to help build connections with potential clients.
- **Develop an online community:** Establish a digital platform, such as a forum or social media group, where members can exchange experiences, offer advice, and share job opportunities.
- **Launch a mobile app:** Create a mobile application that provides easy access to SAFREA resources, job listings, and networking opportunities from anywhere.
- **Offer workshops and webinars:** Regularly organise skill-building workshops and webinars to enhance freelancers' professional development. SAFREA should invest in training that keeps freelancers current with the latest tools and techniques in journalism.
- **Introduce a mentorship program:** Develop a mentorship initiative, pairing experienced journalists with emerging talent to guide and support their career growth.
- **Provide legal support:** Offer members access to legal advice and services for resolving contract disputes, handling copyright matters, and addressing non-payment issues.
- **Support mental health:** Make mental health resources available, including counselling services and workshops on stress management and well-being for freelancers.

7.4 For freelance journalists

- **Support SAFREA:** An association is only as strong as its members. Freelance journalists should engage actively with SAFREA, contributing ideas to ensure the organization addresses their needs. It is vital for freelancers to voice their concerns and collaborate with other stakeholders.
- **Peer Support Networks:** Freelance journalists should form local networks. Building a strong community can foster support, where members can share resources, knowledge, and opportunities, helping mitigate the challenges of working in isolation.
- **Training:** Freelancers should seek out and engage in training opportunities to enhance their skills and knowledge.
- **Upskilling:** Freelance journalists need to continuously improve their skills to stay relevant in the ever-evolving journalism landscape. By developing unique selling points, they can market their specific skills and experiences more effectively.

7.5 For Journalism Schools

- **Integrating Freelancing into Journalism Courses:** Journalism schools should include freelancing principles in their curriculum. As traditional media outlets face high turnover rates and job cuts, many graduates are likely to pursue freelance careers. Preparing them for this reality is essential.
- **Entrepreneurial Journalism Courses:** Journalism schools should also offer training in entrepreneurial journalism. Collaborating with organizations like SANEF, which has in-depth knowledge of journalists' day-to-day experiences, can provide valuable insights and resources for such programs.
- **Refresher Courses:** Journalism schools can offer Short Learning Programmes to help freelancers upskill and stay current with the latest trends in journalism practices and newsroom technologies.

Appendix A: INTERVIEW GUIDE

Interview guide: Freelance Journalists

We start with the usual questions. Name, province of work, who have you freelanced for; how long have you freelanced, do you have a specific news beat that you write about?

Definition of a freelance journalist

- How do you define freelance journalism? (now everyone is writing or doing media work: citizen journalists, bloggers, vloggers, podcasters etc). So who is a freelance journalist?

Type of work/challenges

- What types of freelance journalism work do you do?
- Who do you write/write for?

Motivations for Freelance Work

- What motivated you to become a freelance journalist?
- What does it mean for you to be a freelance journalist?
- Given an opportunity would you prefer freelancing, or you prefer joining the mainstream?

Relationship with mainstream media

- How does mainstream journalism feeds off your work?
- How would you evaluate your relationship with mainstream journalists, editors, and those institutions that feed off your work?
- What challenges do you face working with mainstream media

Rewards, payments & benefits (including payment models)

- How would you rate freelancing journalism in terms of flexibility, financial rewards etc?
- Do you sign contracts with the media houses you work with? Are you happy with the contracts?

Skills and resources

- Are you well-resourced/equipped as a freelance journalist?
- As a freelance, do you think you are represented enough by unions and journalism organisations? Do you think you are valued enough as a community of practice?
- Are you a member of any industry association or professional body?

Use of technology

- How do you use digital media (e.g.social media) in your role as a freelancer?
- Do you use social media to market and promote yourself?

Training needs

- What is the highest level of education you have undertaken?
- Do you have a formal journalism qualification?
- What are the most important skills required for freelance journalists' professional development at the moment?
- Have you attended any training workshops in the last 3 years?
- Are you conversant with latest journalist practices? Data journalism? Climate journalism? Solutions journalism?

Safety, Health and well-being

- What work-related threats do you face as a freelance journalist?
- Do you think the media organisations you freelance for give you enough protection?
- What are the most enduring pressures of freelance journalism?
- How do you deal with the isolation that comes from being a freelance journalist?
- What are some of your major challenges as South African freelance journalist?

Future direction/sustainability

- What are the main crises facing the SA mainstream media?
- What do you think has caused the mass retrenchments in SA newsrooms?
- Since many journalists have been retrenched, do you think there are many opportunities for freelance journalists at the moment?
- How do you see the future of freelancing in South Africa? How about its sustainability as a profession?
- What recommendations would you give to improve freelance journalism in SA?

Interview guide: Editors/managers

- Do you primarily rely on freelance journalists or staff writers?
- Have you been using freelance journalists more or less frequently compared to previous years?
- What are the benefits and drawbacks of working with freelance journalists?
- What editorial challenges do you encounter when collaborating with freelance journalists?
- In light of budget cuts affecting mainstream media, how can you offer better support to freelance journalists?
- Are there any official policies that govern your collaboration with freelance journalists?
- What areas could freelance journalists improve on?
- What do you consider the key opportunities for freelance journalists in today's media landscape?

Appendix B: PARTICIPANTS INTERVIEWED (ANONYMISED)

Classification	Location
Broadcast journalist/editor	Bethal, Northwest
Broadcast journalist	Johannesburg
Sub-editor and writer	Johannesburg
Editor, content writer, journalist	Johannesburg & UK
Sub-editor and writer	Cape Town
Print media journalist & editor	Giyani, Limpopo
Print media journalist, editor & writer	Johannesburg
Print media journalist, editor and writer/SAFREA Board member	Johannesburg
Print media journalist, writer, editor	Durban
Broadcast and multimedia journalist	Johannesburg
Multimedia journalist, podcaster	Durban
Editor & writer	Johannesburg
Community media journalist	Giyani & Thoyondou
Print media journalist	Durban (Kwa-Mashu)
Print media journalist	Giyani
Print media journalist, editor,	Johannesburg
Sub-editor, writer	Johannesburg
Print media journalist	Mpumalanga
Multimedia journalist	Limpopo province
Photographer/ SAFREA Chairperson	Johannesburg
Broadcast journalist	Johannesburg
Print media journalist	Limpopo province
Print media journalist	Pretoria
Writer & Business owner	Johannesburg
Broadcast journalist and editor	Johannesburg
Multimedia journalist	Johannesburg
Print media journalist	Mpumalanga
EDITORS	
Editor at Large - Primedia	Johannesburg
Editor in-Chief - Sowetan	Johannesburg
Managing News Editor – eNCA	Johannesburg
Editor -in Chief SABC	Johannesburg
Deputy News Editor- News24	Johannesburg