

## **Society of Freelance Journalists—written evidence (FOJ0100)**

### **Mission Statement**

The Society of Freelance Journalists<sup>1</sup> (SFJ) offers advice, moral support, learning and job opportunities for journalists whose main source of income is self-employment. Founded in March 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the community has quickly grown to more than 700 members, the majority of whom are based in the UK.

The heart of our community is a Slack group, with dedicated discussion channels for work opportunities, networking, events, and advice on topics from personal finance to working from home. Membership is free to ensure the group is accessible to all. The society's founding members – Laura Oliver, Abigail Edge, Caroline Harrop, and John Crowley - volunteer their time to maintain and develop the group, driven by their collective goal to support and lend a voice to the fast-growing freelance sector of the media industry.

In light of comments made by Rishi Sunak on July 9, we feel the concerns of freelance journalists were dismissed in the Chancellor's 'mini-budget'. We welcome the interest from the House of Lords' Communications and Digital Committee in our society – and hope that policy makers will take note of the points we raise.

### **Membership Summary**

- Some 700 members across 18 time zones.
- More than a quarter of members are active in SFJ's Slack group each week.
- All members are freelance journalists or working in journalism-related roles.

### **Context**

Being a freelance journalist has never been as fraught – and that was before the pandemic struck.

The sector's rates have barely increased in line with inflation and, in many aspects, have been steadily declining for years. The most recent Journalists At Work survey<sup>2</sup> – commissioned by the National Council for the Training of Journalists in 2018 – found that the average salary had remained at £27,500 for the previous six years.

The average median salary in the same year in the UK was £29,500. As these numbers will skew to reflect journalists in staff work, those starting out in freelancing find they have a tougher mountain to climb.

For in-depth features and investigative projects, which demand more time and resource, freelance journalists' work often equates to below the minimum wage. The SFJ would welcome more qualitative survey work in this area to assess how poorly paid our colleagues are.

Many of them work at a local level and are doing important public work to hold people, organisations and those in power to account. In addition, they must contend with energy-sapping issues of 'pay on publication', low 'kill fees' for stories which are

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<sup>1</sup> <https://freelancesoc.org/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nctj.com/downloadlibrary/JaW%20Report%202018.pdf>

commissioned and then not used and – of course – late payments.

With the additional responsibilities of admin, tax returns, organising finances and managing an online presence, it's a wonder that many freelancers find time to take off. Many, of course, are sole workers and work long hours.

Official figures show that freelance numbers continue to swell. According to the Office for National Statistics' Annual Population Survey,<sup>3</sup> there were some 32,000 freelance journalists in the UK in 2019. The figure stood at 21,000 nearly a decade ago in 2010.

These tens of thousands don't go into freelance journalism to make their fortune. For all the mischaracterisation of journalists, the vast majority care deeply about their public-service role of keeping communities informed.

COVID-19 has brought many existing challenges to the fore. SFJ believes there is an urgent need for a broader debate to aid and support this sector beyond the pandemic.

The print industry itself is in sharp decline and many titles are suspending publication due to the impact of COVID-19. Freelancing as a result is an increasingly competitive market. Many former staff journalists have turned to it after being furloughed or made redundant in recent months.

### **SFJ impact and funding**

Our Slack group (and associated Twitter account)<sup>4</sup> is a place to share work opportunities, advice or network with other freelancers. A recent live Q&A on personal finance, organised by SFJ with the aid of two experts, received dozens of questions and interactions within the group.

The society's founders have been pleasantly surprised at how community members have independently connected with one other. So far, SFJ members have helped colleagues find case studies for stories, mentored less experienced journalists and shared ways of finding work on social media.

By introducing new voices and stories and enriching diversity, SFJ feels that freelance journalists play a vital role in the media. We want to do everything possible to support, nurture and protect them. The surge in numbers, however, has not been met by funding from bodies who've tended to direct financial help to newsrooms rather than individuals.

One of the exceptions to this rule has been the European Journalism Centre (EJC),<sup>5</sup> a non-profit institute based in the Netherlands. It recently gave assistance through its Engagement and Innovation Funds to freelancers but other funders have not considered this sector of the industry.

At the start of June EJC announced fresh plans for its Freelance Journalism Assembly,<sup>6</sup> a free-of-charge programme designed to empower and connect freelance journalists across Europe.

The SFJ is grateful to have received funding from EJC and is running a dedicated Slack channel for freelance journalists from across the Continent. In July 2020, we ran an

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/datasets/aps210/reports/employment-by-status-and-occupation?compare=K02000001>

<sup>4</sup> <https://twitter.com/freelancesoc>

<sup>5</sup> <https://ejc.net/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://journalismassembly.com/>

'unconference' around subjects such as personal branding, pitching and mental health and well-being.

The SFJ founders want to connect with other freelance organisations to speak with one voice on these pressing subjects and others. If requested, we'd be delighted to give evidence in person.

### **How public policy can support freelance journalists?**

- **Highlight lack of understanding of self-employment/freelancing that undermined SEISS.**

The Self-Employment Income Support Scheme (SEISS) can provide eligible claimants with a grant worth 80% of their profits up to a maximum of £2,500 per month. The Chancellor Rishi Sunak has extended the scheme and a second round of claims can be made in August 2020. Many journalists and other self-employed people fall outside this remit. The #Forgottenfreelancers campaign says it speaks for three million self-employed people in the UK who feel they have been "left out of the loop" by the UK government's one-size-fits-all solution.

SFJ believes the biggest challenge currently facing freelance journalists are the thousands who remain ineligible for the Self-Employment Income Support Scheme. Many freelancers have roles where they are paid via PAYE – in addition to work for which they invoice clients and complete a self assessment tax return.

In addition, income from self-employment can vary widely year-on-year, particularly if a worker has taken parental leave. We believe there is a severe lack of understanding within government about the nature of self-employment which has deeply undermined the effectiveness of the SEISS.

The lack of government support packages for this cohort of freelance journalists is severely affecting the mental health of many in our community who have seen their work dry up due to the economic impact of the coronavirus. In July 2020, one member told us she had considered suicide because of the anxiety around her financial situation. This was despite the fact that she had a steady flow of income prior to the pandemic.

SFJ also believes it is wrong that those classed as newly self-employed have also been denied government support. We are calling for a scheme similar to Scotland's Newly Self-Employed Hardship Fund to be launched in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

- **Education about freelancing as a career choice/option for trainee and graduate journalists to feature in journalism schools, including employability and financial management modules.**

Students with talent and enterprise are generally able to find staff journalism roles upon completion of their course. In many cases, work experience at a news outlet undertaken during studies can secure an entry level job. Working from home, added to the ongoing blizzard of job cuts across the industry, means these established pathways are now being gradually closed off.

We would welcome a conversation with university and college outlets around modules to help graduates prepare for the demands and strictures of freelance life. Though there are some exceptions, most journalism school programmes concentrate on skills

required in newsrooms rather than giving journalists the tools they need to function as self-employed workers.

With regards to secondary schools, we feel the public service role of journalism is underplayed. More work needs to be done to promote journalism, and freelancing, as a viable career. But before that is done policy makers need to ensure that our industry is not hollowed out because of neglect and market forces.

- **Greater and more accessible legal recourse for late payment and ways to report firms who are consistent late payers or implement payment on publication and similar hostile terms.**

Freelancers largely work as sole traders, meaning many are afraid to 'take on' big news outlets who regularly delay payment. At the moment, there is no industry-wide recourse for journalists to take up complaints with late payers.

Because the market is so saturated with freelancers, news organisations know that they hold a great deal of leverage over journalists anxious to get commissions. If one kicks up a fuss, the news org can simply move on to another. The NUJ does sterling work in this area though it feels that they plough a lonely furrow.

- **Legal support for freelancers regarding contracts and payment terms.**

Freelance journalists are regularly subject to the whim of news organisations who change contracts and payment terms. The time and effort expended to challenge these changes feel like a waste of time when there are no complaints procedures. News organisations largely by default ignore entreaties and requests.

- **Review and challenge of firms that use freelancers for staff roles and enforce lay-off periods.**

Freelancers are often used to perform staff roles without the attendant holiday/pension costs to the employer. In recent years, major UK publishers have employed freelancers on year-long, rolling contracts with enforced breaks to ensure they do not require full-time contracts. The security of regular work is appealing to freelancers but such workarounds leave freelancers vulnerable. Despite being quick to pass judgement on other shoddy work practices, many big established news outlets need to get their own houses in order.

- **Invest/support professional development funds and schemes for freelance journalists with a focus on accessibility, representation and industry diversity.**

Newsrooms still do not reflect the communities they claim to serve. Despite representations being made from newsroom leaders and journalists 'on the shop floor', progress moves at a snail's pace. Working with freelance journalists has, historically, enabled newsrooms and publications to expand their geographic coverage - turning to a freelancer based in or with knowledge of a particular locale is efficient and cost-effective, as well as beneficial for breaking news and time-sensitive, location-based stories.

This model has flaws as well as advantages and it's time to review and revamp it with ambitions beyond just greater geographic coverage. Working with freelance journalists

can help broaden the range of issues covered by a newsroom, it can expose newsrooms and their audiences to a greater variety of voices and experiences, and help drive change in terms of newsroom representation and inclusion.

Commissioning more freelance writers that represent under-represented voices in a newsroom is a good step but not enough on its own. Newsrooms must review how they work with freelance journalists as part of diversity and inclusivity efforts.

- **Invest in grant schemes for freelance journalists to support struggling industry sectors, including local media outlets and underreported communities/topics.**

With freelance budgets dwindling in many newsrooms and the challenge of getting your pitch accepted in such a competitive sector of the industry, important stories are in danger of going untold. Freelance journalists may be faced with a choice between pursuing an important story without the security of a commission (or with the knowledge a commission can be killed at any time) or taking on other guaranteed paid-for work, such as copywriting. In addition, with editors having to manage freelance budgets more carefully than ever, the decision about which stories get told may be a financial rather than an editorial one.

This vicious circle threatens the role of journalism as a public service and is a disservice to audiences and the public at large. Funding or reporting grants aimed at specific areas – local democracy and injustice, social affairs, environmental reporting, solutions journalism – could be beneficial.

- **Work with industry unions to better qualify the demographic make-up of this industry group.**

There are currently no accurate figures for how many freelance journalists are active in the UK, nor information about their skills, experience or specialisms. As such, the value of freelancers to the industry as a whole is easy to dismiss or underestimate. Qualifying the state of this sector and unifying it in this way could help support freelancers in their day-to-day work and when trying to change or campaign against inequalities or poor practice in the industry as a whole.

July 2020