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Journalistic Work During a Pandemic: Changing Contexts and Subjective Perceptions

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the extent to which the Corona pandemic has changed the working conditions of journalists in Germany and how they perceive these changes. The goal is to provide both the scale and qualitative nature of Corona-induced changes in the working environment of journalists by means of an online survey of German journalists ($n=983$) in different employment situations. The results indicate that objective changes such as short-time work, income losses and the sudden shift to home office have notably shaped the world of journalistic work. On a subjective level, journalists' responses mainly point to the personal financial fallout and resulting existential fears. Our findings suggest an intensified precarity in the working environment of journalists and highlight a growing gap between freelance and employed journalists.

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Journalistic work; pandemic; working conditions; precarity; subjective perceptions; employed journalists; freelance journalists

Introduction

Precarious labor becomes increasingly common in journalism (Hanitzsch and Rick 2021; Örnebring 2018; O'Donnell and Zion 2019). Precarity and the corresponding working conditions are characterized, for instance, by low wages and unpredictable payment, which was exacerbated by the Corona pandemic: Freelancers have suffered from significant income losses due to a lack of jobs (DJV 2020; Posetti, Bell, and Brown 2020). At the same time, cost-cutting measures of media organizations lead to short-time contracts for employed journalists (Hertreiter 2020). These problematic developments not only complicate the private lives of journalists, they also put at risk journalism's key role as democratic institution. While proper working news media are commonly seen as essential to citizens' information supply during the pandemic, media workers are increasingly forced to work under conditions of precarity (Nicoletti 2019; Radcliffe 2020).

A significant number of studies focused on pandemic-related transformations of work and the increasing importance of home office for workers of all kinds (e.g., Holst, Niehoff, and Fessler 2020). The working conditions of journalists, who are

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considered constitutive to the proper functioning of democracy, however, are rarely studied during the crisis. Early surveys, which provide quantitative data on pandemic-related impacts on news work, tend to focus on the economic situation of freelance journalists (DJV 2020; DJV-NRW 2020) or on descriptions of the changed occupational situation (Posetti, Bell, and Brown 2020). The subjective perceptions of journalists, however, are rarely put in focus. Lewis (2020), for instance, argues that future research on journalism during the Corona pandemic needs to focus on the lived experiences of journalists.

Therefore, the goal of this study is to examine the effects of the Corona pandemic on journalistic working conditions from the perspective of journalists. Based on a quantitative survey of over 1000 German journalists, the study explores the extent to which the Corona pandemic has changed the working conditions of journalists and how they perceive these changes. In other words, the study captures both the real-world changes in journalists' work environments alongside their subjective perceptions from the journalists' point of view. Objective, real-world changes are covered using quantitative findings, while the subjective perceptions of these changes are captured mainly through analyzing an open-ended question.

Theoretical Background

Working Conditions During the Coronavirus Pandemic

The Corona pandemic has hit everyone's lives since spring 2020. This impact extended into working life, as the pandemic has significantly complicated working routines. To be fair, some occupational fields were more affected by the pandemic than others, however, it is safe to say that Corona has influenced nearly all workers around the globe (Eurofound 2020; Holst, Niehoff, and Fessler 2020). These influences and pandemic-related developments are in the focus of several studies in labor research. Especially changing working routines due to a shift to home office have been investigated from several perspectives (e.g., Bockstahler, Jurecic, and Rief 2020; Eurofound 2020). Results indicate that teleworking has become the customary mode of working for many employees, as more than one out of three respondents reported to work "solely from home" in July 2020 (Eurofound 2020, 31). In Germany, 21 percent of the working population worked from home in 2020 (Destatis 2022).

Studies also show that the struggle for a healthy work-life balance is a key factor during times of home office, especially for parents with younger kids (Eurofound 2020; Möhring et al. 2020). As a consequence, conflicts between childcare and work have become more common (Holst, Niehoff, and Fessler 2020). Financial concerns resulting from the crisis have also been addressed by researchers (Eurofound 2020; Holst, Niehoff, and Fessler 2020; Möhring et al. 2020), showing that many households had or still have difficulties to maintain a standard of living with their savings (Eurofound 2020). Self-employed workers are increasingly put in the focus of Corona studies (Dunn et al. 2020; Eurofound 2020; Holst, Niehoff, and Fessler 2020), demonstrating that they are "especially vulnerable to the impacts of the Covid-19 crisis" (Eurofound 2020, 45). Self-employed workers are at higher risk of jobloss during a crisis and are more likely to report job insecurity (Eurofound 2020), in part also because of their "already-precarious" working situation (Dunn et al.

2020, 2). Existential worries are often a consequence of such vulnerability (Holst, Niehoff, and Fessler 2020).

Journalistic Work During a Pandemic: Theoretical and Empirical Approaches

The pandemic has also affected journalists around the world in many different ways. On the positive side, newspapers have reported increasing subscription numbers since the Covid-19 outbreak due to people's high need for information (Heckenberger 2020; Von Schmettow 2020). German newspapers attracted more than three million additional readers per week (Keller and Eggert 2021). At the same time, however, media companies reported a massive drop in advertisement revenues (Hertreiter 2020; Radcliffe 2020), also in Germany (Keller and Eggert 2021). The media were and still are in crisis since the outbreak of the pandemic, leading to small newspapers closing down and journalists losing their jobs (Garcia, Matos, and da Silva 2021; Posetti, Bell, and Brown 2020; Radcliffe 2020). Statistics about the number of journalists in Germany who lost their jobs during or due to the pandemic are not available. In journalism, like in other professions, the German government has marshaled short-time work frameworks to prevent the news industry from mass layoffs (Keller and Eggert 2021). Despite these measures, several newspapers were forced to lay off some of their journalists as a "consequence of the Corona crisis" (Süddeutsche Zeitung Online 2020).

It is no overstatement to say that Covid-19 has worsened an already existing media crisis (Dawson et al. 2021; Witte and Syben 2022). This tendency is also indicated by the fact that the number of journalism job ads has been falling into decline since the outbreak of the virus (Dawson et al. 2021). Some initial studies have covered how the conditions for news workers have changed since the outbreak of Covid-19. In those studies, scholars choose various approaches to theorize and better understand pandemic-related changes in journalists' working conditions. The diversity of theories in the area may reflect the rather broad ramifications the pandemic had in the industry, impacting on a wide range of aspects and affecting news workers in many different ways. In our study, we therefore find ourselves at the intersection between journalism practice and research fields such as communication studies as well as psychology and the sociology of work. Drawing on theories from various fields allows us to approach work-related changes from several different angles. A review of the literature suggests that theories derived from the sociology of work dominate the discussion, as well as theoretical frameworks focusing on the subjective perception of workers. The concept of emotional labor is one of those theoretical pathways Libert, Le Cam, and Domingo (2022) and Šimunjak (2022) took to understand the pandemic's emotional consequences on journalists. Libert, Le Cam, and Domingo (2022) added the concepts of professional identity and journalistic roles to explore what "being a journalist" means in times of crisis. Based on these concepts, they try to understand how lockdowns have changed professional identities of Belgian journalists. Hoak (2021) as well as Backholm and Idås (2022) focused their theoretical framework on organizational support during "extraordinary events". Garcia, Matos, and da Silva (2021), finally, analyzed objective changes in journalists' working conditions by referring to the concept of precarity to record data related to income, employment relations, and layoffs.

Overall, the pandemic impacted on journalists on both the objective and subjective levels. Changes in journalists' working conditions can be meaningfully understood through the concept of precarity, whereas on the subjective and individual levels, effects on journalists' mental health can be captured through the concept of emotional labor. Negative emotions concerning pandemic-related changes likely affect the self-perception of journalists, which is typically studied through theories of professional identity and journalistic roles. All these approaches aim at explaining crisis-related changes, but they do so from different theoretical angles.

The first large-scale global survey of journalists during the pandemic is a collaborative research project which was launched in April 2020 to study the impacts of the coronavirus crisis (Posetti, Bell, and Brown 2020). With over 1000 respondents from 125 countries, the study serves as a global snapshot of the Corona fallout on journalism. Results show that many journalists are "clearly struggling to cope" (Posetti, Bell, and Brown 2020, 2). The study also covers topics such as safety threats, press freedom violations and misinformation during the pandemic. Other worldwide surveys were carried out by the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), also addressing gender inequalities and press freedom in journalism during the pandemic (IFJ 2020a, 2020b). Journalists reported "declining press freedom", and nearly every freelance journalist had lost revenue or work opportunities (IFJ 2020a).

In Germany, the situation of journalists during the pandemic has not been systematically examined. Studies conducted by the German Federation of Journalists (DJV 2020) and the federal state of North Rhine-Westphalia (DJV-NRW 2020) have somewhat touched upon the situation of freelancers. Here too, journalists reported about income drops by up to 50 percent and one-third of the freelancers stated that there were no new jobs or assignments at all (DJV 2020). However, the study provides little indication as to how journalists perceive those changes on a daily basis and what other issues they were concerned about besides financial difficulties. A qualitative study published two years later by the Otto Brenner Foundation (Witte and Syben 2022) focused on freelance journalists in the city of Bremen. The interviews support the findings of the DJV study, showing that a fair number of journalists even considered exiting the profession (Witte and Syben 2022). Nevertheless, both studies excluded permanently employed journalists and their working situation during the pandemic. Overall, there is very limited data on the current situation of journalists in Germany available, most of which is descriptive and concerns freelancers. Relevant and informative as these studies are, for that Corona-related changes in the working environment of journalists endanger the democratic function of the media (Radcliffe 2020), we need more research that focuses on how journalists of different employment conditions actually perceive those changes.

Research Questions and Objectives

The goal of this study is to examine the negative effects of the Corona crisis on journalistic working conditions from the perspective of permanently employed and freelance journalists. In doing so, the study aims to provide quantitative and qualitative information on Corona-induced changes in the work environment of journalists by means of an online survey of German journalists in different employment situations. The study addresses two main research questions:

RQ1: To what extent and in what areas is the Corona pandemic changing the working conditions of journalists in Germany?

RQ1a How do working conditions differ between employed and freelance journalists?

RQ1b How do working conditions differ between journalists working for different media?

RQ2: How do journalists subjectively perceive those changes?

RQ2a To what extent does the subjective perception of these changes differ between employed and freelance journalists?

RQ2b To what extent does the subjective perception of these changes differ between journalists of different media types?

The first research question addresses the objective, real-world changes we can map through statistical data. The goal of this part of the investigation is to find out what exactly is changing in the journalistic work environment and how extensive these changes are. Since very few pandemic-related studies consider the two employment types (employed and freelance journalists) simultaneously, we aimed to gain more granular information on changes by employment patterns. Therefore, we looked at the working conditions of employed and freelance journalists separately (RQ1a). Based on the state of research, we expected that freelance journalists suffered particularly from the pandemic (DJV 2020; Posetti, Bell, and Brown 2020).

The second research question focuses on the subjective perceptions of journalists. Here, we indirectly assessed the ways in which the changing working conditions also influence journalists' personal lives as well as their health and psychological well-being. As the pandemic's negative psychological impact on journalists has already been proven by Backholm and Idås (2022), our goal was to broaden the picture to also include journalists' subjective perspective on work-related changes caused by the pandemic.

With RQ1b and RQ2b, we also took into consideration the different types of media outlets journalists are working for (print, broadcast, online). Posetti, Bell, and Brown (2020) found that several newspapers reduced their frequency of appearance, which supports qualitative evidence of journalists working for German TV and radio channels to suffer less from these changes than their colleagues in newspapers (Witte and Syben 2022). At the same time, previous studies demonstrated that stressors experienced by TV and newspaper journalists may differ during times of the pandemic (Hoak 2021). Regarding RQ1b and RQ2b, we also looked at potential differences between local, regional, national, and transnational media.

Methodology

The data is based on a study carried out as part of a larger research project on precarity in journalism. In a first step, we collected statistical data through a quantitative online survey of 1055 German journalists in different employment conditions, carried out between October and December 2020. The survey was supported by the two largest professional associations of journalists, the German Federation of Journalists (DJV) and the German Journalists' Union (dju in ver.di). The two professional associations were asked to

distribute the questionnaire link, which they did through their email directories, newsletters, and social media.

The data we will present in this paper focuses on the answers of the main occupation journalists ($n = 983$), which made up 93.2 percent of the total sample. Main-occupation journalists were defined as those who earn more than 50 percent of their income from journalistic activities or spend more than half of their total working hours in journalism (Weischenberg, Malik, and Scholl 2006). Working as a professional journalist—in the sense of earning money from working in journalism—was the main criterion for inclusion in the study.

Overall, 61.7 percent of our sample were male, 37.8 percent female. The journalists were on average 48.9 years old. With a total of 44.4 percent of all surveyed journalists, freelancers were the largest group in our sample. Arguably, freelancers felt more strongly attracted to the subject of the survey than fully employed journalists, especially during the pandemic. In addition, coverage of freelance journalists may be high since they are heavily represented in journalists' associations. The second-largest group in our sample were full-time permanent employees (31.4%). Another 16.7 percent of the sample worked as flat-rate freelancers. Most permanently employed journalists were working as editors (47.9%) in the newsrooms, 10.4 percent as reporters. 6.9 percent stated to be working as authors and 12.2 percent are in a management position (e.g., editor in chief). The majority of main-occupation journalists worked for daily newspapers (37.6%) or magazines (17.5%), while 14.3 percent were online journalists (working for standalone online outlets or an online version of an offline outlet), about ten percent are TV journalists (9.9%) and 8.1 percent radio journalists. Another 8.2 percent of the journalists were working for news agencies. Journalists working for Sunday or weekly newspapers (2.7%) and free sheets (1.8%) make up the smallest part of our sample.

In order to capture the current, pandemic-related situation, the questionnaire was supplemented by a specific section of ten questions relating to the Corona crisis. Here, the journalists were asked about their current job situation, about changes resulting from the pandemic and about current difficulties in their professional and private lives. The first part of the questions was concerned with the objective, real-world changes in the working environment of journalists, including the financial fallout of the crisis, changed work routines, and home office conditions.

With regard to the subjective perception of pandemic-related changes, we asked journalists to indicate the extent to which they agree to the statement "precarization in journalism was intensified by the Covid-19 pandemic" using a five-point Likert scale. A follow-up open-ended question offered respondents the opportunity to describe, in their own words, the extent to which their working conditions have deteriorated. Overall, 617 respondents made use of this option. For the analysis of these open responses, we deductively developed ten categories¹ based on studies on changing working conditions in journalism (e.g., DJV 2020; Posetti, Bell, and Brown 2020; Radcliffe 2020) and on existing work on the impact of the pandemic on the circumstances of work (e.g., Bockstahler, Jurecic, and Rief 2020; Dunn et al. 2020; Holst, Niehoff, and Fessler 2020). In general, the categories were meant to address changes regarding media economics or the media industry in general, as well as changes pertaining to the personal and professional level of the individual journalist.

In a next step, we assigned all open answers ($n = 617$) to the newly developed categories. The aim of this strategy was to structure journalists' answers thematically and identify aspects frequently mentioned by the respondents. Interview responses could be coded into multiple categories, as many journalists mentioned several aspects in their answers. After the coding process, we selected from each of the categories exemplary quotes from the survey that provided an adequate illustration of our quantitative results. In the process, the selection of illustrative quotes also tried to accommodate journalists with different backgrounds (age, media type, etc.). In order to allow readers to contextualize the selected quotations, we mentioned relevant characteristics of the source, such as the age of the journalist.

Objective Changes in Freelance Journalism

Consistent with previous research (e.g., DJV 2020; Josephi and O'Donnell 2023; Libert, Le Cam, and Domingo 2022), our data shows that freelancers in particular are facing economic uncertainty due to the pandemic. Nearly 80 percent of all freelancers stated that they suffered from a loss of income since the outbreak of the pandemic. This income drop is even larger than the one reported by the German Federation of Journalists DJV and DJV-NRW in 2020, according to which nearly half of the freelancers suffer from income losses in Germany in general and 67 percent in the region of North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW). However, when making comparisons of this kind, one should keep the time period of the surveys in mind. The general DJV survey was conducted in May 2020, much earlier than our study. The DJV-NRW study is based on data from August 2020. Thus, the surveys took place at different phases of the pandemic, when anti-Corona measures differed significantly. While the pandemic was still a fairly novel phenomenon in May 2020, the crisis had significantly deepened in late 2020. By then, freelance journalists may not have received any assignments for more than half a year, whereas in May 2020, many media houses were still doing business as usual. Thus, the evidence from the three studies can also be seen as an indication of a crisis that has worsened over the months.

In our survey, three out of five respondents reported that the loss of income also resulted in existential fears. Freelancers who work for freesheets and daily newspapers seem to be particularly affected by the loss of assignments; almost 90 percent reported income losses for both media. This number is much lower for Sunday and weekly newspapers (54.5%). This finding aligns with numbers of the BVDA (2021) regarding a significant decrease in the total circulation of freesheets in Germany. This mirrors our finding that journalists working for freesheets, which heavily rely on advertisement, reported the highest income losses when publishers attract smaller advertising revenues. We found no significant gender differences with regard to income losses. It seems that financial insecurities appear to be problems affecting both men and women in similar ways. Overall, our results are very much in line with Posetti, Bell, and Brown (2020, 23) who conclude from their analysis that journalists' "first priority was surviving."

In Germany, freelancers were eligible for government support in the form of emergency grants. Nearly half of the interviewed freelance journalists and 29.9 percent of the flat-rate freelancers ("Pauschalisten") had applied for this type of Covid-19 emergency grant. 41.4 percent of the lower earners ($\leq \text{€}1200$) applied for financial support and only

18.4 percent of the top earners (> €4800). Age has a relatively small effect on the need for financial support ($p < 0.01$; Cramers $V = 0.18$). Older journalists had a greater tendency to apply for financial support. Almost 70 percent (67.6%) of those who applied for these grants were over 50 years old. Nine out of ten applicants (90.6%) had eventually received the grant. However, it has to be noted that according to the 2020 DJV survey, the emergency aid provided by the government was considered insufficient by many freelancers because they could use the grant money only for direct costs and not for living expenses. Financial support had also emerged as the “top-identified need” of journalists in the study by Posetti, Bell, and Brown (2020, 23).

How can journalists make plans for the future in such a scenario? In the survey, we asked journalists how many years they could plan ahead with relative certainty regarding their working situation. A quarter (24.3%) of all journalists specified a planning horizon of zero years, which is to mean that they felt even their near future was unpredictable. Another 38.8 percent of the interviewees reported a planning horizon of one year, and only 0.7 percent of them felt they could plan for more than ten years ahead. Freelance journalists differed significantly in this regard from their employed colleagues (1.33 vs. 2.90 years; $t = 8.43$; $df = 808$; $p < 0.01$). On average, journalists reported a planning horizon of 1.86 years. Obviously, uncertainties resulting from the Corona crisis had severely affected journalism. In a similar vein, about three quarters of the interviewed journalists (76.1%) had mentioned “uncertainty about the future” as the main factor of job-related insecurity.

Objective Changes for Employed Journalists

Our study also indicates that many journalists worked less during the pandemic. 40.8 percent of all permanent employees reported they were affected by a reduction of regular working hours. Journalists from local (58.5%) and regional media outlets (44.1%) particularly suffered from short-time work (“Kurzarbeit”), while only 32.9 percent of journalists from national and 30.8 percent from transnational media reported short-time work. These results demonstrate that local and regional media are particularly hit by the Corona crisis (also see Dawson et al.; Perreault and Perreault 2021; Radcliffe 2020). Overall, the extent to which journalists reported short-time work was significantly, but weakly related to media type ($p < 0.01$; Cramers $V = 0.29$). Four out of five journalists working for freesheets were employed on a short-time basis, while none of the radio journalists were. In daily newspapers, half of the journalists experienced short time work.

Like many workers during the pandemic, journalists were or still are among those forced to work from home. Based on our findings, 89.2 percent of all journalists worked from home during the pandemic. Notably, this number also includes freelancers who normally work from home. However, 58.0 percent of all journalists who did not usually work from home did so during the pandemic, a number which is significantly higher than for the general workforce in Germany at that time (Destatis 2022). Photojournalists, photographers and producers reported the lowest percentage of home office work. Whether journalists work from home or not also depends on the media type they work for, but the effect is relatively minor ($p < 0.01$; Cramers $V = 0.23$). The home office rate is lowest for freesheets and the highest for journalists working for Sunday and weekly newspapers.

Addressing the issue of potential family-work conflicts, almost 20 percent (18.8%) of all journalists in our survey also had to look after their children while working. This percentage is a bit lower when compared to the results of the DJV, which showed that 32 percent of all freelancing women journalists and 25 percent of their male colleagues worked less due to childcare during the pandemic (DJV 2020). One might assume that as the pandemic has been progressing for months by the time of the survey, journalists have started to arrange themselves with the situation, found alternative childcare options, or took advantage of emergency daycare, the access to which was broadened over the course of the pandemic. Looking specifically at all parenting journalists of our sample, 65.0 percent of them had to look after their children while working.

Subjective Perceptions of Freelancers and Employed Journalists

Deteriorated Working Conditions

Journalists are aware of increased precarity and a deterioration of working conditions. Our findings show that the Corona crisis is hitting quite hard many journalists in Germany. A total of 61.5 percent stated that their working conditions have deteriorated since the outbreak of the pandemic. With regard to this question, we could not find any significant differences concerning gender, media reach or the income of journalists. Journalists regardless of income, gender and age had a similar perception of worsened working conditions. It should be noted, however, that such perceptions were most pronounced among those with smaller earnings. The percentage was highest among photographers (70.0%) and producers (75.5%). A 56-year-old freelancer describes his critical situation in his answer to an open-ended question in the survey:

A TV documentary I was working on didn't take three months, but seven months. In the meantime, I desperately tried to find other projects to compensate for the loss of income. In the end, I decided to apply for Hartz 4 [the German unemployment benefit scheme]. But then, in June, a delayed bill from a project from December 2019 to March 2020 arrived on my banking account. Meaning, I had to pay back Hartz 4 and slipped extremely into the minus. In the end, no one helped me with my Corona losses. (ID 250)

Previous studies have also shown that photographers in particular were heavily affected by the crisis since their working routines mostly depend on direct contact with people (e.g., DJV 2020). In addition, the perception of changes in working conditions depends on the journalists' employment status (see Table 1). While 71.6 percent of all full-time freelancers reported a deterioration, only 52.8 percent of full-time permanent employees made this observation ($p < 0.01$; Cramers $V = 0.19$).

The interview response of a 62-year-old journalist underlines the problematic situation many freelancers experience: "The situation of freelancers was already precarious. Due to many factors, this has deteriorated even further; and the Corona crisis is completing the disaster" (ID 230). At this point, one might ask whether the reported changes are truly Corona-specific or rather signs of a general crisis now reinforced by the pandemic. One respondent supports the second point of view:

I'm not quite sure if this phenomenon is Covid-related. As far as I can tell, all editorial offices, have no budget for freelancers anymore. And I have no illusions about that: Nothing will change in this situation, with or without Corona!

Table 1. Perception of changes in working conditions and employment status

	Fulltime employment		Part time employment		Flat-rate freelancers		Freelancers		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Working conditions have changed	163	52.8	34	46.6	95	57.9	312	71.6	604	61.5
Working conditions have not changed	146	47.2	39	53.4	69	42.1	124	28.4	378	38.5
Total	309	100	73	100	164	100	436	100	982	100.0

Notes: $p < 0.01$; Cramers $V = 0.19$.

With this statement, the respondent follows a line of reasoning found in several studies of journalists during Covid-19 (Comunian and England 2020; Perreault and Perreault 2021). Therefore, journalists' responses may well reflect both Corona-related changes as well as general trends of recent years that are now being accelerated by the pandemic (Comunian and England 2020).

We noted some difference in journalists' perceptions of the situation depending on whether or not they classified themselves as working in a precarious situation. Among those who described their situation as precarious, 72.6 percent reported a deterioration of working environments. For those who did not feel their situation was precarious, the percentage was much smaller (53.1%; $p < 0.01$, Cramers $V = 0.20$). This raises the question how the two perceptions are related. It is possible that a strong perception of precariousness also increases the perception of worsened working conditions, as precarious conditions can complicate working conditions on many levels. At the same time, a perceived deterioration of working conditions can also lead to people classifying themselves as precarious workers.

Overall, 44.0 percent of the respondents reported a strong agreement with the statement that the Corona crisis has intensified precarity in journalism. Another 31.1 percent of the surveyed journalists "somewhat strongly" agreed with it. Freelancers voiced particularly strong agreement, as 54.4 percent of them strongly agreed with this assessment. These results reflect the fact that the majority of freelancers in the survey suffered from income losses, and many of them perceive their working situation as precarious.

Financial Difficulties

Our survey results also indicate that journalists are concerned about their financial situation. Many of the journalists' responses to the open-ended questions regarding the changes in journalistic working environments speak well to this issue. A total of 53.2 percent of the respondents addressed financial difficulties in their comments. Freelancers mentioned a decline in assignments and an income drop of between 50 and 100 percent when referring to their working conditions. Freelance journalists specializing in culture, sports journalists and moderators, as well as travel journalists were particularly hit. One freelancer reported an income drop to zero and found drastic words to describe her situation: "I am a *travel* journalist (original emphasis)! I specialize on worldwide destinations. Since March, I am finding myself in a 'professional ban'." Several journalists write about compensating their income losses through having another, secondary job, such as a 50-year-old freelance journalist and mother of two children:

I partially compensated for the loss of income through book projects, but those fees are significantly smaller than the income for magazine articles. My mixed calculation does no longer work out because normally well-paid texts such as columns are no longer requested. (ID 449)

Several responses of journalists to the open-ended question specifically underline how much freelancers worry about their future. Existential fears, such as the ones we discussed above, may also have psychological consequences. In line with the results of Backholm and Idås (2022), a female freelancer of our study describes what all the changes did to her mental wellbeing: "The impact of the Corona crisis—job insecurity, lack of

assignments, the situation in the newsrooms and concerns about health—have an absolutely grueling effect.” (ID 57).

We also noted that older journalists (50+) addressed financial difficulties more often than younger ones. It seems that the older generation is giving a lot of thought into pension schemes, especially in times of crisis. Their younger colleagues (those at the age of 29 and less) worry less about income losses, partly because many of them (14.1%) still receive financial support from their parents or other family members.

Restructuring of Newsrooms

The second most frequently mentioned observation by our survey respondents concerns the restructuring of newsrooms. Nearly half of the respondents reported restructuring efforts within their media houses, such as budgets cutbacks. Furthermore, journalists also mentioned mergers of newspapers, cancellations of broadcasting programs and company closures in general within this category. A 64-year-old female radio journalist, for instance, said: “They cancelled a program I’ve been working for after 20 years”. About one out of ten journalists also addressed contractual changes in their responses, for instance by specifically pointing to short-time work. A full-time employed magazine journalist referred to the circumstances of working on a short-time basis: “We were on short-time working, but had just as much to do as before. This meant working overtime. However, those extra hours were not recorded and we did not get any extra pay.” (ID 484). At the same time, several journalists feared losing their jobs (employed journalists) or clients (freelancers), a worry also expressed by many journalists in Belgium (Libert, Le Cam, and Domingo 2022). As a female editor of our sample reported: “I have been on short-time working since March and have to fear for the continuation of my job.” (ID 335). The fact that local journalists referred to contractual changes in their answers to open-ended questions particularly often corroborates the literature’s concerns regarding the pandemic’s negative impact on local journalism.

Increased Workload and Worsened Team Atmosphere

Short-time work in media houses can be seen as one reason why nearly one out of ten journalists reported a deterioration of working conditions by referring to increased workload. Especially permanently employed journalists in local media were concerned about this change; probably, because they were heavily affected by short-time work and assignments did not go to freelancers any longer because of budget restrictions. A 48-year-old female editor described her situation as follows: “Officially: short-time work; off the record: the same high workload as usual.” (ID 1001). In a nutshell, as one newspaper editor concluded: “More work to do, but on short-time basis despite staff shortage.” (ID 651). Such “densification” of work also results from layoffs in newsrooms, leaving news organizations with fewer journalists to do all remaining work. As the answer of an online editor makes clear, several editorial departments also increased workload due to the intensified news coverage on Covid-19. One respondent summarized: “More work despite short-time work. Less pay, more pressure.” (ID 564).

Journalists' responses to the open-ended question also indicate that developments such as increased work-related stress in the media houses have led to a worsened team atmosphere. In the survey, journalists mentioned an "increased pressure", a "bad climate" and "bad mood" in the newsroom, and in many cases also a substantive drop in "team spirit". It remains to be seen to what extent such a situation seriously demotivates affected journalists and, by extension, the coverage they produce.

Changed Working Routines

Nearly a quarter of the surveyed journalists referred in their answers to changed working routines. Respondents listed a variety of aspects of their work that were influenced by the pandemic: Firstly, they mentioned poor access to interview partners, as their sources were no longer flexible. Contacting experts seems more difficult during lockdown periods, as people were forced to work from home. Secondly, the reduction of personal contacts also led to stories missed out by the journalists, or at the very least resulted in a "more time-consuming search for topics" (ID 447). As a result, research and investigation practices of journalists have changed, as they relied more strongly on online research and telephone interviews rather than physical encounters. In line with studies from the UK (Šimunjak 2022), US (Perreault and Perreault 2021) and Portugal (Miranda, Fidalgo, and Martins 2021), journalists seem to struggle with the inability to work in the field, as on-site reporting was often impossible during lockdown periods; journalists had fewer opportunities to leave their newsrooms for on-the-ground investigation. A 32-year-old online journalist reports: "True research has become nearly impossible or only possible from one's own desk." On top of that, several fields of reporting and the related topics had shrunk in volume or were suspended altogether. These include, but were not limited to, fairs, sports events, cultural events and conferences. Even the use of journalistic formats seems to change due to the pandemic restrictions. In the survey, journalists indicated that feature stories were produced more rarely than before the pandemic. Many journalists also mentioned practical challenges, such as when they had restricted access to studios and broadcasting equipment.

Home Office

Related to the changed working routines is the increased utilization of home office. In general, journalists who do not usually work from home seem to be satisfied with their home office infrastructure. The journalists were asked to select from multiple answers statements that apply to their home office situation. The results show relatively high satisfaction when it comes to the internet connection at home (69.8%), to available working space (68.4%) and a quiet environment (67.5%). Local journalists seem to have the biggest problems with working from home; 45.3 percent of them pointed to an unstable internet connection. Internet connectivity is generally an issue in many rural areas in Germany. When asked about the availability of a quiet, undisturbed work environment, journalists' responses indicate a small effect in relation to having or not having underage children at home ($p < 0.01$; Cramers $V = 0.10$). While 67.2 percent of the journalists with no minors at home reported a quiet work environment, only 61.3 percent of those who had children at home did so. Homeschooling and home-based child care during the pandemic can make

it quite challenging to work from home (Eurofound 2020; Möhring et al. 2020), but the effect was obviously not strong among parenting journalists. We also noted a difference between journalists with the highest income (more than €4800) and those with the lowest earnings (\leq €1200). While 72 percent of the top earners confirmed an undisturbed work environment at home, only 51.5 percent of the low earners did so.

Among our survey respondents, 21.9 percent of the journalists who noted a deterioration of working conditions related their answers to issues concerned with working from home. The open comments show that those who are not satisfied with their home office situation really seem to struggle. Journalists often criticize the availability and quality of technical equipment for journalistic production. A 24-year-old journalist, who works for a local Sunday paper, explained his situation at home:

The technical conditions in my home office are miserable. We are not provided with any technical equipment. I work with my own laptop and my own cell phone - that's simply not enough. As a result, the quality of our program suffers. (ID13)

Other journalists reported that they had to pay for home office equipment by themselves, such as a 52-year-old editor, who works for a transnational news agency: "I had to set up a home office completely on my own. I'm responsible for the complex technical processes at home all by myself." (ID 986).

Another issue raised by journalists was the challenge of balancing children and work at home. A 50-year-old female freelancer provided insight into her changed daily routines due to Covid-19:

In terms of homeschooling, I had two children to care for and we were all together at home – 24 h a day, seven days a week. I don't have an office at home, but usually, I have times when I am undisturbed and work alone. (ID 449)

Homeschooling also influenced the working times of parenting journalists, like a 34-year-old female freelancer explains: "Reconciling childcare and job was only possible with night work (many evenings at the desk until midnight)." (ID 77). However, separating work and leisure in the home office—this difficulty was also mentioned by journalists who did not have children at home and was also an issue for British (Šimunjak 2022) and Belgian journalists (Libert, Le Cam, and Domingo 2022). The same is true for Filipino journalists, when Arcalas, Tuazon, and Opiniano (2022, 11) write of "work stresses they never experienced before". Other responses in our study addressed a lack of exchange with colleagues and the more complicated communication processes. Due to working from home, in relative isolation, communication among journalists seems to have suffered. At the same time, arrangements with colleagues were more complex and time-consuming. As a female reporter of a local newspaper said:

Communication takes place via Microsoft Teams. I miss the direct exchange with my colleagues because we can only communicate via chats or video conferences. Everyone is sitting in the living room almost all week. (ID 490)

Journalists mentioned ensuing problems, such as the absence of feedback on work as well as a lack of coordination. The new, pandemic-related working situation also seems to influence teamwork and the creative process in general: "The creativity of the editorial team is limited by the fact that everyone is in the home office and a

personal exchange of ideas is no longer possible.” (ID 460). That being said, many of the changes resulting from home-office conditions are not exclusive to journalists but mark transformations in the world of work more generally. At the same time, journalism is arguably a profession where encounters with other people are essential to the quality of the work output.

Looking into the future, 55.7 percent of all home-office journalists could imagine working from home also after the pandemic. This finding should be considered when thinking about long-term trends as a consequence of the pandemic. Like for many workers of different kinds, working from home may positively affect the work-life balance of journalists and could be considered an opportunity in a post-Corona world. However, older journalists (50+) in our sample seem not as convinced of working from home as their younger colleagues do. Fewer of the older journalists could imagine to work from home after the pandemic compared to their younger peers ($p < 0.01$; Cramers $V = 0.17$). Comparing journalists with different editorial roles, producers expressed the smallest desire to work from home in the future ($p < 0.01$; Cramers $V = 0.25$). This makes sense since their work often depends on technical equipment that is largely not portable. At the same time, 66.7 percent of the photographers can imagine working from home more so in the future. Of the parenting journalists, 58.9 percent can imagine working from home in the post-pandemic world, indicating a positive pandemic-related change in the lives of working parents and maybe an improved work-life balance thanks to the affordances of teleworking.

Safety

Not every journalist is able to work mainly from home, however. Examples are photographers and TV reporters. Some of them focused their answers to the open-ended question about perceived working conditions on aspects of safety. As a 59-year-old respondent explained: “For me as a photographer, there is a high Corona risk outside.” (ID 354). A freelance TV journalist pointed to a similar situation during the pandemic (“Much more dangerous work situations during the film shoots”; ID 1023). Very often, journalists mentioned “contact restrictions for interviews” and “mandatory face-masks” as obstacles to their work. Several respondents had been in quarantine, some of them even multiple times.

Conclusions

The aim of our study was to examine the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on journalistic working conditions from the perspective of journalists. In doing so, the study contributes to precarity research not only by shedding light on objective and economic changes in the journalistic working environment but also by taking the subjective side into account. Our survey results attest to the extensive impact of Covid-19 on journalists’ employment pattern; a variety of aspects of journalistic work was influenced by pandemic-related restrictions and outcomes. While the data on real-world changes point to trends evident in the journalistic working environment during the pandemic, the journalists’ answers to open-ended questions provide insight into the subjective perceptions of journalists.

Our results indicate that objective changes such as short-time work, income losses and the sudden shift to home office are notably shaping the world of journalistic work. At the same time, on a subjective level, journalists mainly make note of the personal financial fallout. Other factors included an increased workload and poor home-office conditions. In this way, our results are similar to findings from studies in other countries. Especially on a subjective level, our journalists struggle with similar challenges as their British colleagues (Šimunjak 2022), in which negative feelings such as frustration are just as dominant. Concepts of emotional labor (see Šimunjak 2022) can thus be helpful to better understand the emotions associated with the changes, while the concept of precarity (see Garcia, Matos, and da Silva 2021) allows capturing objective working conditions on a variety of dimensions.

At the same time, we think that theories of professional identity and role conception (see Libert, Le Cam, and Domingo 2022) can serve as an excellent point of reference when it comes to exploring the consequences of changing working routines by answering the question of what it means for journalists to work mainly from their own living room. The fact that a quarter of the surveyed journalists also noted a deterioration in terms of working routines should be taken as a warning: In this respect, the pandemic-related changes were feared to negatively affect the quality of journalistic content, since—as the journalists note themselves—opportunities for research and investigation, brainstorming, contacting sources and the production of contents all were suffering from such change. Our study did not aim to examine the impact of the pandemic on the quality of journalistic content, as this would require other methods. However, there are indications of conditions less conducive to high-quality journalism to a limited extent—be it a lack of technical equipment in the home office, or a reduction of personal encounters with colleagues and protagonists.

Our survey identified groups of journalists who are objectively most affected by crisis-related developments, such as freelancers in general, photographers, travel journalists, sports and cultural journalists, local journalists, parenting journalists and older journalists in general. These journalists are obviously more vulnerable to crisis developments due to their specialization in topic areas strongly affected by the pandemic (such as travel journalism), due to their inherently insecure employment situation (e.g., freelancers) or by virtue of personal family circumstances (journalists with young children). On the subjective level, these subgroups also express their frustration in very strong terms.

With regard to RQ1b and RQ2b, we found that the medium does indeed influence the extent to which working conditions of journalists changed: The medium mainly influences home office work and short-time work. In our sample, local editors in particular were affected by short-time work, which is also reflected in the open responses, in which local journalists complained about contract changes and increased workload.

The fact that employed and freelance journalists were confronted with different pandemic-related challenges was also reflected at the level of perception: While employed journalists primarily addressed issues like home office, changed atmosphere and increased workload in their comments, freelancers were concerned about financial losses and changed working routines. In this context, in line with the findings of Libert, Le Cam, and Domingo (2022, 598), our survey results especially point to a growing gap between freelance journalists and permanent employees. Freelancers are exceptionally strongly affected by the pandemic since their financial situation has substantively

declined. The existential fears many freelancers have expressed in the survey may also have a psychological toll and can become another reason for journalists to exit the profession. Like in many other professions, it seems that these vulnerable groups of journalists are going to pay a major price of the pandemic despite many of them contributed significantly to the supply of information during the pandemic. Nevertheless, we also found a great deal of similarity between journalists in different types of employment conditions, including employed and freelance journalists, as they were confronted with similar changes to working routines and safety aspects during the pandemic.

The findings clearly suggest intensified precarity in journalism—a trend also observed in Portugal (Garcia, Matos, and da Silva 2021), Belgium (Libert, Le Cam, and Domingo 2022) and the US (Perreault and Perreault 2021). One can definitely speak of a Covid-19-induced acceleration of insecure working conditions in journalism on a global scale. Journalists have to work under conditions of increased stress, as news reporting has become more important than ever before, but at the same time, the media industry lacks the necessary financial resources and newsrooms suffer from staff shortages. On these terms, the Covid-19 pandemic reveals problems that were increasingly apparent for years but have rarely been the focus of research. For the industry, intensified precarization can lead to professional exodus, as one must be able to afford precarious work especially in times of crisis.

A limitation of the current study lies in its focus mainly on negative changes during the pandemic. Future studies should broaden the focus to also capture aspects that turn out to be opportunities for journalistic work, rather than obstacles. Experiences from the Corona crisis, such as new and intensified forms of digital work, may also shape journalists' work in the future (Zabel 2020). Lastly, it is important in Corona-related research to remember that conditions and observations do constantly change (Lewis 2020). The present study provides a snapshot based on data from the months of October until December 2020, when the pandemic has already dominated the world of work in Germany for several months. In order to identify long-term developments and trends in journalistic working conditions in times of the pandemic, it would make sense to conduct a longitudinal study and compare data from several periods.

Note

1. Categories: „contractual changes“, „restructuring of newsrooms“, „financial difficulties“, „home office conditions“, „changed working routines“, „changed working atmospheres“, „increased workloads“, „safety“, „others“, „not assignable“.

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