

Historical parallels between the nature of journalistic work in this historical period and others

Journalistic work is changing rapidly. What historical parallels about the nature of that work might be drawn between this historical period and others?

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Introduction

From the past to the present, as the speed of information dissemination has accelerated and the continuous development of media, people's demand for information has increased, and journalism majors or jobs become increasingly popular. For example, it is well known in China that the journalism and communication major is among the most competitive majors in the graduate entrance examination. However, one of the persistent problems in journalism is a lack of resources. Under the competition and replacement of old and new media, the number of journalism jobs is decreasing, and the working conditions of the remaining journalists are also affected (Mombelli & Beck, 2023). In the face of contradictory situations, the nature of journalism becomes one of the contents that people deeply understand the industry. For instance, whether people can accept the salary, welfare and work pressure caused by journalism, the professionalism and social responsibility in the practice of journalism work, and the professional skills required as a journalist and the way to play a professional role. This article will discuss the nature of journalism from three aspects: precarity, professional ethics and social responsibility, and professionalism. Explore the similarities between journalism in the current and other historical periods, reflect the characteristics of the stable existence of journalism, and the interaction between the three natures.

Precarity

Journalists almost always work in precarious working conditions. Precarity is a global and cross-professional trend, and journalism remains an anomaly (Örnebring, 2020). Poverty, insecurity, and stressful working conditions of precarity affect journalists'

living standards and social status and contribute to widespread mental health problems in journalism. However, the professional culture of journalism rooted in the history of precarity also reflects the beautification of journalists' work and their professional identity and self-realisation.

First of all, regardless of historical period, the salary level of journalism has always been low and generally lower than other industries. According to Örnebring (2020), at the end of the 19th century, the average salary of journalism was about \$1,100 to \$1,500, and the annual salary of significant newspaper editors in London was 1,000 pounds, nearly six times lower than that of a successful doctor. In the United States, journalists' weekly wages vary significantly between cities, and their income is similar to that of plumbers or even lower (Örnebring, 2020). The same situation continues into the 21st century. The National Association of Colleges and Employers reports that in 2012, the median earnings of bachelor's degree graduates who found jobs at daily newspapers were \$28,550, weekly newspapers \$27,000, and radio and television stations \$31,250, all well below the \$42,666 median starting salary for all college graduates (Becker et al., 2013).

Moreover, already optimistic earnings will be even more vulnerable in a volatile global crisis. For instance, the COVID-19 crisis has dramatically exacerbated the pay gap between permanent, temporary, and freelance journalists (Libert et al., 2021). Therefore, the income from journalism is lower than the average level of other industries. It is not

easy for ordinary people to get rich in this industry. The objective reality is to make a living.

Secondly, the precarity of journalistic work also stems from the difficulty in ensuring the safety and welfare of journalists, taking the phenomenon of layoffs as the object of discussion. In the 19th century, mass dismissals of journalists were common in journalism. Because an oversupplied labour market made it possible to fill positions quickly, bosses' willingness to fire and layoff measures was often overwhelming. Journalists are in a passive and dominant position. Even if they have a certain social status or career achievements, it cannot help them escape the insecure professional status quo. For example, the successful journalist George Augustus Sala could only apply for funding from the Royal Literary Fund in his later years (Örnebring, 2020).

This insecurity remains strong in journalism today. For instance, under the double blow of digital technology disruption and economic difficulties, many U.S. news media suffered a sharp decline in revenue or even closed down, and practitioners have been laid off or lost their jobs. From 2008 to 2018, the staff of U.S. newsrooms has decreased by about 25%, and the newspaper's staff has decreased by nearly 50% (Jahng et al., 2023). Layoffs may seem like a heavy blow to individual journalists, but they also hurt the journalism industry. The brain drain affects the output speed and quantity of news. It also makes it difficult for the journalism industry to cope with the rapid technological

innovations and challenges, constantly increasing the burden on the journalism industry and deepening the precarity of journalism.

The journalistic work, which cannot fully meet the material needs of journalists and the high intensity and difficulty have aggravated the spiritual pressure of journalism. In the face of journalism's physical and mental demands, Theodore Dreiser, a 20th-century American journalist, said that journalism "is always a hard, driving game, with the ash-heap as the reward for the least weakening of energy or ability (Fedler, 2004, p. 84)." In the 20th century, Fred F. Endres found that more than 90% of the journalists he surveyed had experienced stress, and 86% had been at the scene of violent acts (Fedler, 2004). Subsequently, these people may have typical symptoms, such as nightmares, depression, irritability, and anxiety (Fedler, 2004). Today, many digital journalists also express difficulty distinguishing between work and life. A cross-platform producer said in an interview with Nicole S. Cohen: "I've just depleted all that juice during the day (Cohen, 2019, p. 582)." Nevertheless, the heavy workload makes it impossible for them to complete the work within paid time, so they have to deprive themselves of rest time to complete it.

Professional ethics and social responsibility

Despite the precarity of journalism, the bohemian romanticisation of precarity that emerged in the 19th century not only reflects the union of journalism with the literary world and journalists' solidarity and enthusiasm for journalism (Örnebring, 2020), it

also emphasises journalists' persistence and introspection of journalistic ethics and their will to shoulder social responsibilities, reflecting journalists' pursuit of professional ideals and realisation of self-worth. Lauro Mombelli and Daniel Beck mentioned in their survey of Swiss journalists born after 1990 that young people choose journalism careers more for self-actualisation, and material interests and social status do not play a significant role in career choice (Mombelli & Beck, 2023). Among the career choices involving money and social status, young people who are about to enter the workplace choose precarious journalism, preferring the latter between material and spirit, and are willing to bear the social responsibility of this work. This phenomenon is the same as the journalists in the historical period, who are full of sober persistence in pursuing the truth as journalists. One social media worker said in an interview that they are not doing it for pay or glory, and when big things happen, the professional conviction drives them to join in (Cohen, 2019). For example, The Associated Press journalist Emilio Morenatti spent more than a year during the COVID-19 pandemic observing and photographing the lives of elderly Spanish people suffering from the virus. His works are full of isolation, illness, and death and convey waiting, dedication, and love. This work won the Pulitzer Prize for Feature Photography in 2021. Morenatti was also a war correspondent, closely linking his life with journalism. Professional ethics and social responsibility embody the apotheosis of Bohemia, and Emilio Morenatti is also exploring social phenomena and trends with his life and faith. Journalists' responsibilities have become heavier, and the sense of realising their professional ideals has become more robust (Libert et al., 2021). Journalists' self-realisation process has

also witnessed social changes between individuals and society under the guidance and regulation of professional ethics.

Professionalism

No matter in any historical period, journalism is progressing, and individual participation in journalism is also in the process of professionalisation. Under the influence of precarity, journalists must improve their professional skills to seize more opportunities, promote and consolidate their status, and create news driven by professional faith and a sense of responsibility. As journalists, they determine their role orientation and play their professional role. Journalist roles include "disseminator", "watchdog", "advocate", or other. "These roles make up the interpretative repertoire by which journalists articulate generalised expectations as to how journalism is serving society, in both normative and descriptive terms (Hanitzsch & Örnebring, 2019, p. 109)." For example, Marion Apio, a senior journalism student at Makerere University in Uganda, has been plagued by fake news during the COVID-19 pandemic in Africa. Even though she majored in journalism, it was difficult to distinguish the authenticity of news immediately in the face of some shared information, and she often realised that she had done something incorrect after forwarding it for the sake of her family. In the face of the rampant fake news, UNESCO worked with the Rwanda Media Commission (RMC) to train 66 journalists. Mr Abaas Mpindi, Media Challenge Initiative (MCI) Chief Executive Officer, said there was an urgent need to empower journalists to combat misinformation (UNESCO, 2020). Therefore, the professional identity of

journalists enables them to meet the needs and expectations of society with professional capabilities.

In addition, with the advancement of the times, technology continues to develop, and the means of news creation and dissemination are constantly innovated. From the past to the present, information carriers are constantly enriched, including newspapers, radio, television, and the Internet. In the information age, news processing has become more demanding, and new technologies have emerged to help journalists quantify complex information. For example, analysis tools such as Chartbeat, Omniture, and Parse can help journalists obtain the audience's clicks, reads, shares, consumption, and more (Cohen, 2019). However, with the increasing demands of users and technical support, journalists need to speed up content production, which leads them to pay attention to and even become addicted to data, increasing mental pressure and deepening journalism's precarity. For example, metrics are one of the sources of anxiety for The New York Times, "not only because of their power to influence content, but also because of their potential impact on the organisation's internal dynamics (Petre, 2015)." As a result, technological development improves the professionalism of journalism, but it also makes the character of precarity salient in the context of the digital age.

Conclusion

Above all, based on comparing the similarities in the nature of journalism in multiple historical periods, this article finds that journalism has always been precarious, attaches

great importance to professional ethics and social responsibility, and pays attention to professionalism. Precarity affects the material interests and mental health of journalists. At the same time, the journalism industry's glorification of instability highlights professional beliefs, achieves the self-identity of practitioners, and gains social respect. Journalists abide by professional ethics and strengthen their sense of social responsibility. In addition, professionalism enables journalists to participate in fierce competition. Even if they have to face the consequences of continued precarity, professionalism can prevent journalists from being only passionate and lacking in functional practicality in fighting for social interests.

As an essential part of these times, journalism continues to attract people to participate, and the industry also undergoes many changes. Hence, people can understand the characteristics of journalism when they come into contact with or join it, glimpse the stable nature that journalism may continue to show in the rapidly developing data era, and better reflect on and deal with the changes and future of journalism.

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