

Winner Takes It All

Freelance Journalism on the Global Communication Market

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Abstract

Journalist empowerment or journalist depowerment? Both tendencies are increasing in the new global communication market. News competition is most obvious among extreme risk taking journalists. The more risky the task, the fewer competitors and the easier a winner-takes-it-all-position is obtained. In this article commercial aspects of freelance journalism as both a drawback and a necessary condition for this development is explored. Competence in fields of great demand, skills in cross media work and strategies for personal branding are fundamental for professionals taking part in the race. Dilemmas with freelance journalism are approached and discussed through a case study of the private enterprise of freelance war reporter Åsne Seierstad. At the age of 33, Seierstad has never had a permanent employment in her life, yet she has become an attractive journalistic brand both nationally and internationally.

Keywords: freelance journalism, global communication market, cross medial journalism, one-man-enterprises, risk-taking, loyalty, personal branding

Introduction

At present, every other Norwegian journalist below the age of 30 do not have a permanent job (*Journalisten* 31.oktober 2003). This means that fifty percent of newly recruited journalists are working as freelancers, and must be prepared to do so maybe for most of their professional life. The phenomenon is illustrated by the following statement, given by a photo reporter having worked as an “employed” freelancer for nine years. He and his colleague both have “a good relationship to BT and we appreciate to work there, but we will never get a permanent position. We just have to face that” (ibid.). It should be added that the colleague has won several international awards for his photo journalism.

The photo editor in Norway’s largest newspaper *VG* explains: “- Our policy is a certain rotation so that more people get a chance to testing things out. It is tough to make a living as a press photographer today. Anyone can judge whether people deliver or not, and those who stay only for a short time do not think that we are good enough. But we tell people openly that in our paper people are easily let in, but they are also easily let out. (ibid.)”

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However, journalists of all ages and in most positions are influenced by the ongoing changes in media business: Two out of three news workers in Norway, 66 percent, are afraid of losing their jobs. Ten years ago, only four percent had the same fear (*Dagens medier* 5, 2003). Anecdotal evidence indicates that the same pattern is found in other European countries and in North America.

Media business tends to be an early indicator of marked changes in modern work life (*Dagens medier* 5, 2003). A typical move in the era of globalization is the tendency to “slimming” media organizations; one of the goals with organizational changes towards convergence and cross media publishing being to keep up news production with a reduced number of employed journalists. These changes are undoubtedly pushed forward by business interests, just like in other fields of the work market.

What possible consequences may the above mentioned alterations in structural conditions have for future journalism? This is a crucial question which hopefully will be discussed and thoroughly elaborated by both researchers and practitioners in years to come. In this article I will focus on aspects of extended business thinking in news making manifested through the expansion of freelance journalism locally and globally.

The analysis is based on hermeneutic phenomenology and a case study approach.

A basic assumption is that journalistic news values no longer can be assessed only by “news criteria” as such. News media do not only have a societal obligation; as modern enterprises they are also interwoven in big business: “On the one hand they represent a societal institution that is ascribed a vital role in relation to such core political values as freedom of expression and democracy. On the other hand, they are businesses that produce commodities – information and entertainment – for a market” (Allern 2002).

Flexibility and Cost Reduction

In the Middle ages, a freelance was a soldier to serve anyone for pay. In postmodern society, on the other hand, a freelance equals an organizationally independent journalist earning his living by selling his services wherever he can. Several variables of the freelance concept are found, signalling more or less permanent contracts between the individual and media organizations that he regularly works for. A main point is, however, that a freelancer should not be tied to closely up to one single employer; he is free to work for anyone.

What is it about free lance journalism that makes it increasingly attractive to media leadership?

The basic argument used is not journalistic but economic: it deals with financial result orientation, and the key words are flexibility, on behalf of management, and prizing of news as single goods. Aspects in the fore are extended management control of news worker time use and task priorities combined with less employer responsibilities. Moreover, in fields of news offer overflow, competition between employed and non-employed journalists is enhanced through pressing freelance prices.

In a simplified societal perspective, the shaping of news is making a move from being something mainly produced within a news organization to a product that is sold and purchased on a daily news stock market. What news, what stories and hence what reporters or news producers who get the best prices, depend on the market.

Verbal and symbolic signs of more market orientation in news media include a frequent use of terms like “news producer” instead of journalist or reporter and “news production” instead of making news. The increasing focus on audience, “delivery” and

“convergence” also suggests that news is a “treaty product in great demand”, a language which accordingly is adopted by journalists themselves.

With market liberalism earning its way into journalism, journalist response is getting more business oriented as well. An increasing number of news workers start practicing self leadership in one-man-enterprises. Demonstrating good skills in branding and economy is just as crucial to make success as is journalistic professionalism. Mastering personal risk taking seems to be of particular importance to most freelancers.

From this the question arises: What do reporters gain by being freelancers, and what do they lose? A successful television reporter was asked why he did not change from permanent employment to free lance enterprise. He answered: “- Many people ask me about that. Why not? Think of all the money you could make. Yes, sure. In a short period, maybe. But what about times when you are not as popular any more? What do you have then?”

I like the safety of having permanent employment. I appreciate having something to go back to” (VG, 11.2.03).

Basic Dilemmas

The statement illustrates a basic dilemma for journalists as actors in a market: The reasoning between security contra insecurity, manifested as reasoning between a stable source of income contra assumed possibilities of income. To the extent that free lance journalism is a journalistic career of personal preference, economic insecurity is chosen in exchange to possibly making millions. As “actors” in a manyfold of contexts, a number of other motives for deciding the best journalistic career may of course be identified, but they are not in the foreground here. The assumption is that freelance reporters by choice are more willing to expose themselves for economical risks than reporters who are permanently employed.

Another term for the insecurity-money-axis in modern work life is *risk-taking*. Risk-taking takes place both on the inside and on the outside of media enterprises. Internally, the fundamental lack of stability in modern organizations forces employed individuals to continually testing of their personal risk limits. Reorganizations, new work tasks and regular overturn of people stimulate this development, which is often a great challenge to the individual’s character.

The term “risk” originates from the renaissance italian word for “dare”, *risicare*. Risk taking is to dare to take chances. Implicit is both the possibility to find a golden egg, and the risk of going back to zero – in short an expansion of possible career polarities, including a more or less permanent personal vulnerability.

An Extreme Risk Taker

In our digitalized and globalized era, the economic and branding options for successful freelancers are nearly unlimited. A case study of the Norwegian Åsne Seierstad’s career span exemplifies how fame and finances may be at stake, if one is willing to run the risk.

Having covered wars in Bosnia, Afghanistan and Iraq for international media, Seierstad belongs to the relatively small international group of extreme risk taking freelancers, in a physical and mental sense. In less than five years, Seierstad has become famous world wide as a war reporter. Hence war reporting has become a crucial part of her personal branding, along with skills in cross media news shaping. Included in her

freelance activities is the writing of books from war zones, presented as journalism in the book format.

So far, her most famous publication, “The Bookseller of Kabul” has sold about one million copies in twenty countries. Consequently, Seierstad was by far the best paid journalist in Norway last year, even the best paid cultural worker in the country. She is now 34, but has still not had a permanent employment.

Then the reader may well ask: What is actually new and special in the Seierstad case?

Freelance war reporters have existed ever since the free press was established, and risk taking journalists have always sought times, places and events well suited for exploring the balancing on the edge of a cliff.

Every year, reporters are killed at wars throughout the world, and those who survive have traditionally made good money on their risk taking abilities, including book publishing and international fame. Besides, wars are always a violent struggle about truth. So why bother?

Time Shift in Journalism

The way I see it, Seierstad’s case exemplifies a time shift in modern journalism. It is a time shift partly due to *modern technology in the era of globalization*, partly to *market liberalism mechanisms* and partly to *reporters’ own comprehension of their journalistic role*.

Firstly, the technological aspect of what we may call globalization includes an upheaval of differences in time and space. Part of the new flexible capitalism is, in particular, the importance of being on line instead of on time (Sennett, 1998); with a laptop and a mobile phone today’s journalists are in theory free to work anywhere.

Reporters, like businessmen and politicians, are on line, visually, audibly and writingly from anywhere in the world anytime. Digitalization pushes convergence of media, which in turn has stimulated demands for multi medial and cross medial news coverage.

Subsequently, multi medial and cross medial journalism suggests requests for changes in reporters’ technical and journalistic skills. According to findings in my doctoral dissertation it also demands changes in personal attitudes among journalists. Multi skilling and risk taking abilities provides competition advantages in the market.

Secondly, globalization defined as a world wide market based on the new technological possibilities, expands the individual’s options for influence, both economically and rhetorically. Whereas news competition, or business competition for that sake, often have taken place locally or nationally, cyberspace society is borderless and unlimited. With discourse as your specialist discipline, bigger profit than ever before is at hand.

Another attractive benefit in discourse is well known as the power to create reality. As Michel Foucault states, “power produces... reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth” (Gordon 1981).

In what ways the necessary internal and external conditions operate, depend of course on the context, and I do not have empirical data to be able to generalize. However, the Seierstad case supports several of the above mentioned suggestions: global reporting, cross medial publishing (radio, TV, and newspapers). extreme risk taking, niche advantages (storytelling in fields scarce of reporting). In short, the chosen case may contribute to a further understanding of mechanisms behind a “winner-takes-it-all” concept in contemporary news journalism.

Prizing Mechanisms

As elaborated above, freelance journalism provides news workers with freedom to work for any employer of personal choice, and for several employers at the same time. Implicit is the possible absence of employee loyalty ties to one single news organization, a loyalty which normally denotes income limitations.

In freelance journalism matters of organizational loyalty is up to the individual. Whether employer loyalty is preferable or not, depends on the context. Freelancers often experience that loyalty to one employer may be too risky (*Journalisten*, 10.31.03). Part of the game is therefore developing skills in suitable loyalty switches to take care of one's own journalistic and financial interests.

In the Seierstad case, a fork model of journalistic employer loyalty is practiced: news is shaped and sold to several, non-competing media organizations nationally and internationally. Cross media publishing, in other words, may contribute to financial multiplication also on an individual level. This strategic publishing manoeuvre provides evidence of economic efficiency in the cybermodern media market.

Recycling news is a much honoured management principle in contemporary news organizations. It might be viewed as a part of simple prizing mechanisms in market liberalism: recycling means more financial output for less journalistic input, on all levels.

Another important precondition for a possible winner-takes-it-all-career is the principle of less is more. Overflow of a certain product results in prizes falling, lack of an attractive product implies the opposite. So freelancers who possess valuable expertise in an attractive niche or field are apt to make great profits. For instance in the Seierstad case, she was the only Scandinavian news worker reporting from Bagdad during the whole Iraqi war. Implicitly, Scandinavian news media that wanted Scandinavian eye witness reporting, had one possible option at hand; making a contract with the one reporter being able to deliver the news they needed. Residing nearly alone in an extremely valuable niche in the foreign policy news market, Seierstad was in a financial winner-takes-it-all-position.

During three hectic months of war, daily Seierstad reports from Bagdad were presented both in national and international broadcasting. Daily news stories were also published in more than a dozen national and international newspapers, and translated into more than seven languages (*VG*, 11.8.03). How quickly news was recycled was demonstrated in Seierstad's own TV documentary about her being a war reporter in Bagdad. The programme was released a few months after the war. Later the same year Seierstad's war experiences were further elaborated in the book "101 days in Bagdad. A reportage", which was presold to seven countries.

Now the reasonable reader may well ask: Why does the author of this article dwell with publishing details from the most successful year in an extreme risk taking freelancer's career?

Self Exposure as Branding

Being exposed as often as possible in several media is valuable in itself. Extended self exposure is vital to personal branding. Anyone who works in a market with several actors knows that personal branding is a must to become successful and make it last.

"At its most basic level, a brand is a sign of identification, the label which differentiates your product from those of your competitors... The second most important component of a brand is its personality... The third factor of critical significance to a successful brand is that of providing a consistent guarantee of quality and consistency" (Stobart 1994, p.36ff).

Originally the term branding stems from Old Norse, meaning “burning”. To identify the owners, domestic animals got symbols burned on their backs. Today, the concept personal branding is vital to individuals running their own private enterprises, also in journalism.

During the era of the party press, newspapers’ names and political positions guaranteed journalist credibility and quality. Later, the newspaper brand alone guaranteed for journalist credibility and quality. Today, however, reporters are dependent upon making their own, personal brand. We are at the preliminary utter end of journalistic credibility and quality.

In the Seierstad case, for instance, the personal branding process has been going on for more than ten years. During the last couple of years her brand has become so strong that it accumulates value and influence whenever exposed in media. A main ingredient in her branding strategy is foreign news covery and personal reportage, preferably from war zones. Cross media work is also part of her brand – radio, TV, and newspapers. Publishing books with stories from the same war zones complete the created image of a multi skilled, extreme risk taking news worker. Just like Einstein is the icon of science, Seierstad has become a cybermodern icon of war reporting.

At this stage of personal branding, credibility and the quality of a person’s product is taken for granted. Seierstad has found her “unique selling proposition” (Marconi 1993). In the terms of branding specialists, she knows what her customers want, she satisfies her customers and she *keeps* satisfying her customers. Doing international success in news reporting makes stories about the journalist herself and what she’s up to right now just as exciting.

Last fall, after months of heavy criticism in public, both by the bookseller himself and established authorities within journalism and science, Seierstad’s Afghanistan-story “The Bookseller of Kabul” sold better than ever. The objections only seemed to stimulate the demand for the book. It was even stated in TV news that the ongoing conflicts about realities in the bookseller story were deliberately exposed in American television to promote book sale. The American publisher, on the other hand, stated that they didn’t even have to use the conflict with the bookseller to make the story sell well in the US. (*Aftenposten*, 11.2.03).

Long lasting publicity, exposed image and book selling records all contribute to making the Seierstad brand nearly invulnerable to public discourse. For risk takers desiring world wide success, the trick is “don’t let anything stick on you” (Sennett 1998). In this respect, the Seierstad brand appears to be consistent as well. Confronted with public criticism, the strategy is not to admit mistakes or wrongs, a response which efficiently pulls possible antagonists and competitors off the track.

Empowerment and Depowerment

When frames for journalism change, both processes and results will be altered as a consequence (Kvalsund, 1998). Market orientation through the favouring of freelance services undoubtedly alters news processing in media organizations. One may well ask who gains and who loses power on the way.

According to Foucault, power is something that exists in all kinds of relationships all the time. With more than one person present, elements of power will automatically be activated. Power is not static or given, it is fluent and apt to change any time, depending on individual actions between people and systems involved. Applied on theories of change, for instance frame factor theory, Foucault’s theories of power may shed new

light on what's going on. If something changes, or is going to change, distribution of power is also apt to change.

In the all round news market, presently dominated by an overflow of free lance story production, there's little doubt that most employers experience empowerment whereas most freelancers experience the opposite.

However, in journalistic fields with more buyers than sellers, huge media organizations may experience getting trapped in their own commercial thinking. Management loss of journalistic control manifests itself when news in great demand is hardly obtainable on the free market. This loss of journalistic control is characterized by a power transference from buying media organizations to selling free lancers.

In a cybermodern, global perspective another aspect of possible free lance empowerment also comes to foreground. The concept globalization does not necessarily equal "universalisation" – attempts to create a universal order (Bauman, 1998). On the contrary, local restraint may just as well be a precondition for the experience of global freedom. Bauman draws a picture of a new, globally segregated society, where the goal for the new elite is global movement. Globalization divides just as much as it unites, he proclaims. The losers are the locals – people who are bound to stay in their local surroundings. The global, travelling elite, on the other hand, be it journalists, scientists, tourists or businessmen – may visit any local place they wish, do their task and leave. Their cleaning up is done by the locals.

Through unlimited options for global discourse, Bauman points out, the global elite accumulates power and the locals loose power. Leaning on Foucault's analysis of power as something that exists in all kinds of relationships all the time, a global elite now has the power to create reality – also on behalf of the locals. Through digital technology, the elite's versions of "truth" is messaged all over the world in a few seconds. The dilemma is of course that there exists no single truth about an issue, it all depends on the viewer's angle.

Credibility and Aspects of Loyalty

However, it is a fact that trying to oppose against "truths" that already are spread world wide is a difficult task. This dilemma was demonstrated through a number of stories in Scandinavian media last year, when the bookseller from Kabul came to Norway in person, trying to get what he called "40 falsified words and sentences" removed from Seierstad's best selling story about him and his family. He did not succeed. Nevertheless, the credibility discussion resulted in several hundred articles in Scandinavian newspapers, numbering more than fifty alone in the newspaper *Aftenposten*.

Bauman's globalization concerns are linked with the value crisis in western society. He insists, at a general level, that we see the contours of new power patterns and new strategies of exploitation.

When citing this statement, I'm not hinting that Seierstad and other successful free lance war reporters do not perform journalistically well when in the field. The point is that in a winner-takes-it-all-position, journalistic quality and credibility simply has to be taken for granted by buying publishers. Being in loss of control, news buyers are confined to trusting the ethos of news sellers in the market. Journalistic values are continually at stake, in competition with commercial prizing.

The old notion of journalism as a societal vocation has for decades legitimated journalism both as an occupation and an enterprise. Performing quality news journalism is closely connected to several aspects of loyalty. Basic variables are loyalty to the prin-

principles of news storytelling itself, performed through loyalty to the audience and loyalty to sources.

However, from the previous elaboration of loyalties to employers, it follows that principles of news shaping are not necessarily given; the “how-to-do-it”-kit and quality demands may vary from news organization to news organization, being part of each publisher’s brand.

At a news worker level, on the other hand, loyalty to one’s own standards for news shaping is a basic point of departure, no matter organizational ties. When this loyalty does not fit organizational quality standards, it may cause much frustration and stress among permanently employed journalists. In another sense, organizational demands seem to be important for correcting and adjusting personal standards of news shaping.

In freelance journalism, organizational quality standards may be of extremely varying importance, depending on the market. In fields with news overflow, buyers may prefer cooperation with the most adjustable sellers. This means that freelancers who demonstrate the highest degree of adjustability to buyer’s demands are preferred. Loyalty to one’s personal standards may then be temporary suppressed or subdued.

In a winner-takes-it-all-position, where there are far more buyers than sellers, loyalty to one’s personal brand may be unlimitedly exposed. Loyalty to one’s brand manifests itself through individualized and personal standards for news shaping. This fact in turn has to be accepted by possible buyers; their only journalistic choice is acceptance or refusal.

The observation is that aspects of loyalty heavily influence the distribution of power in news journalism.

Choice of loyalties is seldom deliberately questioned. It’s part of silent knowledge in the journalist profession, although partly integrated in ethical rules. However, in the globalization era, ethical considerations come to foreground in new shapes, brought to surface by structural changes.

In itself, this article illustrates the time shift taking place in news media, focusing more on commercial aspects of news processing than on journalism itself. It is important to note that structural and individual changes in journalism of course resemble changes in modern work life generally. Changes that are likely to accelerate in the years to come.

During the last decade news publishing has expanded in most of the western world. Ideationally, a multitude of publishing platforms may further ensure democracy, giving space to a manifold of reporting voices in public space. With piecework contracting and strict money saving policies in news organizations, however, most of today’s newcomers in journalism must prepare themselves for a freelance future. Whether such structural changes will contribute to further innovative – or further uniforming – ways of shaping news will hopefully be of interest both to researchers and to news media managements in the years to come.

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