

## Freelancers or ‘forced lancers’? Results of a survey to study the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on Belgian journalists

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The current research addresses the challenges that the coronavirus pandemic has posed to journalists and newsrooms in Belgium. More specifically, we present the findings of a representative survey of 628 Belgian journalists (20% of the population) in April 2020. We focus specifically on the fact that the consequences of the pandemic are felt disproportionately hard by freelance journalists as compared to staff employees.

This consideration is inspired by previous research (Van Leuven et al., forthcoming) which shows that the number of freelance journalists is on the rise in Belgium (from 18% in 2013 to 25% in 2018) as in many other countries. Through this outsourcing of news work, “*media companies obtain more flexibility, lower costs, and less responsibility*” (Mathisen, 2017, p.911). Media companies do not need to invest in training or benefits for freelancers such as social security and legal support, nor take the risk for periods of reduced activity (Gollmitzer, 2014; Salamon, 2019). Importantly, many of these freelance journalists (one third in Belgium, Van Leuven et al., forthcoming) are in a situation of bogus self-employment. This refers to journalists who are pushed into a freelance statute by their employer as a cost-saving measure and to organize the workforce more flexibly (Nies & Pedersini, 2003). Although they are officially self-employed, these journalists produce content for just one news medium and do the same kind of work in the newsroom as their permanent staff colleagues. As a consequence, freelancers report lower levels of intrinsic job satisfaction as compared to newsroom staff because of the lack of a steady employment and the benefits that come with it (Ryan, 2009). They are also less satisfied with their statute and with their perceived autonomy against commercial and non-commercial (e.g. political) pressure (Van Leuven et al., forthcoming).

The findings of our survey show that the economic consequences of the pandemic are felt disproportionately hard by freelance journalists in Belgium. 1 out of 2 freelance journalists worked less hours in March 2021 and consequently had a lower income. 1 out of 5 freelance journalists even received no assignments at all in March 2020 as a consequence of the pandemic. When inquired about their expectations for future, 3 out of 4 freelance journalists were concerned about the financial repercussions of the pandemic and about their job security (as compared to one third of the staff employees). 4 out of 10 freelancers had already applied for financial support by the government (as compared to only 1 out of 10 staff employees). The difficult work situation of freelance journalists also has implications on the news production process, since 1 out of 2 freelancers considered it a challenge to find reliable information about the pandemic (versus 1 out of 3 staff employees). A possible explanation is that freelance journalists cannot rely on colleagues in the newsroom to discuss and check information. In conclusion, our survey confirms that the pandemic has reinforced the already precarious working situation of Belgian freelance journalists.

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