

Living the liquid life

*Gender, precarity, and journalism in
the post-#metoo era*

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ABSTRACT

Despite a long-standing trend of increasing women in the profession, masculine norms and gender inequality persist in media work. During the #metoo movement, Swedish journalists launched the #deadline campaign, shedding light on the connection between gender and worsening working conditions. Increasing demands for flexibility have institutionalised temporary contracts, eroded job security, and expanded job precarity, with women and young journalists disproportionately affected. In this article, we explore gendered journalistic precarity and systemic inequalities, challenging the assumption of professional homogeneity in the field of journalism. We conducted 23 interviews with Swedish journalists on temporary contracts, applying a feminist analysis to understand how power dynamics affect their experiences. Five years post #metoo, gender issues have faded from professional discourse. However, the interviews reveal continued gender discrimination and harassment, exacerbated by factors such as age, class, and position in the labour market.

KEYWORDS: gender, journalism, gendered journalism, precariousness, liquid life, post-#metoo

Introduction

In the ever-evolving landscape of journalism, the pursuit of truth and the dissemination of information have long been regarded as foundational principles of democratic societies. Journalists, as the vigilant gatekeepers of information, play an essential role in holding those in power to account, shaping public discourse, and reflecting the diverse voices within their communities. During the #metoo movement, Swedish journalists were particularly apt to report on sexual harassment (Møller-Hartley & Askanius, 2021), but they also launched their own #deadline campaign, putting the spotlight on the newsroom's gender inequalities. Behind the headlines and bylines, a complex and often unsettling reality emerges – a reality characterised by increasingly precarious working conditions that have come to define the profession in the twenty-first century.

The professional experience of journalists has traditionally been staged by organisational settings, providing support and continuity as well as employment security. Owner and management interests were balanced by the strength of the professional collective. Today, there has been a shift in power from the professional group to the benefit of media employers (Waldenström et al., 2019). An increasing number of journalists today work on temporary contracts, leading to disrupted employment security and an expanding precariat. Those journalists work under uncertain conditions, whilst being expected to show professional integrity, loyalty, and to act as watchdogs for democracy. According to the latest available statistics, around 30 per cent of Swedish journalists hold temporary positions or freelance, in addition to the group of journalists employed by staffing agencies (Werne, 2017). Between 2004–2014, the overall workforce of Swedish newspapers was reduced by 25 per cent, and the union saw membership decrease by 23 per cent. Journalism is thus increasingly becoming a buyer's market driven by digitalisation, increased competition, and a growing element of market- and profit-oriented thinking – a situation in which the journalist community is lagging, and many journalists belong to the losers (Werne, 2017).

The new reality is not, however, equal for all. People differ in their vulnerability to precarious working conditions, depending on their individual dynamics and positions. Education, family background, age, gender, and specialisation all matter to the degree of accessibility to welfare and labour protections (Greenhalgh & Rosenblatt, 1984; Milner & Gregory, 2022; Percival, 2019). Minorities are more likely to be unemployed, the older more likely to suffer from redundancies and outsourcing effects, and the younger have more difficulties securing a permanent position (Kalleberg, 2009; Percival, 2019). And these structures intersect. For example, Ross (2004) showed that women and young journalists seem to suffer the most in tough labour markets. Indeed, our own previous research (Melin, 2008; Wiik, 2010) has shown that gender intersects with other individual characteristics in the construction of the power hierarchies and professional life of journalism. But what are the costs and consequences to those working in the field of journalism?

In this article, we embark on a critical examination of precarious working conditions in journalism, shedding light on the intersecting dimensions of vulnerability that journalists face within this rapidly transforming industry. Drawing on a

feminist approach, we delve into the multifaceted web of systemic inequalities that permeate the journalistic landscape, exploring how factors such as gender, class, and age converge to shape the lived experiences of those within the profession. Our analysis unveils the interconnected challenges faced by journalists and sheds light on the unique and compounding struggles experienced by individual journalists.

Addressing this development, the aim of this study is to investigate the gendered dimensions of precarious working conditions in journalism, with the goal of understanding how systemic inequalities shape the experiences of journalists. We do this by asking the following research questions:

RQ1. How does the prevalence of precarious employment, such as freelance work and short-term contracts, impact the job security, economic stability, and overall well-being of journalists?

RQ2. In what ways do gendered identities influence the opportunities, representation, and career progression of journalists within newsrooms, and how do they contribute to or mitigate precariousness?

RQ3. What are the mental-health implications of working in a profession characterised by uncertainty, tight deadlines, and exposure to traumatic events, and how do these challenges intersect with gender-based stressors within the journalism field?

In our pursuit of a more comprehensive understanding of these issues, we aim to amplify the voices of journalists who daily navigate the intricate web of precariousness.

Our study focuses on individual journalists but also places them in their work conditions and culture. The underlying question is how the conditions of precarious work affect journalists' ability to act in public interest. The outcries from different newsrooms during the #metoo movement were as much about journalism as a democratic institution as they were telling stories about the professional experience of individual media workers. There is a need to understand the implications of the changing labour market from both of these perspectives.

The liquid life of media workers

Bauman (2005: 2) argued that the increasing fluidity of the everyday, coupled with a prevalent sense of permanent flux, has created conditions for living a "liquid life", that is, "a precarious life, lived under conditions of constant uncertainty". The notion of a liquid life encapsulates the idea of society being characterised by transience rather than permanence, prioritising the immediate over the long term and placing utility above all other values. In this society, identity turns from a fact to a task. Being individuals in the liquid society does not simply mean being good consumers, but also being competitive goods in the global labour market (Palese, 2013). Deuze (2006: 17) has argued for the need to study media workers and their working conditions as they have become "the directors as well as reflectors of liquid modern life". He pointed to the increasing precariousness of media work, which is now characterised by endemic uncertainty and permanent change.

Scholars have further explored these changing conditions, focusing on the gradual dismantling of the journalistic profession (Marjoribanks et al., 2021; Johansson et al., 2019; Nygren & Appelgren, 2015; Nygren, 2019; O'Donnell et al., 2016; Pajnik & Hrzenjak, 2022), the consequences of digitalisation (Melin, 2015), as well as the internal stratification of the profession (Wiik, 2015). Cohen (2015) pointed to declining incomes, loss of control over one's work, intense workloads, long hours, and limited access to labour and social protections. For the late-modern labour force, this means enduring strong demands of flexibility and adaptiveness (Webster, 2002). In a study of journalists in six European countries, Örnebring (2016) found that organisational goals are imperative, while the broader professional identity of journalists is rather weak. He concluded that journalistic professionalism, above all, is about adaptability, and "being a good journalist [...] is often the same as being a good employee" (Örnebring, 2016: 188). The collective feature of journalistic professionalism is challenged by processes of fragmentation, individualisation, and differentiation (Singer, 2016).

Self-marketing has become a key strategy for success in media work (Cohen, 2015). For the professional identities of journalists, this has meant an emphasis of the journalist as an entrepreneur (du Gay, 1997), and "the radical remaking of subjectivity" (Gill, 2011: 260). In practice, this means "regularly, frequently, or always working on a temporary and/or part-time basis" (Claussen, 2011: 3), and "the need for people in rapidly changing industries to adopt worsening working conditions" (Oakley, 2014: 149). The transforming identities are not merely an ideological construction but have direct bearing on journalistic practice and output. Ursell (2003) could, for instance, show how British media professionals were in the process of de-professionalisation and subordination to cost-driven production criteria, and how they thus became less able to meet their professional standards.

The concept of precarity has garnered increasing significance in media studies in recent years but is well established in research on culture and creative work. It refers to the situation of lacking stable work and steady income, as well as any other social protection (Kasimir, 2018). Precarity is focused on by the autonomous Marxist tradition, involving scholars like Hardt and Negri (2000). According to them, the autonomy and creativity of labour is the central mechanism of capitalism. They argued that capitalism changes dialectically in relation to the struggles of labour movements, ascribing a great amount of power and agency to workers (Gill & Pratt, 2008). An important understanding of this dialectic is forwarded by the concept of affective labour, which explains the emotional dimensions of work and how individuals create a sense of meaning in the process of alienation brought by precarity. Ursell (2000) named journalism "a labour of love" to stress the importance of passion, personal engagement, and drive in the overall construction of news work.

Gendered media work

Gender has repeatedly been pointed out as a very important identity marker in practically all social spheres. In organisational contexts, gender may differentiate the professional orientations of men and women, despite the existence of

a common work culture. The construction of gender in organisations happens in intimate relation to organisational culture: Gender happens here and now – performed in everyday practices and manifested in the institutional forms and praxis those practices take (Billing & Alvesson, 2009, 2014). Indeed, Melin (2008) showed how gendered power structures permeate the entire journalism culture, and that sexual harassment is used as symbolic power strategies, both in the UK and in Sweden, albeit in different ways.

One does, however, not only become a woman (de Beauvoir, 1947/2011), one becomes, for example, a white, middle-class, homosexual, Swedish woman journalist; identity is formed in the intersection of a variety of social positions. Mainly, in line with Hill Collins and Bilge's (2016) view, we consider a feminist approach as playing a double role as a critical mode of enquiry and as critical praxis: It is knowing and doing.

Furthermore, many studies have explored gendered power structures of newsrooms (e.g., de Bruin, 2000; Milner & Gregory, 2022; North, 2009, 2016; Pajnik & Hrzenjak 2022). Those studies show that, although journalism in several countries presents an almost equal gender division, women still face symbolic violence and professional limitations. Findings also indicate that a combination of powered positions influences the professional identity of media workers (Melin, 2014, 2015; Percival, 2019; Ross, 2004). The #metoo movement opted for change in the entertainment and media industries, but a few studies indicate that not so much happened after all (Sreedharan et al., 2020), although newsroom awareness of sexual harassment and discrimination was raised initially (Røsok-Dahl & Orgeret, 2020). Møller Hartley and Askanius (2021) showed in a comparative study of the #metoo movement in Danish and Swedish newsrooms that the story raised conflicts between the ideal role and practice, that journalists on the one hand were sympathetic to the movement and on the other felt they had to perform the objectivity ritual, wanting to play the roles of watchdog and interventionist at the same time.

From previous research, we extract that the social position of individuals intersects with working conditions in the professional experience of journalists. In these studies, a gender perspective is, however, missing. Instead of talking of attributes and social factors, feminist theory acknowledges how people negotiate a complexity of identities and social positions along with gender (Hill Collins & Bilge, 2016): We consider them all as integral parts of this study design, the interviews, and the analysis. Focusing on gender alone will not capture this situation, nor will material conditions or professional theory. Instead, these perspectives must be merged (McKercher, 2014).

Methodology and study design

Empirically, our study is based on qualitative interviews with journalists and media workers in precarious working conditions. These stories allow us to understand the professional and personal experience of precarity from the perspective of individual journalists. Their experiences, although not generalisable in a statistical

way, (hermeneutically) reflect the more general working condition of this group. In other words, with a thematic interview study, and with the support of secondary data, we can make theoretical conclusions concerning the gendered working conditions of Swedish journalists in precarious working conditions more generally.

We draw on a feminist methodological perspective, bringing a reflexive and reciprocal power perspective with us into both interview situations and data analysis. An interviewee is not considered a research object, but a subject in conversation with another subject (the researcher). In this study, it is important to bear in mind the already precarious situations of the journalists we interviewed. Throughout the study, we continuously engaged in methodological discussions, which assured the quality of the research. MacKinnon (1989), coming from a Marxist feminist perspective, argued that reflexivity enables the (feminist) researcher to see through power structures more easily. Taking this reflexive subjective subject position is what Harding (2015) called strong objectivity, and the only way to achieve what Haraway (1991) has termed situational knowledge. This was made clear to us during our study. Dovetailing with scholars of feminist methodology, we argue that our methodological reflection assures conscious, reflexive, reciprocal, and strongly objective research.

Conducting the study

The interviews were conducted in two phases: 2018–2019 and 2022. We interviewed journalists in precarious work situations: working on short-term contracts, being agency-employed, or forced freelancing. For the first set of interviews, we used a snowball selection by contacting trade union representatives. These spoke to members or put a message out on internal apps. The journalists were from different media organisations, although the majority worked in newspapers. Many of them worked through staffing agencies, supplying media organisations with journalists. We made an important choice to include these journalists even though they carried permanent positions, because separating employment from the newsroom via a staffing agency is an established practice in the industry. These employees may be directed anywhere in the publishing house, creating a much more flexible organisation. The individual consequences of such flexibility were something we wanted to study.

The interviews took place at the university or online, lasted 1–2 hours, and were conducted by one or both of us. Being two allowed us to compare notes, observe, and to learn from each other, thus increasing the reliability of our interpretations of the interviews, which were recorded and transcribed. All interviews were held in Swedish and transcribed into Swedish. The quotes below are all translated into English by us.

The reflexive feminist methodological perspective was essential particularly during and after the interviews, as they turned out to be very difficult, both for the interviewees and for us as researchers. The fact that the interviewees were all working under precarious conditions meant that their stories were highly emotional. Precarity, vulnerability, and anger shone through. Some interviewees started to cry. Others had clinched fists, tight jaws, and found speaking about

some issues very difficult. Many of them stated that the interviews brought “therapeutic” dimensions, and that they felt a lot better after the interviews. All were very specific that their anonymity should be guaranteed so their employers would not find out they were participating in the study.

In 2022, we continued our study and reached out on social media both via The Journalist-bubble [Journalistbubblan], an open forum for journalistic debate and the Facebook page of the Journalistic Union. In total, we interviewed 22 journalists from a variety of media, including 6 men and 16 women (of which 3 women were of non-Swedish ethnicity, i.e., not born in Sweden). The interviewees varied in age from 25 to 57, but were mainly around 30, and they lived in different parts of Sweden. All had received various forms of higher education, including a journalism degree.

Based on our previous research, we knew we would get multifaceted material, but we had not anticipated the richness and depth of responses we received. We approached the data using thematic analysis, mining for different aspects of our research questions, such as background questions, practical conditions, private life, and relationship between work and home-life. At each stage of the research process, we reflected on the multitude of identities and social positions of each interviewee, using theory and previous research to unpack the analysis.

One limitation of the study concerns the selection strategy. All interviewees volunteered to be part of our study *because* they felt the negative consequences of these changes, and voluntary samples entail methodologic problems (see also Kvale & Brinkmann, 2012). Nonetheless, we argue that our sample *in itself* could be seen as a result – it was mostly women and younger journalists who felt the consequences strongly enough to join the study.

Result and analysis

The structural changes to the media industry have impacted the interviewed journalists hard. All media organisations where the interviewed journalists worked had laid off substantial numbers of employees, in some cases cutting the staff by half, and had started using staffing agencies. The interviewees pointed out that there are hierarchical differences in the contracts offered for temporary workers: Being employed by a staffing agency is worse than being employed directly by the media organisation. Although factually having different degrees of precarity, they all experienced being treated badly, for example, being overlooked, not being listened to, or being treated as disposable. It seems that, apart from the large structural differences, their type of employment was also reflected in newsroom status and how the journalists were treated by editors and colleagues:

The crass consequence for locums is that we are being treated as a b-team. And we already are, as we are being given much less salary than those employed by [the newspaper]. (Adam, permanently employed by staffing agency, 2018)

This said, Adam had a permanent contract and worked as a temporary editor. Kristina’s precarity was objectively different, and her sadness from her situation tangible:

A large portion of the media industry employees are a bit like, how should I put it, like cattle that are herded around at will. One is a wear-and-tear commodity, one could say. Not so much, that is, they don't value staff because they are good, but it is more, like, you are a labour force and we expect you to do what we say, or else you are out. (Kristina, temporary contract at staffing agency, 2018)

Being treated like a b-team, a wear-and-tear commodity, and cattle herded around at will are but a few of the images journalists used to describe how they felt about their work situation.

Gendered professional experiences

That the journalistic field is gendered has been shown by a plethora of previous research (e.g., Ross, 2016; Milner & Gregory, 2022), which is also a result of our study. What is rather surprising, however, is that our study was made one and five years respectively after the #metoo movement. Despite its strong media impact, the movement seems not to have made a significant difference in the media industry, judging by the responses of our interviewed journalists. In this perspective, it is noteworthy that gender seems to be a sensitive issue. Among our interviewees, all the men and a few of the women answered a hesitant “no” to the question of whether there are any gender differences at their workplace (albeit the women later gave example after example to the contrary). The interviewed men talked of numbers and percentages of male/female editors and reporters. Adam stressed that women and men had the same opportunities, even if their feelings of it might vary. Carl, however, tentatively reflected on gender in the newsroom:

Gender is an important factor. It's like this, on a group level... I'm more comfortable taking space and to sound like I know what I talk about. And I think that it is an important... rather, it is a trait that I profit from, because I... Yeah, because it is a behaviour that is rewarded [...] Certain personalities and people are rewarded, and more often they are men. But then it's... kind of, it is rather gender equality. Well, there are not super many [women] in our management team, but it's kind of equal. (Carl, Locum broadcast reporter, 2022)

Most of the interviewed women, however, brought up gender differences or sexual harassment without us asking about it. When we did, some burst into laughter, others were near tears, got angry, got excited, or just interrupted the interviewer with a loud “yes of course”. The differences in gendered experiences they brought up were plenty. All the women had stories of sexual harassment in their media organisation, and most had themselves experienced it and shared lengthy accounts of these experiences. There were stories of having a hand up one's skirt or on the bum, of being asked questions with sexual innuendoes, of a male colleague coming a bit too close when being alone together, and of having a hand on the thigh during a long car ride. Karoline told two stories of

experiences that had a strong imprint on her. The first occurred when she, after just two weeks in a new job, was asked to cover a story a few hours way from the newsroom. The photographer, a middle-aged man, drove, and he started the journey by flirting with her:

I thought he was sleezy, but he was kind of 50 and I didn't think he was sexually interested in me. But then he took my hand and held it and said, "Now when I hold your hand you make my entire body warm". You know, it is totally illogical that he should hold my hand, he has kids my age. He let go when his mobile rang, but then he took it again and it was three hours left of the journey and I didn't know anyone in the town we were about to pass. And then I put my hand on my thigh and thought he would let go, but he put his hand high up on my thigh and squeezed. He only let go the times he needed to change gear. I was quiet the rest of the long journey and hoped he would understand I did not like him. [...] I got a lot of support from the trade union, but my boss said, "Well [he] is kind of flirty" and such things that made me irritated. [...] Last summer there was a personal party, and one of the sales guys touched my bum and squeezed. Because of what happened with the photographer I dared to go to my colleagues and my boss, who phoned his boss, who said it was because [he] was too drunk. (Karoline, Locum news reporter, 2018)

Most of the stories told by the interviewees had to do with other kinds of gendered experiences. They talked of substantial differences in salaries despite similar contracts, of not being seen or heard when suggesting jobs or ideas, which in their view differed from how their male colleagues were treated. In contrast, the interviewed men talked of feelings of being in control, of being in with the editors, in with the gang, of being listened to. Adam had a permanent contract with a staffing agency, but still felt the following:

One has pretty much to say and contribute to debates if one... The person that is above me always has the last word. But it's almost always after a discussion [with me] in any case. (Adam, permanently employed by staffing agency, 2018)

The interviewed women recognised these issues, as several of them talked of male locums being in with the permanent crowd, getting better deals, and being promoted rather than women locums with longer and more suitable experiences. To the question of whether there are gender differences, Sarah answered loudly:

Yes but... people in the media, it's mostly men that are elevated there. And it is there it begins and then men elevate each other, and women have to kind of beat their way up. And when you beat your way up, there is a risk that you are seen as a person that tries too much. (Sarah, temporary contract at staffing agency, newspaper, 2018)

As pointed out, gender is but one identity necessary to consider when analysing our material. Other identities or structural factors we found important were age, class, ethnicity, and having a social network – and their intersections. It is

important to bear in mind that our sample is self-selected, that is, the interviewed journalists perceived themselves to be in a precarious job situation. As for age, most of the interviewed journalists were between 25–35. Both Kalleberg (2009) and Percival (2019) have shown, however, that not only younger, but also older journalists are more likely to suffer redundancies and outsourcing effects, which is supported by our study. The two journalists above 55 were women, from a working-class background, and had higher education, and albeit working as journalists for several decades, felt little hope of finding a permanent position, and both pointed to agism as a cause. Lena had for 27 years been in the locum/freelance circle, describing the significance of “age-fear” in the business. She told that after successfully working two years as a locum for a national newspaper, her contract was not renewed, and she said the editor gave her the following reason:

He said “yes, you are admittedly very appreciated here, but you turn 40 now, and we have then... we take in new younger... and we want to have a certain flow, not just keep those that work well, but...” I had seen this myself, but he said it straight to my face. When I asked him if the paper applied age-discrimination he said, “No, never in my life, we don’t do that at this newspaper. It is totally unacceptable to us. And I will tell you, we have two girls in the editorial team and one is 38 and the other 40”. It is true. And then he said something even worse. “...but these girls work really well”. (Lena, unemployed newspaper reporter, 2018)

That networking is important for journalists has been shown in many previous studies, but in Sweden, the level and kind of education has been pivotal for getting a job as a journalist and for promotion. It has also been used as a tactic for women to climb the career ladder (see also Melin, 2008, 2015; Milner & Gregory, 2022). Our small study shows that, for journalists with precarious working conditions, education seemed not to matter. When asked if there are other factors than gender that influence career possibilities, Maria, who has two bachelor’s degrees and a master’s degree in journalism, answered:

Mmmm, I think a social network. ... Me and my brother have no social network as we are from a countryside working class family, but I kind of see that the daughter of the royal correspondent gets to work with politics during the election. *Only* work with politics during the election. The son of [a famous TV reporter] who works on [my newspaper] also gets to work a lot with politics. I don’t think it is a coincidence that it is these that get... and it is a lot of this kind of... people that know people in the business. My pal at [the journalist school], I have no problem with him, but he lived next to [a famous editor] and he got a really cool job at TV. Yes, I believe that the social network plays an enormous role both for getting a job, the kind of jobs you are given, and salary and positions. Yes, I think that a social network is pretty crucial in this business to get good terms. It is a feeling I have. For those I know with a good social network, they have sort of... been allowed to stay at [the newspaper] without having their contracts terminated after the given time. (Maria, editor and reporter, permanent staffing agency contract, 2018)

We suspect that this networking situation is gendered (see also Socratous, 2018). All the women we interviewed had used increased education capital as a way of getting a permanent job – and failed. No matter what master's courses or further education achieved, this did not get them employed. The men, however, albeit in a precarious situation, and not knowing any journalist prior to starting locum positions, were in the upper echelons of precariousness. And they got jobs and promotions with the help of knowing someone who knew someone.

Liquid life in journalism

The concept of liquid life, as introduced by Zygmunt Bauman, is vividly exemplified in the experiences of the journalists in this study. Their professional lives have been characterised by constant flux, everyday fluidity, and pervasive uncertainty. They found themselves in precarious situations, often regarded as commodities that can be used at the discretion of their employers. The nature of their employment, marked by short-term contracts and irregular schedules, greatly impacts their private lives. This includes challenges related to scheduling holidays, making long-term plans, and maintaining relationships. The inability to predict their work schedules creates a considerable burden on their personal lives and decisions. Maria gave an account of her being sent all over Sweden with very short notice. She was supposed to find her own living quarters, and especially in Stockholm that is a large problem – her editor advised her to sleep on a friend's couch. She argued that fundamentally, the uncertainty of the job changed her life, and she gave as an example that this was the very reason her boyfriend gave when breaking up with her. And she is weary of how the job will influence her future:

I am not certain if I want a family and such, but I think that it must be bloody hard having a family with these terms and conditions. And it is *therefore* I don't want to have a family, because to work like this... it would never work.
(Maria, editor and reporter, permanent staffing agency contract, 2018)

The experiences and responses from the female journalists reveal how gender plays a significant role in the challenges they face. Unequal pay, the absence of permanent positions, and maternity-leave issues create distinct obstacles for women in the field (see also Milner & Gregory, 2022; Percival, 2019). Gender disparities affect not only their professional lives but also their personal choices, such as family planning. The issue of equal (or not so equal) pay was also mentioned with anger by most of the interviewed women. Again, this is not new, nor surprising. Sarah showed, however, how this inequality affects the job as a journalist:

Sure, I will get maternity leave with money, but afterwards I have no job to come back to as I have no permanent position. Men have it easier that way and they can continue their career whilst the woman is pregnant, and of course that influences things. And the salary is super different. That girls in the media industry earn much less than the guys, which sets standards for all kinds of differences. (Sarah, reporter, short-term locum contracts, 2018)

Nadeem also talked about the relationship between private life and her life as a temporary locum:

When I was on parental leave, I could wake up all sweaty with stress... that I don't have anything to go back to, despite my... I have studied five, six years and I still cannot enjoy being on leave and take care of my child, but wake up all sweaty and worry about the future... It has been really hard... and this stress, press, and worry about what will happen next year. It is inhuman and so hard to think about, even though it has not happened to me (yet), this worry is just there. And not to be able to buy a house. I have a husband with a permanent contract, but without him I wouldn't have been able to afford or to take a loan. It's so humiliating. (Nadeem, locum broadcast journalist, 2022)

Bauman's (2005) concept of liquid life seems to come alive in the 23 stories told to us. Permanent flux, everyday fluidity, constant uncertainty, and not least being treated as goods on a market that can be used at the whim or need of the employer was exemplified through the experiences of the journalists we interviewed. They must navigate and balance carefully on the brittle path between being a good (non-employed) employee and a private person. They need to, as Banks and Deuze (2009) argued about media workers, cunningly navigate the tension between costs, risks, and rewards.

Should I stay or should I go?

The interviewed journalists talked of fundamental insecurity, a feeling of being exchangeable, of never being good enough, of not being able to plan ahead, of being stressed, and of having anxiety because they did not know if they could pay the bills next month. One example was provided by Nadeem:

I'm very frustrated about my work situation. I have studied for so many years, but my employer gives me the feeling that I am exchangeable, that I can be replaced by someone else at any point, as there are many people that would like to work here. And it's just that... yeah, they can pick someone from the long queue. Yeah, so therefore I have this hesitant feeling, doubtfulness, that one's workplace... one is not good enough for [laughter] ... One is actually not... we just have you as a test... and then one has been a test-case for five, six years. And still, I am not good enough. That I think is really uncomfortable and very sad to think about. And then there is this constant worry, constant stress, and to go around and feel one is not needed... It doesn't matter how much one learns, how much one develops, one is just... someone they can replace the next day. (Nadeem, locum broadcast journalist, 2022)

This is but one voice of all the harrowing stories we heard, and we cannot but wonder why they stayed. Maria clearly stated that she did not want to leave journalism, but it was also clear in the interview that she did not quite know how to deal with her situation. Nadeem, however, found a tactic to hopefully remain in journalism:

I normally question stuff, but I think many of us [locums] hear a lot... We normally had reporters' meetings on Thursdays, and many said a lot of things to us, but no one confronts these people. I believe many of us limit and censor ourselves and don't speak up and don't want to be a pain. And many of us have said straight out that I want to continue working here so I don't want to bring up these difficult issues, because then I become one of the troublesome persons that they want to get rid of. (Nadeem, locum broadcast journalist, 2022)

Kristina also spoke of silencing herself:

We are not supposed to think about having a journalistic mission but must do what the readers want. Many clicks. And one colleague tried to discuss this in meetings. I wanted to talk and agree, but felt it was not a situation where I could take a fight for myself. Because I am a locum and my manager thinks that I have the wrong kind of attitude to what jobs should be done, and yes, if I am not interesting, next time he will choose another locum. It is so bloody frustrating to sit and be quiet when all I want to do is to say what I think. It feels limiting. (Kristina, permanent contract at staffing agency, newspaper, 2022)

As Melin (2008, 2014, 2015) has discussed, journalists in precarious situations deliberately choose tactics that best fit the given situation to remain in the job. Silence and self-censoring were clearly tactics that many felt worked, behind which is a fear of not being chosen for the next locum contract. Showing off is another tactic chosen by many of the interviewed journalists. They talked of always saying yes to jobs and showing motivation and eagerness to do them (although it might have felt totally wrong). They talked of showing off their knowledge, education, and networks, but also symbolic behaviour like always running up the stairs (instead of taking the lift or walking normally) to show the editor they were fit and on their toes.

As in Røe Mathisen's (2019) study, our respondents expressed a shared passion for journalism, but at the same time a desire for stable employment, reasonable salaries, and the ability to lead normal private lives. The precarious nature of their work makes achieving this seemingly impossible. The men we interviewed all started talking of how good they were at their jobs and what great prospects they had, but as the interviews went on, they started hesitating and showing frustration, anger, and sadness. And those feelings did not differ from those of the interviewed women. They all wanted to stay in their job, to have stability, to have a career in journalism, to have a secure future. So, what makes them stay? Sarah's answer is typical of those we interviewed – it is such fun!

It's mostly that I find it such fun to work with news. It's just that it changes, that it feels that one does something [strong emphasis], and also that one can... [...] What keeps me in the job is that I feel I make some difference to the world [laughter]. But one does not make a difference when unemployed [laughter]. So I would perhaps not call it love-hate, but it is like that. That one understands that it is totally unsustainable long term, but still clings on because it feels so good once one can do it. And it is such fun! (Sarah, temporary contract at staffing agency, newspaper, 2018)

Sarah's and other's responses about a love-hate attitude towards journalism was mirrored in Erik's discussion of the problems he had getting a loan for an apartment, which in Sweden is impossible without a permanent employment contract. Both he and his partner are locum journalists, and he was wavering between wanting to stay and go:

Not to be able to buy a flat further on because I don't have a permanent contract and can't take a loan, influences enormously this... life ambitions in the future. I'm really honest here. Yeah, it is really difficult, but then we are both journalists, so we know how it works. And I suppose one says a few times per year, if I don't get a permanent job next year then I change my career. And now, I suppose I should change career soon. Not necessarily to buy a flat but it's this fundamental security. [...] But when the job is such fun, it's difficult to give it up just to get fundamental security. [...] But then, I have applied for a lot of jobs, really a lot. (Erik, locum broadcast journalist, 2022)

All the interviewed journalists hated their precarious work situation, and they all dreamt of having a permanent contract with a media organisation, not a staffing agency. At the same time, they had all thought of giving up journalism, as it threatened their private lives, and therefore they were looking for other jobs both inside and outside of the media industry, where they could use their journalistic capital. Some even worked in totally different jobs, like a substitute nurse, just to be able to pay the bills. Nadeem put words to these wishes:

I would like more responsibility. I want more challenges. I want to develop myself, but I have not got what I want, therefore I want to leave because I'm standing stomping around in the same spot. And I can't even get a permanent contract so that I can feel security, and it is in this insecurity I'm stomping. (Nadeem, locum broadcast journalist, 2022)

Discussion

Based on 23 interviews with journalists on short-term contracts, we have shown that precarity is not equal for all. In this increasingly complex organisational environment, the stratification of the workforce is tied to societal power structures. Unsurprisingly, it is especially difficult for young journalists to establish themselves in the journalistic labour market, but the difficulty also intersects with factors such as age and class.

Our previous research (Melin, 2008; Wiik, 2010) proved education to be a useful way into journalism and a useful career-enhancing strategy in Sweden. This study shows, however, that educational capital seems to be surpassed by social networking, which points to meritocracy being partly put out of play. Professional skills and experiences are still valid capital in the field, but our interviews show that for temporary workers, social capital is even more important, and the male journalists interviewed had the upper hand in this. Social networks and individual connections are permeating the professional practice of

journalism, forwarding the homo-sociality of male journalists as an important factor. The advantage of being a white Swedish man in this game should not be underestimated. Statistically, the gender division of Swedish journalism is fifty-fifty, but in practice, men seem to navigate networking and self-promoting more easily. The women interviewed gave evidence of feeling uneasy about the unwritten demands for personal branding, sensing that they have already lost the game. From a business perspective, journalism tends to mainstream its workers into the extrovert, self-branding, white, male stereotype that is general to society. A new normal seems to be prevalent amongst journalists with precarious locum positions. The new normal journalist is a smiling, eager, good employee. Or is this old wine in a new bottle? (see also Clausen, 2011).

The women journalists interviewed reported difficulties in career advancement, such as being passed over for promotions or having their ideas disregarded. Both genders noted that in the fluid and insecure organisational context, where networked short-term employment practices are dominant, some skills and personal traits become clear assets: being an extrovert, social, and highly adaptable. The most successful temporary workers are those able to switch gears quickly, adjust to new assignments, and be flexible in their approach to different types of stories and topics. Many of the journalists interviewed saw these traits as gendered and claimed that male journalists found this more natural, and thus had an easier professional path. We notice that gendered power structures conflate with neoliberal tendencies of individualisation, as the individual worker shoulders a huge responsibility for the organisation and their career. The inability to secure a permanent position is ascribed to individual failure and a lack of drive. Being discriminated against is regarded as shameful and a sign of weakness, and thus few of those interviewed dared to contest their situation for fear of not having their contract renewed, their main goal being to act as good employees.

Consequently, the individual journalist takes the brunt of the new staffing agency and locum system, which has mental-health implications. This is partly demonstrated by the fact that many said the interviews were therapeutic for them – that someone was finally listening to their stories. And these feelings were further demonstrated by the tears, tight fists, clenched jaws, anger, and sagged shoulders when telling their stories. We asked: Why stay? Journalism seems to be an affective labour (Gill & Pratt, 2008) and a labour of love (Ursell, 2000). Individual journalists are driven by a passion for journalism itself, and they are prepared to cope with frustration, fatigue, sadness, and even depression in order to cling to their job. Though some thought of leaving journalism, they all dreamt of a permanent contract, for which they applied repeatedly.

Our findings indicate that the affective dimension is crucial to the understanding of identity formation processes, as personal boundaries are negotiated in relation to demanded flexibility of the labour market. In their precarious situation, both their private and professional identities were not only negotiated, but taken hostage. These journalists did not ask to have their entire life taken over by their work. Habitus seems to structure the fundamental identity process, with young women, older women, and women with a non-Swedish ethnic background

seeming to suffer the most. The interviewed men (white and Swedish) were frustrated and angry but did not seem to suffer mentally the same way.

What are the professional and democratic implications of this? The streamlining of journalists into smiling, fit, and service-minded locums does not resonate with the need for critical watchdogs. As indicated by our interviewees, the limited professional autonomy is also a pressing issue for them. They experience a lack of possibilities for doing reportage, following up on stories, and scrutinising. Fearing non-renewal of their contracts, journalists may conform to editorial demands for content that aligns with popular trends, potentially leading to a self-imposed limitation on pursuing critical or controversial stories. The issue of underrepresentation and lack of diversity in newsrooms is also a pressing concern. Gender discrimination and other biases within the industry may result in a limited range of voices being heard. This lack of diversity not only impacts the journalistic profession internally, but also contributes to biased reporting, reinforcing existing societal power imbalances. We argue that the individual space for acting in the public interest is limited by the development in the media industry.

The short-term locum contracts and the use of staffing agencies have become praxis. This study emphasises that the issues raised by journalists, such as gender discrimination, harassment, and ageism, are not merely individual problems but are deeply rooted in the structural aspects of the media industry. It seems that the #metoo movement, while impactful in raising awareness, has not yet led to significant change in the media industry. In conclusion, our study highlights the pressing need for media organisations to address precarious working conditions for journalists from a gendered perspective. The findings underscore the importance of fostering diversity, promoting gender equality, and combating discrimination within the industry to create a more inclusive and equitable work environment in the post-#metoo era.

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