

Refereed Paper

## From Battery Hens to Chicken Feed: The Perceived Precarity and Identity of Australian Journalists

### Authors:

Holly Patrick and Kate Elks

### Abstract

There is an industrial revolution taking place in the media sphere, and it is a result of digitalisation. Between mass layoffs and falling word rates, Australian journalists are exposed to multiple potential sources of precarity. This paper makes use of a case study of Australian journalists to explore the perceived causes and experiences of precarity for journalists working across the media industries. We find that the perceptions of precarity for salaried journalists are different from those of freelancers. We also find that not all of our journalist participants consider their work to be precarious, but that these perceptions are shaped by their professional identities. We contribute to the literature on employment precarity by identifying an unexplored role that preferred professional identities may play in enabling and limiting career mobility, and therefore in contributing to perceptions of precarity.

### Keywords

Precarity; Professional Identity; Journalism; Cultural Work; Digitalisation

### Biography

Holly Patrick wrote this article during a 2 year tenure as a visiting scholar with the Centre for Management and Organisation studies at UTS Business School in Sydney, Australia. As of January 2016 she will be joining the University of Edinburgh Napier as Lecturer in HRM.

Kate Elks is a content marketer and former journalist. She wrote this article while working as content director for Sydney agency Filtered Media, to better understand the pressures and opportunities facing media practitioners.

**Contact:** drhollypatrick@gmail.com

The Asia Pacific Journal of Arts and Cultural Management is available at: [apjacm.arts.unimelb.edu.au](http://apjacm.arts.unimelb.edu.au) and is produced by the School of Culture and Communication: [www.culture-communication.unimelb.edu.au](http://www.culture-communication.unimelb.edu.au) at the University of Melbourne: [www.unimelb.edu.au](http://www.unimelb.edu.au)

*"I have been asked by a fairly well-known publication to write 1500 word essay on labour exploitation for \$50. Guess they want autobiography"*

[@SarahKendzior, 06/12/2014]

*"She went from being a battery hen at the SMH to earning chicken feed as a Freelancer"*

[Bridie – Interview]

### **Introduction**

Boltanski and Schiapello (2006) argue that contemporary capitalism has adopted a new "spirit" based on the norm of project-based work; a norm disaggregation of work, of flexibility and of building a career through a series of short-term project-based assignments. While this new spirit excites citizens towards a new understanding of the emancipatory status of work, the employment realities are profound. A project economy may offer more diverse employment opportunities, but it disrupts systems of social reproduction at the societal level (Lee & Kofman, 2012), and destabilises the work/life balance at the individual level (Neilson & Rossiter, 2005). The economic and psychological hardships experienced by workers in such situations are captured by the concept of worker precarity. According to Gill and Pratt (2008, p. 3), "Precarity (in relation to work) refers to all forms of insecure, contingent, flexible work". Until recently, the effects of employment precarity on cultural workers, such as journalists, have been argued to be wholly negative. However, the discourse on cultural workers' precarity may be shifting. Where previously, cultural workers were seen as the victims of industry characteristics including oversupply of labour (Menger, 1999), "digitalisation" (Kim, 2013), changing consumer demands (Christopherson, 2008), and exclusionary social networks (Grugulis & Stoyanova, 2012), meta-critical scholars have identified the potential for precarity to empower workers (Ross, 2008). Ekman's (2014) recent ethnography of creative work suggests that the debate over precarity has ignored the propensity for worker opportunism in precarious labour markets. In addition, theoretical work has highlighted the potential for precarity to be realised as a reconfiguration of labour politics in which workers, mobilising collectively, can challenge the power of incumbent, large creative organisations (de Peuter, 2011). Indeed, it has even been argued that precarity is the normal status of the worker, and full employment the historical "outlier" (Neilson & Rossiter, 2008). Ekman (2014, p. 156) argues that this debate highlights the need for more multi-dimensional, "empirically dense and contextual" studies of worker precarity.

Worker precarity is an issue of considerable interest in Australian journalism (Lee-Wright, Phillips, & Witschge, 2011). Cunningham and Turnbull (2014) argue that the funding model for quality journalism has been largely dismantled by the changing relationships between news media and advertising. This has led to mass layoffs of journalists in major Australian media organisations over the past four years and a rapid "casualisation" of the journalistic workforce (ABC News, 2012; Bodey and Akerman, 2014; LA Times, 2010). While, as the quotes at the head of this paper show, there is considerable awareness of the intensification (battery hen) and devaluing (chicken feed) of journalists' labour within the industry, there has been limited academic examination of this phenomenon in the Australian context. There is evidence that the systematic casualisation of the workforce impacts inequitably on women (North, 2013) and that when forced out of traditional work roles, journalists may often be required to freelance (or "moonlight") in commercial work (such as PR), which can cause ethical conflict and damage their professional self-concepts (Fröhlich, Koch & Obermaier, 2013). There is a need therefore for studies which examine precarity from the journalists' perspective.

This paper addresses these gaps by presenting a case study of the perceived precarity of Australian professional journalists from across the media sphere and the spectrum of journalistic specialisms. The case study is based on primary data drawn from interviews with journalists, former journalists, editors, and media managers. Our research process was driven by three core questions: do journalists perceive their work as precarious? If so, what causes do they assign to the precarity and what effects has it had on their work and personal lives? What factors influence whether a journalist perceives their work as being precarious or not? We identify a number of perceived causes of precarity and job security for journalists, and argue that professional identity plays a driving role in shaping these perceptions. In particular, we highlight an important relationship between worker subjectivities - the relationship between preferred professional identity and perceived precarity. Due to the small size of our case study, these findings should be taken as indicative rather than conclusive. Yet our findings may resonate in industries beyond journalism or the broader category of creative work in which it resides. The case of cultural and creative workers is argued to “symbolise contemporary transformations of work” (Gill & Pratt, 2008, 2). We would argue that the changes occurring in the media sphere present somewhat of an “ideal type” case for building theory concerning the increasing precarity of work in the broader economy as digital technologies dismantle existing value chains and organisational structures.

## Literature Review

### Defining Precarity

Precarity is defined by Gill and Pratt as “all forms of insecure, contingent, flexible work - from illegalised, casualised and temporary employment, to homework, piecework and freelancing” (2008, p. 3). The term precarity is also extended beyond the realm of work to refer to the consequences of such “exploitative” employment relations on workers’ personal lives (Neilson & Rossiter, 2005, p. 1). Precarious work is not a new phenomenon; indeed some authors argue that precarious work is the norm and full employment the historical outlier (Jensen & Westenholz, 2004; Neilson and Rossiter, 2008). What is new is the contemporaneous spread of this precarity into highly skilled occupational categories (Gill & Pratt, 2008).

We have been, since before Beck so convincingly identified it in 2000, living in an era characterised by a “political economy of insecurity” for even those workers in the previously affluent middle layers of society (2000, p. 9). As economic and political complexities make large corporate structures difficult to sustain, employers shift risk to employees by abandoning tenured positions for the flexibility of a casualised, contracted, self-employed workforce (Kalleberg, 2009). For this reason, precarity is described as being “double edged” (p. 2). The birth of the term among European anti-capitalist protestors attests to its emancipatory connotations. While the flexibility inherent in post-Fordist capitalism condemns workers to an employment situation characterised by insecurity, it also provides the opportunity for new forms of organisation which mobilise the benefits of this precarity for workers. It is through this reasoning that “the creative, cognitive, or new media worker has emerged as the figure of the precarious worker par excellence” (Neilson & Rossiter, 2005, p. 2).

Typologies of precarity are beginning to emerge in the literature. Lowe (2014) identifies precarity as having three derivatives; job precarity, financial precarity, and skill precarity. Job precarity concerns the shifting of the employment landscape away from salaried jobs and towards casualised and self-employed models (Louie, Ostry, Quinlan, Keegel, Shoveller, & LaMontagne, 2006). Financial precarity concerns the extent to which employment provides people with a fair wage, and skill precarity concerns the extent to which individual employees have the necessary skill set to make a living as technology advances. It is no surprise that Lowe (2014) finds that the flexibility of the contemporary US economy means that, in this context at least, skill precarity is the greatest source of perceived precarity for workers.

In this paper, we are interested in precarity as a worker subjectivity. This means that we are interested less in the objective status of a worker as being precarious or not, according to some pre-determined scale of precarity (as used in studies such as Lowe, 2014), than we are in the worker's subjective perceptions of their work as secure or precarious. We consider precarity to be socially constructed perceptions of insecurity or uncertainty.

#### The Precarity of Journalists

The convergence of media and the collapse of the traditional advertising-funded economic model are considered the main drivers of precarity in journalism. Killebrew (2003, p. 39) discusses the challenges which media managers face in "confront[ing] existing cultures, tradition, and conventions, while overcoming a frantic climate of uncertainty" caused by the convergence of media channels. He argues that the key to dealing with such changes effectively is to engineer a values shift towards a risk-tolerant culture. It is important to note that precarity caused by technological revolution is not a new story in journalism. Studies of the evolution of journalism as a profession point to the historical importance of skill precarity. Smith (1977, p. 185) argues "the profession of journalism has been marked by a seemingly endless process of re-demarcation of specialisms and sub-professions. Every new mechanical device (telegraph, typewriter, wireless) has tended to summon into existence a new schism within the business of journalism, or rather, act as the defining catalyst for the emergence of a new brand of journalism."

Precarity in journalism is largely studied through the empirical case of freelancers, or self-employed journalists who contract their services to one or more media organisations. While the mainstream literature on journalism continues to favour a focus on the working practices and ideologies of full time, employed journalists (Das, 2006), there have more recently been a number of empirical studies into the work practices and employment insecurity of freelance journalists (Baines, 1999, 2002; Das, 2006, 2007; International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), 1999; Meehan, 2001). These studies have identified a series of sources of precarity affecting the growing proportion of journalists who work in freelance positions. The IFJ found that the increasingly large proportion of self-employed journalists has undermined the ability of media unions to negotiate for improved conditions (1999). Empirical studies of British journalists have also shown the breakdown of the work/life balance that characterises teleworkers such as freelance journalists (Baines, 1999, 2002). In the Australian context, Meehan (2001) found that Victorian freelancers are precarious not only because of employment insecurity and low wages, but also because of a lack of access to training opportunities.

Taking a Bourdieusian approach to understanding precarity, Das (2006) argues that freelancers experience symbolic violence at the hands of media organisations and commissioning editors through three avenues: restriction of work, lack of intellectual property protections, and declining pay rates as a result of labour oversupply and a lack of negotiating power on the part of the freelancer.

In both Das' analyses of the working conditions of Australian freelancers, the twin issues of motivation and identity arise. In her 2006 paper, her participants rely on work other than "journalism" to earn money, but choose to identify as professional journalists because "they love their work" (p. 176). In addition, they identify having control over their work and having independence as key reasons for continuing to freelance (rather than seeking salaried employment). These are primarily ideological reasons tied to their occupational identity as journalists. In her 2007 paper, she specifically focuses on the professional ideals of freelance journalists, arguing that these are at odds with their lack of independence (Das, 2007). Although it is not in the scope of this paper to adopt a normative critique of journalists' identification tactics, it is interesting from a value-free perspective to note the importance of this professional identity to freelancers.

Indeed, the role of professional ideals and identities in driving the work practices of journalists has been covered extensively (see Curran, 1977, for a historical analysis; and Deuze, 2005, for a review). Deuze (2005, p. 458) investigates the role that an ideal

-typical professional identity, backed up by and based on a strongly defended occupational ideology, plays for journalists in “liquid modern news times”. This “ideal typical value system” has also been studied through the lens of “professional mystique”. Defining professional mystique as “the expectations built up through training and through the early stages of on-the-job-socialisation”, McQuarrie (1999, p. 21) investigates the extent to which a lack of identification with “mystical” expectations affect the job satisfaction of US journalists. She finds that these expectations - such as working in the service of an ideal (public service), autonomy, having meaningful encounters with others, being appreciated by the public and a supportive workplace - are strong influencers of journalists, but that a lack of identification with them does not cause job dissatisfaction.

While there have been a limited number of studies of journalist precarity, a number of questions remain. The working conditions of freelancers have received some attention (Das, 2005, 2006; Meehan, 2001), but there has been no systematic study of how precarity impacts on journalists working in other occupational categories (for example in salaried employment). The mass layoffs at major news organisations over the past five years (and earlier in some cases) suggest that these workers may also consider themselves precarious (ABC News, 2012; Bodey & Akerman, 2014; LA Times, 2010). In addition, there has been no consideration of the subjective factors which may frame journalists’ experiences of precarity, in other words, the factors that may cause some workers to perceive their work as being more or less precarious. In this vein, while the precarity of journalists, and the role of professional identities in driving work attitudes have both received attention, no study has considered how these two worker subjectivities may interact. This is the gap we seek to address.

## **Methodology**

### Case Study Setting

A case study setting is ideal for building preliminary analytical knowledge in areas which are relatively new to academic study (Eisenhardt, 1989). Although there is a strong and well-developed literature on journalistic work (Fröhlich et al, 2013; Killebrew, 2003; McQuarrie, 1999), the field itself is in the middle of what our participants call an “industrial revolution”, meaning that experiences of precarity are likely to be rapidly shifting and not adequately captured by older studies of journalistic work. For this reason, it makes sense to adopt an inductive, case-based approach for this preliminary study, in order to establish the context for experiences of precarity in a defined subset of the field as a whole. We believe the scope of our case is well-defined for the purposes of this study, as we have gathered participants from across three spheres of journalistic work: legacy media, digital media, and marketing. Our participants come from different positions within those spheres, in relation to types of journalism and seniority. The purpose is not to generate findings which are generalisable to the entire population of working journalists, but to identify what Tsoukas (1989) calls “generative mechanisms”, to identify underlying sociological relationships which may explain journalists’ perceptions of precarity. We are sensitive to the issues raised around the prioritisation of the accounts of certain types of workers in analyses of precarity (Fantone, 2007; Vishmidt, 2005). As such we did not limit our focus to traditionally precarious employment classes, like freelancers, but took an inductive approach to identifying and understanding precarity across the journalistic profession. By adopting a well-defined case setting and an inductive approach to analysis, we optimise the theoretical advantages of a case-based approach (Langley, 1999).

The focus of our study is on the precarity of Australian journalists. While the majority of our participants currently live and work in the Sydney region, the group as a whole are highly mobile, having worked in Melbourne, rural New South Wales, rural Queensland, Indonesia, across Western Europe, and in conflict regions in Africa and the Middle East. We identified three spheres in which Australian journalists are employed: legacy news media (e.g. large news conglomerates); digital media (e.g. digital publications);

and marketing (e.g. “content” or “brand” marketing agencies). The scope of our study is defined across these three spheres rather than just in the legacy news media sphere) as, from the outset, it was clear that self-identified “journalists” do not work solely in the legacy media sphere, although the professional origins of journalism are closely tied to print newspaper organisations. Rather, a lack of jobs in the legacy media sphere, and a growth of jobs in the digital and marketing spheres, have seen a movement of journalists into jobs in these adjacent, content-focused, production areas. This can be seen in Appendix A, which details the sphere in which each participant is currently employed, and the sphere in which they began their career as a journalist.

As we are interested in understanding the links between industry conditions and experiences of precarity, we spent at least 15 minutes of each interview (up to the full interview in some cases) exploring our participants’ career histories and linking career moves to prevailing industry changes. It stands to reason that precarious labour conditions push people into new roles and new spheres of employment, and many of our participants talked about their precarity as freelancers or salaried journalists retrospectively. For this reason, Appendix A includes not only current job title, but also information about relevant previous roles about which the participant talked in the interview.

#### Data Collection

We have a total of 17 participants, recruited through a mixture of targeted sampling and snowballing. We sought to recruit participants from across the spectrum of journalistic professions. Participant information is given in Appendix A.

We used semi-structured interviews to gather our data, with the majority of participants (14) being interviewed by telephone, and the remainder being interviewed in person (2) or over email (1). The interview guide consisted of 12 questions grouped into topics on employment history, changes to news media, developments in the industry (focussed on changes to employment), and perspectives on precarity.

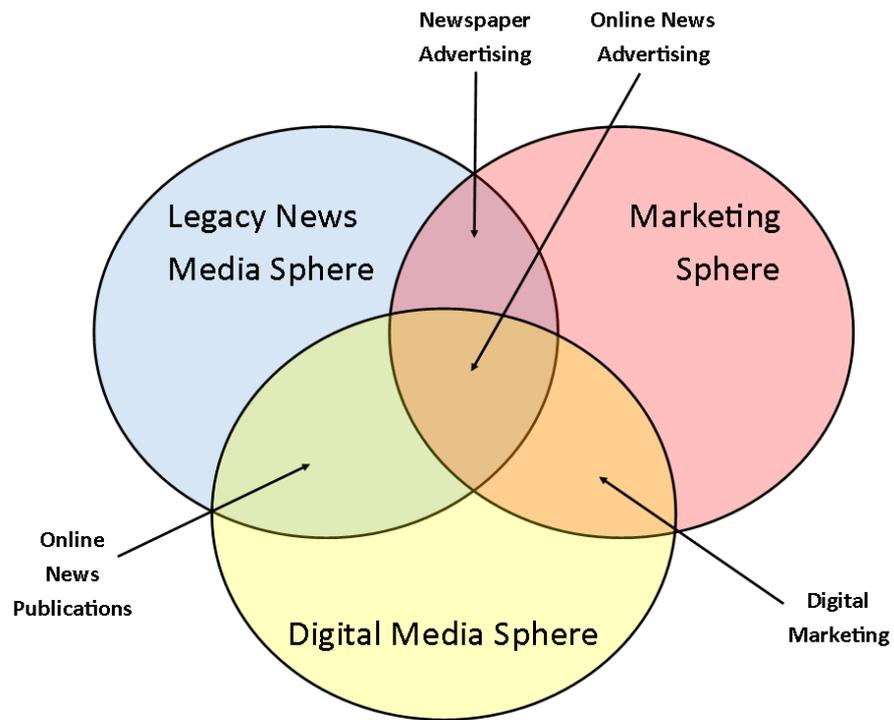
Our shortest interview was 30 minutes, and our longest 1.5 hrs. The average length of the interviews conducted was 52 minutes. All interviews were imported into NVivo 10 for coding and analysis.

#### Data Analysis

Our first step in data analysis was to inductively code the data using NVivo, resulting in nine aggregated theme codes spanning a range of issues related to precarity (precarity, subjective precarity, objective precarity, factors contributing to precarity, the changing nature of journalism, pay, freelance pay, professional ethics, traditional journalism). We then moved onto a secondary stage of analysis where we identified the perceived causes of precarity and the outcomes of precarious work for the participants. Following this, we looked for variables which explained the different perspectives held by groups of participants concerning the precarity of the industry and highlighted professional identity as a key variable. Finally, we returned to the original coding structure and re-analysed the codes for “identity”, “ideology” and “professional ethics” in order to understand in more detail the conceptions of identity which were being invoked and how these related to participants’ perceptions of precarity.

#### Defining “The Journalist”

The contemporary world of journalism is diversifying and disaggregating as a result of digitalisation and media convergence (Deuze, 2005). Acknowledging this, we allow our participants’ responses to guide our judgement of who is “in” or “out” of the field. This is particularly important because, as we explore below, journalists are increasingly working in positions and organisations which would not be considered traditionally journalistic, like brand journalism.



**Figure 1 - Spheres in which our journalist participants work**

Some of our “journalist” participants identify as journalists working within the journalism field, some hold different occupational identities (e.g. researcher) but work within the journalism field, and others identify as journalists but work in adjacent fields (e.g. marketing). We believe it is important to include each of these three groups as they together represent the world of contemporary journalism, which exists across and beyond the traditional field as illustrated in Figure 1.

## Results

In the first two parts of this section, we explore the different causes and experiences of precarity relayed to us by salaried journalists and freelancers. Following this, we analyse the perspectives of those journalists who do not see their work as precarious, and focus on their perceptions of the causes and experiences of employment security. These two sections effectively answer the questions: do journalists perceive their work as precarious? If so, what causes do they assign to this precarity and what effect has it had on their work and personal lives?

In the key findings section, we present our analysis of why different groupings of participants perceive precarity differently, and answer the following question: what factors influence whether a journalist perceives their work as being precarious or not? We begin with an analysis of freelancers’ precarity.

### Understanding the Causes and Experiences of Freelancer Precarity

Analysis reveals four factors that are perceived to contribute to precarity (see Figure 2). The first is the twin issue of chronic oversupply of labour, and the undervaluing of content. The former is caused by layoffs at legacy news organisations and by the thousands of graduates entering the market annually, and the latter is due to the amount of content now produced for free by consumers and others.

The progressive undervaluing of content is a pervasive issue identified by all our participants. Even in legacy news organisations, where freelancers have the greatest protection under union-negotiated agreements, word rates have fallen to half what they were five years ago.

Described as a “commodity decline” by digital marketing agency CEO Adam, or “race to the bottom” by editorial director Camila, the situation is exacerbated by an oversupply of labour and by the rise of crowdsourcing platforms. Platforms with international reach, like Freelancer.com and Elance.com, are the site of fierce competition among creative professionals, with aggressive quoting serving to push down prices. According to senior marketing executive Tara, the outcome is the cost of labour has been “driven down to nothing”.

The second cause of freelancer precarity is the clash of professional logics which occurs when journalists decide to seek work in corporate writing or marketing. Our participants identified that working for marketers, as opposed to working for legacy media managers, involved not only a new form of writing, but also different types of expectations concerning timescales and different norms concerning how the brief should be presented and how accurate it should be. This clash appears to freelancers like photographer and journalist Tom as a type of naiveté. When it seems as though the brief does not match the feedback received on the copy, “it’s not a question of transparency, so much as competency,” he said. “I think sometimes they don’t really know what they want, they just really want you to go away and sort of know what has to be done and do it.”



**Figure 2 - Causes and Experiences of Freelancer Precarity**

The third cause of precarity for freelancers is a lack of access to adequate training opportunities in both legacy and new media spheres. This limits opportunities to professionally develop and thereby improve earning potential. As Adam notes, the traditional “training ground” for new journalists was in legacy news media organisations. With jobs in these organisations in sharp decline, “the question becomes: how do you get trained up in the industry,” he said. While the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance (industry union) runs a freelance professional development programme, it is not capable of filling the training gap left by the shrinkage in traditional news organisations.

The fourth cause of precarity is a lack of what is perceived by freelancers as “desirable work”. Freelance photojournalist Ned drew a Venn diagram of two intersecting circles: jobs with organisations that do “proper journalism”, and jobs that pay well. He

emphasised the extreme slowness of the overlap between spheres. He later argued that even when he managed to find employment in that intersection, the economic realities were still too harsh for him to survive. "I was at the point where I was working for people who were doing journalism justice," he said. "But the level of risk you have to assume and the kind of, the business reality of it, making a living out of it... You end up spending so much of your own time and effort and money you can't get back. And that can't go on for very long, really."

The precarity caused by these industry factors had a number of common characteristics across our freelancer participants. They felt that freelance journalists were exposed to harsh and worsening performance pressures which erode the distinction between work and home life. According to editorial director Camila, this creates a situation where "you're only ever as good as your last story."

This pressure creates a "noblesse oblige" relationship between editors and writers, as noted by freelance journalist Ana. Both our freelancer and our editor participants strongly emphasised the importance of building enduring relationships in order to secure work. These relationships are a lifeline to freelancers. They are also a necessity for editors, selecting from a rapidly expanding pool in which the reliability and quality of many potential contractors is unproven. This makes both professional and social networks increasingly important for freelancers in accessing work opportunities.

The precarity of these freelancers was heightened by a need to adapt to new systems of value in different media spheres. While some had the symbolic capital to negotiate a fair rate with agents based on the value of their work to the end client, others were inexperienced in negotiation or lacked necessary status, and so were forced to compete on price.

The most general experience of precarity experienced by the freelancers we interviewed is one of financial and residential insecurity. In addition to living from one job to the next, many were unable to afford to live near the location of their work. This led to long commutes and separation from colleagues, heightening the breakdown of the work/life balance and affecting job satisfaction and mental health. Arts journalist Ana noted that journalists in her field are particularly affected by the "weird professional atmosphere" of being "terrified of being ill" and living in physical isolation from support networks.

#### Understanding the Causes and Experiences of Salaried Journalist Precarity

The experiences and perceived causes of precarity are markedly different for the salaried journalists we interviewed than they are for the freelancers (See Figure 3). The single most significant difference in causes of perceived precarity is the culture of job redundancy that pervades the legacy news media sphere. All participants who had held salaried positions at legacy organisations spoke of how insecure, disheartening and challenging it was to work through several rounds of redundancy in each job.

A number of our more recently graduated participants felt they had benefitted from a practice of legacy organisations replacing well-paid, long-tenure senior journalists with lower-paid graduates. They also felt this was progressively eroding the traditional newsroom culture into non-existence. Salaried news journalist Nathan said traditional culture was being replaced with a "dog eat dog" atmosphere of aggressive competition for stories and promotion.

Part of this aggressive competition was attributed to the lack of opportunities to progress in metropolitan locations. Journalists reported feeling they needed to "go bush" to prove themselves and earn the right to work in the city. Newer graduates noted their university colleagues had unrealistic expectations of finding work in their city of choice. "If you want to get a job you need to move, you need to go bush," said Nathan. "That's where all the jobs are because no one wants to go there."



**Figure 3 - Salaried Journalist Precarity**

Another persistent source of precarity for our salaried journalists is the practice of rotating employees at all levels of the hierarchy every two years, which occurs at several large legacy organisations. According to our participants, the management gave no consideration to their residential address when choosing where to move them. As sports journalist Michael said, this makes it “hard to put down roots somewhere and get settled in a particular area.”

As shown in Figure 3, the salaried journalists we interviewed characterised their perceived precarity along four major lines. The layoffs and restructuring occurring across the legacy news media sphere meant participants felt there was an ever present threat of redundancy in their workplaces. Siobhan chose to move into social media management because she had been through several rounds of redundancy in every legacy journalism job she’d had. “[It makes me feel] pretty crap,” she said. “It is demoralising, thinking that your role is so fickle.” She said there was “not a journalist in the country” who hadn’t had a similar experience. Michael said this omnipresent threat of redundancy meant he “couldn’t really know what’s round the corner and whether you’ll be the one who pays... They always say editorial is at the bare bones already but you never really know.”

The demands of the “digital first” race—to publish news online as it happens, and before all competitors—add to the pressures facing our salaried journalists. Participants noted this race was often at the expense of quality reporting, with Nathan recalling an editor saying he’d rather see copy published quickly with errors than delayed by fact checking or editing.

According to Nathan, this affected his productivity and also his passion. “All the extra pressures make you, to a degree, not care, and just makes it like a sausage factory,” he said. “You come in and pump the same crap out everyday and that passion, that love for what you do, you lose it a bit.” Ana emphasised the consequences of this when she said that these pressures can lead to journalists “burning out” as their passion is turned inside out by the demands of the job.

A particularly interesting experience of precarity relates to the lack of, and high demand for, jobs in major cities. Participants reported offering to take large pay cuts to move back into city locations. "People who've worked in the industry for years and years and should be editors are coming back to junior level positions just to get jobs," said Nathan. "They're taking \$20-30k pay cuts just to get a job in Sydney, Melbourne, in Brisbane." To escape the bush circuit, he was willing to take a pay cut of up to \$10k - a substantial proportion of his graduate salary.

Between this need to relocate repeatedly for quality of life and progression, and the system of rotations at many large legacy news employers, our salaried journalists experience significant residential insecurity. Nathan, among others, commented that moving around for work had meant he had missed opportunities to invest or "make a life", and has made these sacrifices to get ahead in his job. "I've lived in four places in eighteen months," he said.

Our participants argued that this precarity has had the effect of narrowing the demographics of journalists entering and remaining in the industry, both in freelance and in salaried positions. According to Ana, the necessity of completing unremunerated internships means "you have to be quite wealthy or at least come from a loving home to keep doing it, because your first few years are going to be unpaid." She also argued that fiscally-minded journalists are likely to self-select out of such a precarious profession. "People drop out very quickly – literally if they're smart then they drop out because they figure out that they can earn actual money doing something else", she said. "You get people who can afford to do [arts journalism], rather than people who would be really good at it."

This "dropping out" is reflected by other participants. Freelance radio journalist Alex noted her sense of precarity "confirmed the kind of work I want to do" and made her exit the news media industry for doctoral studies in the arts. "It's made it really clear that I would rather undergo personal sacrifice and personal financial sacrifice and keep doing what I believe in, than go along with the tide," she said. "There's something empowering about that because it makes it really clear that what I am doing is the right thing, because I have chosen it against all the odds."

The concept of a "plan B" was discussed by digital editor Sasha, who told a story of a colleague attending a digital journalism training course for mid-career professionals. "We went around the room and everyone said why they were there and one woman said 'look – I'm here today to see if I can learn a little about how to do online journalism because if I decide I can't do it I'm just going to quit and do nursing,'" she said. Sasha said that she knew at least five former colleagues who had retrained as doctors because of industry conditions. Both Alex and Ned recently won scholarships to study for PhDs, both related to their previous work but neither in journalism.

#### Understanding the Causes and Experiences of Journalist Security

In contrast to the other participants, five interviewees reported feeling confident in their ability to secure well-paid work across the media sphere (as summarised in Figure 4). The primary cause for this feeling of security was the creation of and growth in the digital media space. Digital sports journalist Mila was happy to be publishing online because "it's actually probably a lot more safe than other areas of work in journalism and in media." She didn't see it as a risky industry, and noted that the large organisation she worked for got "a lot of money from online advertising, video, and they need people to manage that content." According to Siobhan, the public had "never been hungrier for content," and "as long as you can provide content – and I mean content in the broadest of terms – then you're gonna be okay."

### Causes of Security

#### **Stable Industry**

The perception that online is not a 'risky industry'

#### **Strong Supply of Work in Online**

There is no shortage of new opportunities for people with online skills

#### **Demand for Content**

The public and news organisations have 'never been hungrier for content'

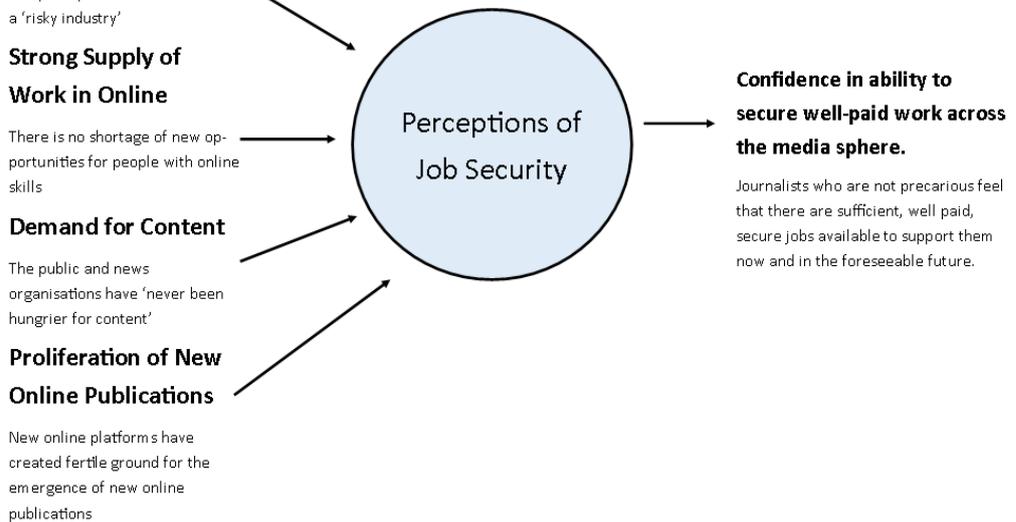
#### **Proliferation of New Online Publications**

New online platforms have created fertile ground for the emergence of new online publications

### Experiences of Security

#### **Confidence in ability to secure well-paid work across the media sphere.**

Journalists who are not precarious feel that there are sufficient, well paid, secure jobs available to support them now and in the foreseeable future.



**Figure 4 - Causes and Experiences of Security for Journalists (amalgamated)**

Growth in new media publications like BuzzFeed, Broadsheet and Hoopla contributed to feelings of security for participants. According to Brad, editor at a large legacy organisation, job losses in traditional news organisations were compensated for by the growth of jobs in new areas. "There are some really good startups round these days, even like BuzzFeed is taking on loads of journalists these days", he said. "It's swings and roundabouts. There are probably more mainstream opportunities now than there were ten years ago in terms of jobs opening up for younger people."

An unwillingness to adapt, or a lack of talent generally, was brought up as contributing to perceptions of precarity. "Good people will never be out of work," said Camila. Pulling out the implications of this statement, she stated that the conditions in the industry are an excuse for journalists who are not prepared to move with the times. "There is more demand for good writers than there has ever been," she said. "Mediocre people are being weeded out... People who have [been weeded out], that I know, are actually really unreliable and they'll tell you it's because the industry is falling apart and all this other stuff but they never bothered to use Twitter, they never bothered to think about readership, they only thought about themselves when they were writing and their own skillset and you just can't do that anymore."

The majority of participants noted skillsets were the key determinant in employment precarity. One observation made by Sasha was that skills most valued in digital journalism tend to be held by new graduates, but not veteran journalists. "For a lot of older people – mid age to older people – it's very precarious," she said. "Every journalist knows there's redundancy happening everywhere in print journalism and a lot of people who are older feel they are too old to retrain to get those technical skills that you are expected to have these days – even things like video editing, a lot of people don't feel like they want to learn that. You look at all the job ads and that's often a minimum job requirement."

## The Relationship between Preferred Professional Identity and Perceptions of Precarity

A key differing factor emerged when we contrasted the characteristics of participants who identified their work as precarious with those who did not. The participants' perceptions of precarity were linked to their preferred professional identity. We identified two dominant preferred professional identities within our sample: A *traditional journalistic* professional identity, as identified in previous studies of journalism (e.g. Das, 2007; Deuze, 2005); and a professional identity based on the notion of commitment to a *readership*.

The nature of the traditional journalistic identity is explored in great detail in Deuze (2005). Key to the way our participants described this preferred identity were journalistic ideologies; normative ideas about the role that journalists should play in society. Journalism was seen by Alex as a vocation, by Kathy as a labour of love, and by Ned, as a democratic necessity. "No one has any answers to the big questions of how journalists will continue to produce the sort of journalism that's necessary to help people be effective citizens in a democracy, which is what journalism is for in its purest sense," he said. "That's why we do what we do – to help people engage with the world we live in." The realities of the industry often come into conflict with idealism, with Ned admitting "most journalists are a bit idealistic and consider it something of a calling." However, Adam noted "that sort of enthusiasm can only get you so far" in a sphere where mass layoffs are the norm.

The traditional "fourth estate" professional identity of the journalist has been traced by Smith (1977) to the massive growth in newspaper circulation between the Napoleonic and Crimean wars. Smith states that "[t]he journalist found himself *{sic}* with a dominant professional doctrine of confrontation with the government rather than subservience or cooperation with it; the journalist increasingly spoke of himself as part of a 'fourth estate' which exercised social power as a legitimate by-product of the circulating of information" (p. 189). It is important to place this identity in historical context as Smith argues that the "ideology of the press and the development of appropriate production technologies" are co-evolutionary. The alternate "readership" professional identity held by some of our respondents may represent an emergent ideology of journalism accompanying the growth of digital platforms for media.

In the descriptions of our participants, the "readership" preferred professional identity invokes a critique of the traditional identity, based on the commercial and organisational realities of news production. People who took this position argued that the first responsibility of journalists was to their readers, and advertising and editorial pressures in the legacy news sphere made it more difficult to fulfil this responsibility. These respondents were not distancing themselves from traditional journalistic ethics, but rather uncoupling their professional identity from its role associations and carrying it into other media spheres. For these respondents, the disintermediation of the marketing sphere makes them better able to meet the needs of the reader.

For Camila, who now works in the marketing sphere, the traditional preferred identity actually overstates the democratic role of journalism in general, which is often not, as Tom said, the "keeping the bastards honest" writing of lore. "The thing that really interested me was the storytelling side of things," Camila said. "This is going to sound odd, but I don't have any hang-ups about the fourth estate - the kind of journalism I was doing was explanatory, not democratically fundamental. I think a lot of journos overstate their participation as an independent observer as opposed to a demystifier. As a storyteller, what I am doing has not changed." This data suggests that Fröhlich et al's "internationally shared" ethical norm concerning the (in)appropriateness of journalists engaging in activities such as public relations, content or brand marketing, is eroding (2013, p. 809). There is no consensus among our participants that such activities are ethically adverse, rather we find that the emerging journalistic professional identity based on the notion of readership legitimises such work.

While some participants have long preferred a readership-based journalistic identity, others like Adam were forced to rethink their identity as a result of industry realities. "My heart's always been in journalism, as a writer, and I still hold the ethics of journalism close to my heart," he said. "But practically the business opportunity is to work with big brands who want to produce their own content. I don't hold it to be pure journalism, but you've still got to have that background." Other participants adopted a readership identity based on disillusionment with the institutions of the legacy sphere. Tara spent many years working towards getting a role with a legacy media corporation she'd long admired, only to find that the reality did not match up to her expectations. "I came to a news environment that was a little bit self-satisfied and at some point it became clear to me that [my aspirational workplace] was a corporatised, lazy environment... where things were more about money, about compromising."

Participants who prefer a professional identity based on the notion of readership are better able to adapt to the exogenous shocks impacting the field of journalism, and are therefore less likely to consider their work precarious. They consider their role as journalists as writing to the needs and wants of the reader, and see this relationship with the reader as being transferrable to other contexts. If they cannot support their work through traditional journalistic avenues, they are able to transpose the same type of work into other contexts such as brand journalism or corporate writing. Some participants even feel they are better able to realise the aspirations associated with their professional identities in these contexts as they see corporate writing, for example, as being a disintermediation of the relationships between advertiser, writer and reader, when compared with journalism. "The fundamental driver for any publication is the readership," said Camila. "You should always be writing for the reader, not for the advertiser. What I'm doing now is just taking out the middleman, I no longer have a publisher between me and the advertiser... Effectively, what I'm doing has not changed, it has been disintermediated. I'm no longer working to pay the wages of [legacy media] fat cats."

In contrast, participants who prefer a professional identity premised on a more traditional notion of journalism struggle to adapt to the exogenous shocks disrupting the field, and are more likely to consider their work as precarious. Their professional identity is predicated on the existing structures and institutions of the legacy media sphere. When these structures and institutions are constricted or made obsolete by the breakdown of existing economic models, these participants are unable to transpose to other contexts with more secure work.

An additional factor at play here is the ideology underpinning the traditional journalistic identity may devalue the skills associated with digital or "online" journalism. As a result, the jobs available to those participants with a traditional identity in what remains of the legacy media sphere are commonly few in number, insecure, and often lower paid, compared to the historical conditions for salaried journalists. Those who fail to secure salaried work are left with limited choices; to struggle on in poorly paid and insecure freelance work, to attempt to shift their professional identity, or to seek to transpose their work into other contexts, like academia, which meet their societal aspirations.

### **Concluding Discussion**

This paper is the first to consider the perceived precarity of journalists working across the media sphere. By interviewing a range of journalists employed across the media industries, we have been able to gather some indicative evidence concerning journalists' perceptions of their own employment (in)security, and what they perceive as the causes of this (in)security.

While the majority of our participants considered their work to be precarious, a minority reported that they were able to find plenty of well-paid work, particularly in online and brand journalism. While all our freelancer participants considered their work to be precarious, we found that our sample of salaried journalists was split, with some seeing

their work as precarious and others not. We found the perceived causes and experiences of precarity are different for our salaried journalist participants than for the freelancers. The freelancers contend with falling word rates, poor access to training, a lack of desirable work, and new value systems as they move between media spheres, all the while needing to maintain positive relationships with noblesse oblige editors. Meanwhile, the salaried journalists face residential insecurity and threats of redundancy, leading to highly competitive workplaces. While our sample is relatively small, it is diverse, and these findings add significant breadth to existing studies of journalists' employment insecurity, which typically focus specifically on freelancers (e.g. Das, 2006, 2007).

Following an analysis of how our journalists experience precarity, we turned to an analysis of why they experience their work in this way. Based on the characteristics of our sample, we came to the conclusion is that it is not purely skills or opportunity that differentiates "precarious" from "secure" journalists, but rather professional identity. We find that the journalists in our sample who strongly prefer a traditional journalistic professional identity do not make a move into newer forms of digital or corporate journalism (where jobs tend to be seen as more available and secure) because they are normatively bound to the institutions and norms of the legacy media sphere. On the other hand, we identify an emergent professional identity which we term "readership", and we find that the journalists in our sample with this preferred professional identity do not experience the same issues in moving beyond the legacy news sphere. These journalists see their role as writing for a readership, and find the disintermediated realms of digital and corporate journalism better enable them to deliver on the norms associated with this professional identity than did the legacy news media sphere.

These findings concur with the studies on professional identities in general (Johnson, 1972) and journalistic identity in particular (Ursell, 2004) which see identity as "a technique for negotiating place and status in society" (p. 35). In this context, the journalist's identity is not just a regime of the self (Rose, 1996), but an institutional anchor which enables the individual to operate effectively within one professional context and not in others (Giddens, 1991).

The limited scope of our case study provides indicative propositions concerning precarity and identity which offer many potential opportunities for future research. Our data tentatively suggests that journalists' preferred professional identities contribute to their perceptions of employment precarity. In order to confirm these findings, future studies should seek to identify whether the two professional identities espoused by our respondents are more generally prevalent across the profession. From there, a sampling of journalists who consider themselves precarious, those who do not, and those who have undergone career shifts in response to perceived precarity could be used to explore whether the identity dynamics observed in this study are more generally applicable. Finally, it would be interesting to explore whether the same kind of identity/perceived precarity dynamic exists in other professions exposed to the disruption of digital technology, such as graphic design or film-making.

In this paper, we avoid the temptation to present an epochal account of changing work subjectivities, characteristic of many contemporary studies of identity in the "new economy" (Jensen & Westenholz, 2004). The emergent readership identity does not, we would argue, represent a hegemonic shift in the professional identity of journalists, but the most recent step in the historical professional identity dynamic produced at the nexus of evolving economic, labour, and technological developments. This emergent identity enables some journalists to move into non-traditional roles which they perceive as less precarious, by providing professional justification for the value of digital or brand journalism.

Those journalists who continue to evoke a more traditional preferred professional identity do not see these types of work as legitimate forms of journalism, and so are more likely to remain in industries and positions which they perceive as precarious. In

2003, Killebrew argued that journalists were “at a crossroads” (p. 40), and there can be little doubt from the data we have presented that the same metaphor still applies. Historical analyses of journalism such as that of Smith (1977) suggest that the professional identity we label as “traditional” is a relatively modern invention anyway. In this context, the focus on readership as a source of identity and legitimacy for professional journalists may be experiencing not an emergence, but rather a resurrection.

## Appendix A

Table 1 - Characteristics of Participants (Anonymised)

ID	Sphere of the Journalistic Field (Original Sphere – where relevant)	Job Title (Previous job- where relevant)	Age	Precarious?
Nathan	Legacy News Media	Salaried News Journalist	20-25	Yes
Michael	Legacy News Media	Salaried Sports Journalist	20-25	Yes
Alex	Legacy News Media	Freelance Radio Journalist	25-30	Yes
Mila	Legacy News Media	Salaried Sports Journalist	20-25	No
Kathy	Legacy News Media / Digital Media	Freelance News and Features Journalist	25-30	Yes
Troy	Digital Media (Legacy News Media)	Managing Editor (Digital Executive)	35-40	Yes
Adam	Marketing (Legacy News Media)	CEO, Digital Marketing Agency (Salaried and Freelance Legacy and Digital Journalist)	40-45	No
Ned	Legacy News Media/ Digital Media/ Marketing (Legacy News Media)	Freelance Photojournalist	25-30	Yes
Ana	Legacy News Media/Digital Media	Freelance Arts Journalist (Salaried Legacy Journalist)	30-35	Yes
Siobhan	Legacy News Media	Social Media Manager (Salaried Legacy Journalist)	25-30	No
Sasha	Digital Media	Editor (Salaried Legacy Journalist)	30-35	Yes
Tara	Marketing (Legacy News Media)	Senior Executive (Salaried and Freelance Legacy and Digital Journalist)	40-45	No
Brad	Legacy News Media	Editor (Salaried Legacy Journalist)	30-35	No
Camila	Marketing (Legacy News Media)	Editorial Director (Salaried and Freelance Legacy and Digital Journalist)	35-40	No
Tom	Legacy News Media/ Digital Media/ Marketing (Legacy News Media)	Freelance Journalist and Photographer (Salaried Legacy Journalist)	30-35	Yes
Anthony	Legacy News Media/ Digital Media/ Marketing (Legacy News Media)	Freelance Journalist (Salaried Legacy Journalist)	30-35	Yes
Mark	Union	Spokesperson		

## References

- ABC News. (18 June 2012). Fairfax slashes 1900 jobs, closes presses. Retrieved from <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2012-06-18/fairfax-blog-follow-developments-live/4076870>
- Baines, S. (1999). Servicing the media: freelancing, teleworking and 'enterprising' careers. *New Technology, Work and Employment*, 14, 1, 18-31.
- Baines, S. (2002). New technologies and old ways of working in the home of the self-employed teleworker. *New Technology, Work and Employment*, 17, 2, 89-101.
- Beck, U. (2000). *The Brave New World of Work*. Boston: Polity.
- Bodey, M. and Akerman, P. (8 May 2014). Staff in 'unlawful' walkout as Fairfax swings the jobs axe again. *The Australian*. Retrieved from [http://www.abc.net.au/mediawatch/transcripts/1514\\_oz.pdf](http://www.abc.net.au/mediawatch/transcripts/1514_oz.pdf)
- Boltanski, L. & Schiapello, E. (2006). *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. New York: Verso.
- Christopherson, S. (2008). Beyond the Self-expressive Creative Worker An Industry Perspective on Entertainment Media. *Theory, culture & society*, 25, 7-8, 73-95.
- Cunningham, S. D., & Turnbull, S. (2014). *The media and communications in Australia*. Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin.
- Curran, J. (1977). Capitalism and Control of the Press, 1800-1975. In J. Curran, M. Gurevitch & J. Woollacott. (Eds.), *Mass Communication and Society*, (pp. 195-230). London: Edward Arnold.
- Das, J. (2006). Varied perceptions: freelancing in Sydney's print media. *Australian Journalism Review*, 28, 2, 171.
- Das, J. (2007). Sydney freelance journalists and the notion of professionalism. *Pacific Journalism Review*, 13, 1, 142-160.
- De Peuter, G. (2011). Creative Economy and Labor Precarity A Contested Convergence. *Journal of communication inquiry*, 35, 4, 417-425.
- Deuze, M. (2005). What is journalism? Professional identity and ideology of journalists reconsidered. *Journalism*, 6, 4, 442-464.
- Eisenhardt, K. M. (1989). Building theories from case study research. *Academy of management review*, 14, 4, 532-550.
- Ekman, S. (2014). Is the high-involvement worker precarious or opportunistic? Hierarchical ambiguities in late capitalism. *Organization*, 21, 2, 141-158
- Fantone, L. (2007). Precarious changes: Gender and generational politics in contemporary Italy. *Feminist review*, 87, 1, 5-20.
- Fröhlich, R., Koch, T., & Obermaier, M. (2013). What's the harm in moonlighting? A qualitative survey on the role conflicts of freelance journalists with secondary employment in the field of PR. *Media, Culture & Society*, 35, 7, 809-829.
- Gill, R., & Pratt, A. (2008). In the social factory? Immaterial labour, precarity and cultural work. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 25, 7-8, 1-30.
- Grugulis, I., & Stoyanova, D. (2012). Social capital and networks in film and TV: Jobs for the boys? *Organization Studies*, 33, 10, 1311-1331.
- International Federation of Journalists (1999). *Freelance futures: World survey of the social and economic status of freelance journalists*. Brussels: IFJ.
- Jensen, T. E., & Westenholz, A. (Eds.). (2004). *Identity in the age of the new economy: life in temporary and scattered work practices*. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Johnson, T. J. (1972). *Professions and Power*. London: Macmillan.
- Kalleberg, A. L. (2009). Precarious work, insecure workers: Employment relations in transition. *American Sociological Review*, 74, 1, 1-22.
- Killebrew, K. C. (2003). Culture, creativity and convergence: Managing journalists in a changing information workplace. *International Journal on Media Management*, 5, 1, 39-46.
- Kim, C. (2014). Labor and the limits of seduction in Korea's creative economy. *Television & New Media*, 15, 6, 562-576.
- LA Times (28 April 2010). ABC News concludes wrenching round of cuts with fewer involuntary layoffs than expected. Retrieved from <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/entertainmentnewsbuzz/2010/04/abc-news-concludes-wrenching-round-of-cuts-with-fewer-involuntary-layoffs-than-expected.html>

- Langley, A. (1999). Strategies for theorizing from process data. *Academy of Management review*, 24, 4, 691-710.
- Lee, C. K., & Kofman, Y. (2012). The politics of precarity views beyond the United States. *Work and Occupations*, 39, 4, 388-408.
- Lee-Wright, P., Phillips, A., & Witschge, T. (2011). *Changing journalism*. New York: Routledge.
- Louie, A.M., Ostry, A.S., Quinlan, M., Keegel, T., Shoveller, J. & LaMontagne, A.D. (2006). Empirical Study of Employment Arrangements and Precariousness in Australia. *Relations Industrielles/Industrial Relations*, 61, 3, 465-489.
- Lowe, T. (2014). *Subjective Economic Insecurity in the United States: Perceived Precarity in the New Economy*. Doctoral Dissertation. Paper 476, available at <http://digitalcommons.uconn.edu/dissertations/476>.
- McQuarrie, F. (1999). Professional mystique and journalists' dissatisfaction. *Newspaper research journal*, 20, 3, 20.
- Meehan, K. (2001). It's the hard life for freelancers. *Australian Journalism Review*, 23, 1, 99-109.
- Menger, P.-M. (1999). 'Artistic Labor Markets and Careers', *Annual Review of Sociology*, 25, 541-74.
- Neilson, B., & Rossiter, N. (2005). From precarity to precarity and back again: labour, life and unstable networks. *Fibreculture*, 5.
- Neilson, B., & Rossiter, N. (2008). Precarity as a political concept, or, Fordism as exception. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 25, 7-8, 51-72.
- Ross, A. (2008). The New Geography of Work Power to the Precarious? *Theory, Culture & Society*, 25, 7-8, 31-49.
- Smith, A. (1977). Technology and Control: the interactive dimensions of journalism. In J. Curran, M. Gurevitch & J. Woollacott (Eds.), *Communication and Society*. (pp. 174-194). London: Edward Arnold.
- Tsoukas, H. (1989). The validity of idiographic research explanations. *Academy of Management Review*, 14, 4, 551-561.
- Ursell, G. (2004). Changing times, changing identities: A case study of British journalists. In T.E. Jensen & A. Vestenholz (Eds.) *Identity in the Age of the New Economy: life in temporary and scattered work practices*, pp. 34-53. UK: Edward Elgar.
- Vishmidt, M. (8 February 2005). 'Precarious Straits', Mute 29. Retrieved from <http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/precarius-straits>