

Exploring Freelance Journalism



**Report for the National Council for
the Training of Journalists**

Mark Spilsbury

nctj

National Council for the
Training of Journalists



Acknowledgements

Author: Mark Spilsbury

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Executive summary

The rise in freelance journalism

The level of self-employment has been rising across the UK, and the extent of freelance journalism is also increasing. From 2000 to 2015, the numbers of freelance journalists increased from 15,000 to 25,000 (an increase of 67 per cent), with the proportion of journalists who categorise themselves as being freelance increasing from 25 to 35 per cent. Across the UK economy, the rate of self-employment across all workers is 15 per cent and, whilst different occupations have different self-employment rates, that for journalists is amongst the highest.

The rise in self-employment is thought to be the result of a combination of changing economic forces, combined with behavioural changes affecting different groups of people, leading to more women, younger people (those under 25), older people (those over 55) and those who are in professional occupations. The key point is whether people have been pushed into self-employment, either by a lack of jobs or a lack of suitable jobs, or pulled in by the attractiveness of quality of work and control over work/life balance. Evidence from across the economy suggests that, on balance, the majority of people have been pulled into self-employment – to achieve greater freedom or to make the most of a business idea. Only a minority of the newly self-employed have been pushed due to unemployment. The most important reasons for people to move into self-employment have been aspirational.

The findings from the NCTJ's survey of freelance journalists finds the same pattern exists: Less than a fifth (17 per cent) had been pushed into self-employment solely because available employment opportunities were not attractive with 44 per cent saying that they had been 'pulled' into self-employment because of its attractiveness. 39 per cent believed it was a mixture of both.

It is likely that the rates of self-employment will vary over time – it is possible that the current rise in freelance journalism is a 'cyclical blip'. However, there is little sign of this in the freelance journalism data: over four-fifths (82 per cent) believe they will be working as a freelance journalist in five years' time.

Nature of freelance journalists

The data shows that freelance journalists:

- are equally balanced between men and women. This is in contrast to all self-employment across the UK where the majority of the self-employed are men (69 per cent), but does reflect the balance of employee journalists, where 55 per cent are men and 45 per cent female;
- tend to be older, in a pattern reflecting the self-employment balance across the entire economy;
- are predominantly white (95 per cent). Across the economy 89 per cent of the workforce is white, as are 90 per cent of employee journalists.

Freelance journalists tend to be well qualified – 84 per cent have a degree or higher level of qualification. This is the same as for employee journalists (89 per cent), and both are much higher than the levels of qualifications for the UK workforce (about four in ten have a degree or higher level of qualification).

Nature of self-employment

The majority (63 per cent), but not all, of the freelance journalists had found their way into journalism from a previous journalism-related job. One in ten (nine per cent) had entered into freelance journalism straight from education, and 28 per cent had worked in a non-journalism capacity.

Freelance journalists work across a range of sectors – but the main areas are for magazines (27 per cent), newspapers (24 per cent) and online (19 per cent). Only a minority list their main activity as being PR (six per cent). Despite discussion of its rise, only a very small minority (one per cent) say their main sector of work is hyperlocal newspapers or magazines.

Anecdotally, there has been suggestion of considerable amounts of ‘re-work’: journalists being laid off from a job and then being re-hired on a self-employed basis. However, the data from the survey suggests that this is only pertinent for a minority of freelance journalists: 72 per cent do not work for their previous employer at all, and of the 28 per cent who do work for their previous employer, 66 per cent say that it occupies less than 40 per cent of their work. Overall, less than one in ten of all freelance journalists work for more than 60 per cent of their time for their previous employer.

Research across the whole economy suggests that much of the growth of self-employment has been accounted for by a rise in part-time employment. National data sources suggest that the link between part-time employment and freelance journalism is clear: 43 per cent of freelance journalists work part-time compared with 11 per cent of employee journalists. The rate of part-time working is higher (43 per cent) than for self-employed people across all occupations (29 per cent). 87 per cent of freelance journalists did not want a full-time job – only nine per cent say they were working part-time because they could not find a full-time job. In addition, the freelance journalists who replied to our survey were, by and large, content with their working hours – 87 per cent thought them reasonable.

Related to this part-time work is the extent to which freelance journalists work in other jobs. Just over a third (35 per cent) do so, mainly in closely-related areas of work: a quarter (26 per cent) of these journalists work in some other area of media (PR, photography, digital media), a further quarter (24 per cent) in education or research and a fifth (18 per cent) in some other writing capacity (writer/novelist, copywriting, editing).

National data suggests that journalists are better paid than average, at an average annual salary of just below £31,000 (£30,884) compared to the all occupation average of £22,487. Unfortunately this national data is not available for freelance journalists. Our data suggests that the mean salary for all freelance journalists is £19,499. This suggests that, whilst not directly comparable, freelance journalists are paid substantially less than their employed counterparts – not least because a higher proportion of them work part-time.

Skills and learning

We know that journalists as a whole are much more highly qualified than the overall workforce, with 84 per cent having a degree or a higher level qualification. What is of concern in this section is the extent to which they have (i) journalism-specific qualifications and (ii) whether there are additional skills that they require for the ‘self-employment’ aspect of their work.

The first thing to note is that about half of freelance journalists in our survey have a journalism qualification or are working towards one (48 and one per cent respectively). 50 per cent do not. The data we have suggests that the proportion of freelance journalists who hold a journalism qualification is lower than the population of journalists as a whole – where research suggests that 63 per cent of journalists hold a journalism-related qualification.

Half the freelance journalists in our survey had undertaken some kind of learning activity relating to their work as a freelance journalist. This is significantly less than learning activity rates across all journalists found in the 2012 *Journalism at Work* research (71 per cent).

The areas of learning relate either to:

- social media and digital journalism – social media, writing for the web, development of digital journalism skills, etc;
- business skills, particularly relating to starting out as a freelancer and pitching and marketing;
- writing skills, including feature writing, investigative journalism, script writing, etc;
- photography, including digital photography skills and design.

The training is regarded as a positive experience by 84 per cent of those who have undertaken it.

The majority (61 per cent) of freelance journalists in our survey believed that there were new or additional skills that they required in order to be more efficient as a freelance journalist. The most common area of skills gaps (37 per cent of these respondents) lay in the area of ‘business finding’ – either pitching for new work or networking. 30 per cent felt that they had skill gaps in the area of new media and 27 per cent believed that gaps existed in other media areas (TV and video,

photography and radio). A quarter (26 per cent) felt they had gaps in technical skills (IT skills, web skills and digital skills) and a further quarter (25 per cent) that they had skills gaps in writing skills.

Just less than half (48 per cent) of those with skill gaps had tried to undertake training in the skills gaps area – but 87 per cent believed that they had faced barriers in obtaining relevant training. These barriers were financial – either fees being too high (59 per cent), the possible loss of earnings (36 per cent) – or issues regarding supply – lack of suitable courses (34 per cent). There also seems to be information issues regarding learning – either difficulties in assessing course relevance or quality (29 per cent) information or a general lack of information about courses/training (18 per cent).

Of course, it might be expected that skills gaps are most likely to occur when people first started into self-employment. This is certainly borne out by our data – 72 per cent said that they would have liked advice, either in the areas of tax returns and tax matters (51 per cent), book keeping and record keeping (38 per cent) or financial planning (36 per cent). Over two thirds (69 per cent) of these freelance journalists (ie those who felt they needed advice) had sought it – normally from friends, family and peers, an accountancy firm or on the internet.

Issues for freelance journalists

Research across the economy suggests that self-employment may be associated with relatively low income levels, long working hours and spells of isolation. However, the same research notes that the self-employed appear to be content at work and 'happier in their lives', as self-employment confers 'softer' benefits. Self-employment can be a sacrifice which allows a life style that would otherwise not be available.

Our freelance journalists' data confirms that there are concerns about financial issues – irregularity of income, lack of security and lack of ability to save. Issues of balancing work and family life and isolation seem to be less of an issue.

63 per cent of freelance journalists would like further opportunities to network with other freelance journalists.

Discussion points

The research allows us to consider a number of wider points, which perhaps conflicts with common anecdotal views of freelance journalism. It suggests that:

- most journalists are pulled into journalism by the attractiveness of the flexibility that it offers, not because they have been pushed out of employment due to declining opportunities. Most freelance journalists (82 per cent) are not seeking to leave freelancing, and a similar proportion (of those who were able to give an answer) think they will still be working as a freelancer in five years' time. This is not to say that there will not be a number of freelance journalists who feel marginalised and devalued by their move into self-employment, but the evidence from this survey suggests that these are in the minority.
- most freelance journalists are not (i) working for their ex-employer on a part-time or piecemeal basis (and surrendering their employment rights in doing so) or (ii) working in PR, holding onto their 'journalism' title but not actually producing work that they might previously have regarded as 'journalism'. Only a minority (28 per cent) work for their previous employer and the majority of these individuals work for this previous employer only for a minority of their time. The data suggests that only a small minority (four per cent) are dependent on their previous employer for a significant (80 per cent) proportion of their work, and only relatively few (six per cent) give PR as their main sector. These are outweighed by the proportion who say that their main sector of work are magazines (27 per cent), newspapers (23 per cent) and online (19 per cent).
- freelance journalism earnings are relatively low. Whilst the average pay for all journalists from national data sources is £30,884, data from the freelance journalist survey suggests that for freelance journalists it is in the region of £19,500. 44 per cent of freelance journalists in our research earn less than £15,000. Issues related to income and earnings are the biggest concerns to the self-employed. On balance, it appears that the findings of other research holds true for journalists – that becoming freelance brings with it many benefits regarding flexibility, but with associated sacrifices, particularly lower and more fragile income.

The data also suggests that there may be some issues regarding the skills of journalists. Over a third (37 per cent) have become freelance journalists without prior experience of working as a journalist and, whilst the general level of educational attainment of freelance journalists is high (as it is for employed journalists), less than half (49 per cent) hold a specific journalism-related qualification, which compares to nearly two-thirds (63 per cent) of all journalists. 61 per cent believe that they have skills gaps, with new or additional skills needed in order that freelance journalists can be more efficient, but only half (50 per cent) have taken part in learning activities over the last year, which compares with 71 per cent of all employed journalists.



1 Introduction

A significant trend across the UK economy has been the rise in self-employment. Journalism has not been isolated from this phenomenon and there are no indications that this trend will diminish. Yet, despite the strength of this trend, we currently know relatively little about the motivations, work experiences or emerging skills needs of these freelance journalists.

To address this, the National Council for the Training of Journalists has conducted this research to explore this trend in more depth. The research has consisted of two stages:

- a discussion paper which explored what is known about the rise in self-employment generally and develops a view of how this might apply to journalists. This was based on the literature on self-employment and freelance working and national data from the Office for National Statistics. This paper was circulated to opinion formers, (including employer representatives, major employers, individual representatives and educators), and re-drafted to take their views on board; and
- testing and quantifying the issues identified in the discussion paper in an online survey of over 600 freelance journalists¹.

This report discusses the rise in self-employment in the context of journalism. It discusses:

- trends and patterns in self-employment, including the recent rise in the numbers of self-employment, differences in self-employment rates across different occupational groups and considering reasons why self-employment has increased;
- who the self-employed are, including personal characteristics, qualification levels, geographic distribution;
- the nature of self-employment, including a consideration of routes into freelance journalism, who the 'employers' of freelance journalists are, the nature of clients, the extent of part-time working and earnings levels;
- issues around skills and learning, including the skills required by the self-employed, journalism skills and qualifications, learning activities and skill needs; and
- freelance issues, including problems and the desire for supporting activities.

¹ The methodology used for the survey is contained in Annex 1.



2 Trends and patterns in self-employment

2.1 The rise in self-employment

There has been a steady increase across the whole UK economy in the numbers and proportion of people who are self-employed². Over the period 2000 – 2015, the numbers who were self-employed increased by 1,237,000, an increase of 38 per cent. Given that the number of people working overall has increased by 14 per cent (3,802,000), the proportion of overall employment accounted for by the self-employed has increased, from 12 per cent to 15 per cent.

Employment patterns of journalists are similar, albeit with a greater rate of change. The overall levels of employment have increased by 22 per cent, from 59,000 to 72,000 and, within this, the proportion of this overall employment which is accounted for by the self-employed has increased from 25 per cent to 35 per cent.

Table 1: Change in self-employment levels, 2000 – 2015

	Employees		Self-employed		All
	N (000's)	%	N (000's)	%	N (000's)
All in employment					
2000	23,710	88	3,274	12	26,984
2005	24,864	87	3,605	13	28,469
2010	24,740	86	3,964	14	28,704
2015	26,275	85	4,511	15	30,786
Change, 2000 – 2015	2,565		1,237		3,802
	11%		38%		14%
Journalists					
2000	42	71	15	25	59
2005	38	73	14	27	52
2010	46	73	17	27	63
2015	47	65	25	35	72
Change, 2000 – 2015	5		10		13
	12%		67%		22%

Source: Office for National Statistics, Labour Force Survey at <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/lms/labour-force-survey-employment-status-by-occupation/index.html>

² We are using the definition of 'self-employed' here as used by the Office for National Statistic's Labour Force Survey. A discussion on defining the self-employed and freelancers is contained at Annex 1.

2.2 Differences in self-employment rates across occupations

The rate of self-employment varies widely across occupations, with each occupation having a self-employment rate which has been created by employment patterns pertinent to that individual occupation and the sectors in which members of that occupation work. In some sectors and occupations (eg skilled trades in construction) self-employment is more of a 'norm' than in others.

In the table below we have shown the self-employment rate for each of the major occupational groups and the self-employment rates for more detailed occupational groups within these broad groups which have particularly high self-employment rates. The self-employment rate³ varies between a low of just over one per cent for Elementary Storage Occupations (SOC 926) to 69 per cent of those in artistic, literary and media occupations (SOC 341). This data suggests that 42 per cent of journalists are self-employed (SOC 2471, Journalists, newspaper and periodical editors). As can be seen from this, higher level occupations tend to have above average levels of self-employment – managers (SOC 1) at 24 per cent), associate professionals (SOC 3) at 16 per cent), with lower level occupations having a lower self-employment rates – sales and customer service occupations have a rate of four per cent and elementary occupations at nine per cent. Within these broad occupational groups, there are some more detailed lower level occupations with higher rates, such as those working in construction occupations. Overall though, only nine of the 90 occupational groups in the structure have a self-employment rate higher than journalism.

³ This data is taken from the Labour Force Survey (LFS). Like all sample surveys, the LFS is subject to sampling error: a degree of inaccuracy caused by observing a sample instead of the whole population. In this case this is particularly true for occupations which are relatively small in size – such as Journalism. This is the reason why the self-employment rate for journalists in this LFS series varies slightly to that shown earlier in Table 1 (also the LFS, but covering a slightly different time period).

Table 2: Occupational self-employment rate in the UK, 2014 (major groups and selected occupations)

Occupation	Self-employment rate
	%
All UK	15
1 Managers, Directors and Senior Officials	24
121 Managers and Proprietors in Agriculture Related Services	62
122 Managers and Proprietors in Hospitality and Leisure Services	35
125 Managers and Proprietors in Other Services	51
2 Professional Occupations	12
221 Health Professionals	27
222 Therapy Professionals	24
241 Legal Professionals	32
247 Media Professionals	24
2471 Journalists, newspaper and periodical editors	42
2472 Public relations professionals	11
3 Associate Professional and Technical Occupations	16
321 Health Associate Professionals	25
341 Artistic, Literary and Media Occupations	69
342 Design Occupations	35
344 Sports and Fitness Occupations	43
4 Administrative and Secretarial Occupations	4
5 Skilled Trades Occupations	36
511 Agricultural and Related Trades	67
524 Electrical and Electronic Trades	25
531 Construction and Building Trades	59
532 Building Finishing Trades	71
533 Construction and Building Trades Supervisors	17
541 Textiles and Garments Trades	41
544 Other Skilled Trades	47
6 Caring, Leisure and Other Service Occupations	11
613 Animal Care and Control Services	31
622 Hairdressers and Related Services	49
7 Sales and Customer Service Occupations	4
712 Sales Related Occupations	36
8 Process, Plant and Machine Operatives	18
814 Construction Operatives	28
821 Road Transport Drivers	32
9 Elementary Occupations	9
911 Elementary Agricultural Occupations	25
912 Elementary Construction Occupations	34
923 Elementary Cleaning Occupations	20

Source: Office for National Statistics, Labour Force Survey

Note: 3 digit SOC's which do not have a sufficient sample size is too small for reliable estimates have been omitted from the table

2.3 Explaining the rise in self-employment

Statistically, there are two reasons why self-employment might rise across an economy:

- the changing structure of the economy has led to increased shares for those occupations which have a higher share of self-employment; and
- a higher proportion of people in each occupation have become self-employed.

Historically, the first of these (the structural explanation) has been true. As we have seen, the extent of self-employment varies significantly between different occupations, and recent employment trends in the UK has seen an increase in employment of higher level occupations at the expense of lower levels. On its own, this would tend to increase the level of self-employment across the UK.

But the second (behavioural) also seems to be true, and is certainly the case for journalism. Our task here is to try and understand what forces these are, how they apply to journalism and what has changed.

The RSA (*op cit*) point to a number of changing factors that may be leading to increased self-employment:

- a changed **mind-set** amongst people, with people enjoying the acts of making, doing and selling, with a shift from conspicuous consumption to conspicuous production and a gradual shift from 'materialist' to 'post-materialist' values means that greater numbers of people now prize the freedom and meaning that comes with self-employment;
- the emergence of **new technologies** has lowered the cost of doing business and make entry into self-employment easier. There are now more opportunities to work remotely. There are now also platforms designed to match companies with talent – for many freelancers securing enough work is one of the biggest daily challenges, but with the development of such apps and the development of new online marketplaces launching worldwide, this is helping freelancers find work in their chosen fields. The RSA survey found that over a third of their sample believed that they would not have been able to start their business without advances in technology, such as the internet;
- the emergence of **new markets**, with the change from a mainly manufacturing economy to a service-based economy has led to lower barriers to entry, with no need for expensive capital to enter markets, but a need for skills and talent. The growth of niche markets (products and services that cater to very particular tastes), stimulated by increasing incomes and facilitated by the internet;
- **demographic shifts**, such as an ageing population and high levels of immigration may have increased self-employment since these groups are more likely to start up in business. The number of people aged 65 is set to increase by 50 per cent over the next 20 years and many of these will continue to work past 65 and the 'retirement age'. Added to this is the increased level of migration into the UK, with migrants being more likely to be self-employed.

The RSA research (*op cit*) also suggests that the rise in self-employment has been driven by certain demographic groups increasingly turning to self-employment, most notably women, the over-50s and young people. The RSA research suggests that since 2000:

- 40 per cent more **women** have become self-employed, which is twice the growth rate for men. Women account for 60 per cent of the increase in self-employment since the downturn in 2008;
- the number of **older people** entering self-employment has disproportionately increased. The number aged 55 – 64 in self-employment has increased by around 40 per cent, whilst the number of over-65s has increased by 140 per cent. Over half the increase in self-employment since 2008 can be accounted for by the over-55s; and
- the number of **young people** becoming self-employed is also growing, with the number of under-25s becoming self-employed increasing by 55 per cent, even if they still remain a relatively small proportion of their age cohort;
- the biggest increase in self-employment since 2008 has been in **professional occupations**.

The IES note that the heterogeneous nature of self-employment, and the diverse reasons for becoming self-employed can be influences both on the performance of the businesses established by the self-employed, and the skills and development needs of the self-employed themselves. There is strong evidence that **cultural and attitudinal factors** influence both the likelihood of someone choosing self-employment and their chances of making a success of it. Being self-employed and being successful at it are much more likely among people with family backgrounds of entrepreneurship; there is similar evidence that cultural factors contribute to the persistence of regional patterns of self-employment incidence (high or low).

2.3.1 Push and pull factors?

The forces that are creating the increased rate of self-employment are grouped into ‘**pull**’ (eg quality of work and work/life balance) and ‘**push**’ (eg declining employment opportunities) factors. The question is whether the rise in self-employment is a result of a drive to embrace self-employment or whether people are turning to self-employment as a result of a stagnating labour market. Or a mixture of both? This is important: if journalists have been pushed unwillingly into being self-employed, then it is likely that as the economy recovers, if employment opportunities begin to emerge that they will revert to employee status. If this is the case, then the need for concern about this issue is reduced.

Research by the IES⁴ notes that the self-employed have diverse reasons for becoming self-employed, including growth-driven ‘opportunity’ entrepreneurs, ‘lifestyle’ self-employed, and ‘necessity’ entrepreneurs, driven into self-employment by an inability to secure a salaried job.

Other research by the RSA⁵ suggests that most of the newly employed have not been pushed. Whilst the levels of self-employment and unemployment are positively linked, the RSA finds that only just over a quarter (27 per cent) of those who started up in a recessionary period did so to escape unemployment. Far more likely to be given as a reason was to achieve greater freedom or to make the most of a good idea. Other research from the Resolution Foundation found that only 28 per cent of newly self-employed people would prefer to be ‘typical’ employees⁶. This research suggests that the move from unemployment into self-employment accounts for only a quarter of the rise in self-employment, which is a significant rise, but not the main driver.

Sapseed⁷ has a similar analysis, dividing motivations to become self-employed into ‘aspirations’ (desire for more flexibility, realisation of business ideas and ambitions), ‘lifestyle’ (desire to earn more money) and ‘necessity’ (lack of suitable jobs, redundancy and desire to keep living and working in Brighton). The most important reasons are aspirational.

Other considerations are that:

- it is not just the **absolute** lack of jobs that could drive people to self-employment but the lack of **good** jobs, jobs that give sufficient satisfaction whilst paying a sufficiently high wage. More widely across the labour market, structural trends which have stripped out many middle-level jobs in the ‘hollowing out’ of the labour market have led to more people being pushed down into lower skilled jobs. What we may be seeing is people being unwilling to accept lower-level jobs and as a result become self-employed.
- it is also possible that individuals experience a combination of ‘push’ and ‘pull’ influences – that they are pushed into self-employment by the forces described above, but that having experienced self-employment they would no longer wish to work in an employment contract in the future.

The journalists in the survey were asked whether they had gone freelance because they had chosen to (ie pulled) or because employment opportunities were not attractive (ie pushed). Less than a fifth (17 per cent) stated that they became self-employed because available employment opportunities were not available, with 44 per cent stating they became a freelance journalist because they chose to. For 39 per cent it was a mixture of both these ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors.

Table 3: Reasons for going freelance

	n	%
Chose to	271	44
Available employment opportunities were not attractive	107	17
Mixture of both	243	39
Total	621	100

Source: NCTJ Freelance Survey, 2016

Base: all respondents (621)

⁴ *Skills for self-employment*, Meager N, Martin R and Carta E, UKCES Evidence Report 41, 2011

⁵ *Salvation in a start-up? The origins and nature of the self-employment boom*. Benedict Dellot, RSA, May 2014

⁶ *Just the Job – or a working compromise*, D’Arcy C and Gardiner L, Resolution Foundation, 2014

⁷ *Brighton Fuse 2: Freelancers in the Creative Digital Economy*, Sapseed J, with Camerani R, Masucci M, Peterman M, Rajguru M and Jones P, University of Brighton, 2015

Those that had chosen to were asked why they had done so. The majority (55 per cent) wanted a greater degree of flexibility in their work. Only 10 per cent had a business idea which they wanted to develop. A high proportion, 44 per cent, gave some 'other' reason, and exploring these it would suggest that although the individuals had 'chosen to' go freelance, not all the decision may have been entirely positive, with some mentioning 'redundancy' or a 'lack of suitable jobs'. These respondents tend to be those who had replied that they had gone freelance as a mixture of both choosing to and lack of alternative employment opportunities, reflecting the sometimes complex nature of this decision.

Table 4: Positive reasons for going freelance

	n	%
Had a business idea I wished to develop	50	10
Wanted greater flexibility in work	284	55
Other, including	228	44
<i>Redundancy</i>	70	14
<i>Lack of suitable jobs</i>	33	6
<i>Positive employment opportunity</i>	29	6
<i>Caring responsibilities</i>	17	3
<i>Better control of work</i>	14	3
<i>Issues with previous job</i>	14	3
Total	513	

Source: NCTJ Freelance Survey, 2016

Base: all respondents who had stated they had chosen to go freelance (513)

Note: multiple responses allowed so %'s will total more than 100

Those who said that they started working as a freelance because alternative employment opportunities were not attractive cited that there were no permanent jobs available (42 per cent), that the journalists jobs which were available were of a low quality (27 per cent) or paid too low a salary (25 per cent).

Table 5: Negative reasons for going freelance

	n	%
No permanent jobs available	146	42
Journalist jobs which were available are of a low quality	94	27
Journalist jobs which were available pay too low a salary	86	25
Other, of which:	117	34
<i>Redundancy</i>	18	5
<i>Issues with last job</i>	21	6
<i>Lack of suitable jobs</i>	31	9
Total	346	

Source: NCTJ Freelance Survey, 2016

Base: all respondents who had stated they had chosen to go freelance (270)

Note: multiple responses allowed so %'s will total more than 100

2.3.2 A cyclical blip?

It is likely that the trends leading to differing rates of self-employment may vary over time. If the forces are employer-led, then there is a cyclical trend. When downturns arrive, employers lay off workers, which is a difficult, time consuming and expensive process. When the economy starts to pick up again and employers need increased amount of labour, they tend not to replicate the employment contracts before the downturn. They do not immediately take on workers on full-time, permanent contracts – partly because of natural caution, partly because of a desire not to have to repeat the downsizing exercise in the same way if it becomes necessary. Thus in the first immediate period of the economy picking up, forms of peripheral employment increase – self-employment, part-time work, fixed-term contracts, etc. As the labour market tightens and skilled workers become increasingly difficult to find, employers are forced to offer more attractive forms of employment – permanent and full-time (to those that want them). In this part of the cycle, we may expect to see self-employment rates decline.

This is an important point – if the rise in self-employment is a cyclical ‘blip’ then we might also assume that when the economy returns to ‘normal’, these self-employed people will return to being employees and the short term nature of the self-employment means that there is no real reason for concern or investment in support for the self-employed. The RSA (*op cit*) disagrees with the extent to which it is cyclical, arguing:

- the rise in self-employment had been increasing before the recession started, by an average of two per cent per year;
- the rise in self-employment continues to grow at a fast rate now, despite the fact that the economy is recovering; and
- survey evidence suggests that only nine per cent of the self-employed plan to return to ‘employment’ in the next three to five years.

This was also explored in the NCTJ freelance survey. A large majority – over four-fifths (82 per cent) intend to stay as a freelance journalist. Of those seeking to leave freelancing (less than a fifth, 17 per cent) 11 per cent were looking for a permanent journalism-related job and six per cent seeking to leave journalism altogether.

Table 6: Whether seeking to leave freelancing

	n	%
No	503	82
Yes, looking for a journalism-related job	69	11
Yes, looking to leave journalism	39	6
Total	611	100

Source: NCTJ Freelance Survey, 2016

Base: all respondents (611)

Only a minority (12 per cent) do not intend to be working as a freelance five years hence. 53 per cent positively state that they intend to, with just over a third (34 per cent) not knowing. If we exclude these ‘don’t knows’ from the calculation, 81 per cent believe they will still be working as a freelance in five years’ time, 19 per cent that they will not be.

Table 7: Intention to be working freelance in five years’ time

	n	%
Yes	326	53
No	75	12
Don’t know	210	34
Total	611	100

Source: NCTJ Freelance Survey, 2016

Base: all respondents (611)



3 Who are the self-employed journalists?

This section looks at existing national data sources (in this case the Labour Force Survey – LFS) and the data from our Freelance Journalism survey. The main problem using national data sources is that the sample size for journalists in these surveys is generally small and will not allow much meaningful analysis. A new LFS analysis has been undertaken specifically for this project which has bolstered the sampling⁸. This data suggests that there are in the region of 25,000 self-employed journalists. The normal guidelines for analysis of the LFS is that population sizes of 4,000 should not be regarded as statistically significant, so whilst we can use the LFS for some overall data, it may become unusable when we want to look at sub-groups.

3.1 Personal characteristics

The national data and our survey data shows that:

- whilst for overall self-employment, men are more likely to be self-employed than women, for journalists the balance of men and women is the same for self-employed as for employees. The survey data shows the same result – 50 per cent of freelancers being men and 50 per cent women;
- for journalists, as for overall self-employment, self-employment is skewed to the older age groups when compared to overall employment. National data shows that 42 per cent of self-employed journalists were over the age of 50, compared to just 20 per cent of the employed journalists. 31 per cent of the respondents to our freelance survey were over 50;
- there is no difference in the ethnic balance of employees and self-employed for the overall workforce (with 11 per cent of all employees and 11 per cent of all the self-employed are from non-white ethnic groups). Whilst this balance is the same for employee journalists, the proportion of self-employed journalists who come from non-white ethnic groups is lower at three per cent. Five per cent of our survey respondents were from minority ethnic groups;
- a higher proportion of both all self-employed and self-employed journalists have a health problem or disability. This is an aspect which needs exploring further – it is possible that those with disabilities may find it easier to be self-employed, which may allow them to combine working with other demands on their time.

“The internet dissolves boundaries between nation states. About 30 per cent of my work is for US publications now. I do B2B work for publications across Europe.”

Freelance journalist

⁸ This analysis has aggregated LFS data from eight quarters, from July 2013 to June 2015. By averaging in this way, it effectively increases the sample size and allows for greater disaggregation than using a single LFS quarter, or a single year's data

Table 8: Personal characteristics of journalists

	All in employment (LFS)		All journalists (LFS)		Freelance journalists (NCTJ Survey)
	Employees	Self-employed	Employee journalists	Self-employed journalists	
	%	%	%	%	%
Sex					
Male	51	69	55	54	50
Female	49	31	45	46	50
Age					
Under 25	14	4	4	2	1
25 – 29	12	7	18	8	11
30 – 39	23	19	30	23	8
40 – 49	24	27	28	24	48
50 and over	28	43	20	42	31
Ethnicity					
White	89	89	90	97	95
Non-white	11	11	10	3	5
Disability					
Have health problem/ disability	12	15	12	17	14
No health problem/disability	87	84	87	81	86
Total (000s)	25,953,000	4,484,000	47,000	25,000	539

Source: Labour Force Survey, 2013 – 2015 and NCTJ Freelance Survey, 2016

This age profile aligns with the ‘traditional’ view of freelancers in that they are people who have gained their skills in an ‘employee’ position (as editors and sub-editors), developed their contacts but have then moved onto freelancing. Anecdotal evidence suggests, however, that this may be changing, and some have started out freelancing as a first (or very early) job in their career. Unsurprisingly, IES (*op cit*) note that the research suggests that **prior work experience**, particularly if it includes previous spells of self-employment, contributes to success in self-employment.

3.2 Qualification levels

We know from previous research that journalists as a whole are more highly qualified than the overall workforce – and this is shown in this data. 89 per cent of employed journalists are qualified to Level 4 and above, as are 84 per cent of self-employed journalists (compared to 42 per cent of all employees and 39 per cent of all self-employed).

But of interest here is the (slight) higher tendency of self-employed journalists to have no or lower levels of qualifications than employed journalists – 10 per cent have Level 2 or lower qualifications compared to three per cent of employed journalists. This is possibly linked to the fact that a higher proportion of self-employed journalists are older – we know that the older the journalist the more likely they are to have lower levels of qualifications, with new entrants to journalism almost certainly holding graduate or postgraduate qualifications.

Table 9: Qualification levels of journalists

	All in employment		All journalists	
	Employees	Self-employed	Employee journalists	Self-employed journalists
No qualifications or below Level 2	21	25	1	7
Level 2	18	16	2	3
Level 3	19	20	7	7
Level 4	32	30	64	61
Level 5	10	9	25	23
	25,953	4,484	47	25

Source: Labour Force Survey, 2013 – 2015

3.3 Geographic distribution

From previous research we know that journalists are more likely to work in London and the South East when compared to the overall workforce, and this is confirmed in this data. However, what this national data also shows is that self-employed journalists (whilst more London-centric than overall employment) are less likely to be based in London than employee journalists, with higher proportions working in the South East and South West.

Table 10: Region of work

	All in employment (LFS)		All journalists (LFS)		Freelance journalists (NCTJ Survey)
	Employees	Self-employed	Employee journalists	Self-employed journalists	
North East	4	3	2	3	2
North West	11	10	2	5	4
Yorks & Humber	8	7	4	3	2
East Midlands	7	6	2	4	2
West Midlands	8	8	3	2	2
East of England	9	9	7	9	4
London	15	18	49	32	39
South East	13	16	12	20	11
South West	8	10	7	11	5
Wales	4	4	1	7	2
Scotland	9	7	8	2	6
Northern Ireland	3	3	1	1	2
Outside UK	0	0	1	0	19
Total (000s)	25,953,000	4,484,000	47,000	25,000	539

Source: Labour Force Survey, 2013 – 2015 and NCTJ Freelance Survey, 2016

The survey data reflects this overall pattern with one exception: a high proportion of respondents to our survey worked outside the UK (19 per cent). In part this reflects the survey methodology⁹ but it also reflects the increasing ability of individuals to work via the internet across borders.

⁹ The LFS is a household survey, with individuals identified through their postal address – people are therefore resident in the UK and more likely to work there. The Freelance survey was conducted online, and geographical boundaries are less meaningful.



4 Nature of freelance journalism

This section explores a number of aspects about self-employment. It covers individual's routes into self-employment, the nature of self-employment, including a consideration of routes into being a freelance journalist, who the 'employers' of freelance journalists are, the nature of clients, the extent of part-time working and earnings levels.

4.1 Routes into self-employment

The majority (63 per cent) of those responding to the survey had been a journalist in their previous job. 16 per cent had worked in a non-journalistic capacity, with just less than a tenth (nine per cent) having entered freelance journalism directly from education.

Table 11: Job/occupation before becoming a freelance journalist

	n	%
Worked as a journalist on a permanent or fixed-term contract	392	63
Worked in a non-journalist capacity	96	16
Was in education	58	9
Other	74	12
Total	620	100

Source: NCTJ Freelance Survey, 2016

Base: all respondents (620)

Those who had been working in a journalistic capacity had mainly worked in newspapers (35 per cent, 19 per cent in national newspapers, 16 per cent in regional or local newspapers) and 25 per cent in magazines (12 per cent in business magazines, 10 per cent in consumer or leisure magazines). Beyond this, freelance journalists worked in a range of other sectors including TV (eight per cent) and radio (five per cent).

Table 12: Main sector worked in previous journalism job

	n	%
Hyperlocal newspaper or magazine	5	1
Regional/local newspapers	72	16
National newspapers	87	19
Business magazines	56	12
Consumer/leisure magazines	48	10
Other magazines	13	3
Regional/local radio	8	2
National radio	12	3
National television	26	6
Regional TV	6	1
Cable or satellite TV	4	1
Online	31	7
Books	9	2
Public relations	20	4
Independent production company	0	0
Other	68	15
Total	465	100

Source: NCTJ Freelance Survey, 2016

Base: all respondents who had worked in a journalistic capacity before becoming freelance (465)

Those who had not worked in a journalism-related role were asked what job, or jobs, they had done before. We have coded these responses to the normal Standard Occupation Classification, though we have made a distinction within professional occupations to differentiate those jobs which were more media-related – such as press relations, content managers, publishers, designers, advertising executives, etc.

As can be seen, the most common previous occupations (65 per cent) are in this professional occupations group, with 41 per cent having worked in a range of ‘general’ professional occupation (eg university lecturer, teacher, financial advice or accountancy, solicitor, engineer, architect, social worker, pilot, etc) and 24 per cent in a Media-related occupation (as described above). 16 per cent worked in an associate professional role (eg artist, musician, catering manager, jockey, etc). Seven per cent worked in sales and customer service occupations – retail assistants, call centre operatives, etc.

Table 13: Non-journalistic job before becoming a freelance journalist

	n	%
Managers, directors and senior officials	5	4
Professional occupations	79	65
<i>General professional occupations</i>	50	41
<i>Media-related professional occupations</i>	29	24
Associate professionals	19	16
Administrative and secretarial	2	2
Skilled trades	2	2
Caring, leisure and other service occupations	1	1
Sales and customer service occupations	8	7
Elementary occupations	5	4
Total	121	n/a

Source: NCTJ Freelance Survey, 2016

Base: all respondents who had worked in a journalistic capacity before becoming freelance (465)

4.2 Who employs them?

4.2.1 Sector

From national data sources¹⁰ we can see that 23 per cent of self-employed journalists say that they work in SIC 58.14 (publishing of journals and periodicals – more commonly known as the ‘magazine’ sector), as do 26 per cent of employee journalists. Only seven per cent of self-employed journalists state that they work for the newspaper sector (compared to 19 per cent of employee journalists). The proportion of self-employed journalists who give the broadcasting sectors as their sector of work is very low – only one per cent say radio broadcasting (SIC 60.10) and none TV programme and broadcasting (SIC 60.20), compared to a total of 20 per cent of employed journalists.

Table 14: Sector

		Employee journalists	Self-employed journalists
58.11	Book publishing	4	4
58.13	Publishing of newspapers	19	7
58.14	Publishing of journals & periodicals	26	23
58.19	Other publishing	2	3
60.10	Radio broadcasting	8	1
60.20	Television programme & broadcasting activities	12	0
70.21	Public relations & communications	0	1
73.12	Media representation	3	4
90.03	Artistic creation	7	37
All other SICs		21	21
Total (000s)		47	25

Source: Labour Force Survey, 2013 – 2015

The freelance journalist research provides a much greater range of detail on the sectors they work in. We collected data on ‘all’ sectors and the ‘main’ sector.

Looking at ‘all’ sectors, we see that 79 per cent work for the magazine sector (29 per cent for consumer or leisure magazines, 25 per cent for business magazines and 25 per cent for ‘other’ magazines). 60 per cent work for newspapers (41 per cent for national newspapers and 19 per cent for regional or local newspapers). 45 per cent work online, with 22 per cent working to some extent in PR and 20 per cent in the book sector.

Looking at the main sector, the most common area is magazines (27 per cent), 23 per cent in newspapers and 19 per cent online.

¹⁰ When looking at the sectoral distribution of journalists there is a need to be aware of a ‘quirk’ in the classification system used to describe industrial sectors (the Standard Industrial Classification) which is that if an individual describes themselves as a ‘self-employed journalist’ without mentioning a specific sector, then they get coded into the category of ‘Artistic creation’ (SIC 90.03). We can see this has happened here – 37 per cent of the self-employed journalists are coded in that sector. Given the point made above that we do not know where the self-employed journalists ‘sell’ their work into, this sectoral distribution gives little further insight.

Table 15: All and any sectors worked

	All sectors		Main sector	
	n	%	n	%
Hyperlocal newspaper or magazine	39	6	8	1
Regional/local newspapers	118	19	41	7
National newspapers	253	41	96	16
Business magazines	158	25	72	12
Consumer/leisure magazines	179	29	59	10
Other magazines	153	25	32	5
Regional/local radio	34	6	5	1
National radio	46	8	12	2
National TV	47	8	9	1
Regional TV	26	4	4	1
Cable or satellite TV	11	2	7	1
Online	278	45	118	19
Books	125	20	31	5
Public relations	137	22	40	6
Independent production company	40	6	14	2
Other	122	20	73	12
Total	621	n/a	621	100

Source: NCTJ Freelance Survey, 2016

Base: all respondents (621)

A particular aspect discussed in the literature on freelance journalism has been the rise of hyper-localism, but we do need to see this in context. Research¹¹ estimates that there are approximately 496 active sites across the UK, most run by a single person. In the context of the 17,000 freelance journalists estimated by national data sources, this makes these very much a minority. In addition, this research that these hyperlocal sites may not have journalism as their main focus (the majority do not regard what they do primarily as journalism, but about ‘community participation’. Only 57% say their site is about local journalism) and the people doing this are not journalists (52 per cent have had no journalistic training or experience at all). The data above shows that only six per cent of freelances work in hyperlocal newspapers or magazines at all and only one per cent identifies it as their main sector. So whilst the emergence of hyperlocal news outlets is not a major numerical factor it is an example of the changing and widening employment opportunities for self-employment and has contributed to the widening options for self-employed journalists.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that there may be a high level of ‘re-work’: journalists being laid off from a job and then being re-hired on a self-employed basis to provide content for their previous employer. This may be a transitional phase for the individual journalist, a stepping stone until they develop new work avenues, but in the initial stages the extent to which this is actually true self-employment or ‘hidden’ employment cost cutting is debateable.

However, data from the NCTJ Freelance Survey suggests that this may not be as high as this anecdotal evidence would suggest. Whilst 28 per cent of respondents do work for their previous employer, the majority (72 per cent) do not.

¹¹ *The State of Hyperlocal Community News in the UK: Findings from a survey of practitioners*, Williams A, Barnett S, Harte D, and Townend J, July 2014, at <https://hyperlocalsurvey.files.wordpress.com/2014/07/hyperlocal-community-news-in-the-uk-2014.pdf>

Table 16: Whether work for their previous employer

	n	%
Yes	162	28
No	422	72
Total	584	100

Source: NCTJ Freelance Survey, 2016

Base: all respondents (584)

Those that did work for their previous employer were asked what proportion of their work was for that employer. The data suggests that levels of re-work for previous employers is relatively small. Of the 28 per cent who did work for their previous employer 50 per cent suggested that this accounted for less than a fifth of their work, with only seven per cent stating that it accounted for all their work. Putting this in the wider context of all freelance journalists, this suggests that less than a twentieth (four per cent) of freelance journalists are dependent upon their previous employer for a significant portion (80 per cent or more) of their work.

Table 17: Proportion of work that is for their previous employer

	Freelance journalists who do work for a previous employer		All journalists	
	n	%	n	%
0	n/a	n/a	422	72
1 – 20	80	50	80	14
21 – 40	25	16	25	4
41 – 60	16	10	16	3
61 – 80	15	9	15	3
81 – 99	13	8	13	2
100	12	7	12	2
Total	161	100	584	100

Source: NCTJ Freelance Survey, 2016

Base: all respondents (584)

4.3 Nature of clients

Evidence of the ‘nature of clients’ of self-employed people is scarce. We have evidence from the Creative IT and Digital sector in Brighton¹² which suggests that freelancers engage with their clients in a number of different ways. The majority tend to work with the same clients all the time on a ‘repeat business’ way, which is seen as having advantages and disadvantages in that:

- the advantages are that it removes uncertainty for the short-term and the need for investment in active marketing;
- the disadvantages are that freelancers can become dependent on one or two clients’ specific needs and lose a general sense of what the market requires.

This model certainly seems to be the case for freelance journalists – 67 per cent report that they work for the same clients all the time, with a third (33 per cent) saying that they work for a wide range of clients.

¹² Brighton Fuse 2: Freelancers in the Creative Digital Economy, Sapseed J, with Camerani R, Masucci M, Peterman M, Rajguru M and Jones P, University of Brighton, 2015

Table 18: Range of clients

	n	%
Tend to work for the same clients all the time	393	67
Wide range of clients	191	33
Total	584	100

Source: NCTJ Freelance Survey, 2016

Base: all respondents (584)

The most common form of work-relationship is for the work to be done on a commissioned basis – only 10 per cent of the freelance journalists do not derive any of their income from this model, and 37 per cent derive all of their income from commissioned pieces. Nine per cent earn all their income from working shifts (although 70 per cent earn none of their income this way) and six per cent earn all their income from selling stories on spec (though 57 per cent earn none of their income this way).

Table 19 Proportion of work that is commissioned, sold on spec or shift

	Commissioned		Stories sold on spec		Shifts		Other	
0	50	10	120	57	140	70	132	78
1 – 20	56	11	112	22	31	6	44	9
21 – 40	36	7	25	5	23	5	10	2
41 – 60	57	11	31	6	26	5	17	3
61 – 80	75	15	12	2	20	4	17	3
81 – 99	50	10	11	2	9	2	6	1
100	189	37	29	6	46	9	29	6
Total	513		513		513		513	

Source: NCTJ Freelance Survey, 2016

Base: all respondents (513)

4.4 Part-time working

The RSA research suggests that much of the growth in self-employment has been accounted for by the growth in part-time self-employment. They suggest that the amount of people who work for themselves for less than 30 hours per week has grown by almost 60 per cent over the period 2000 – 2013 compared to a 20 per cent increase in the number of full-time self-employed. In addition, a small, but growing number seem to be operating as self-employed alongside paid employment elsewhere. Data from this research suggests that in the region of one in five works in a full-time job as well as being a freelance worker in their 'creative businesses'. There are many gradations of 'full-time' (one day, two days per week, etc) which allows such dual working and also allows the development of the so-called 'lifestyle' businesses.

Relating this specifically to journalists, this link between self-employment and part-time work is clear: national data shows that 43 per cent of self-employed journalists work on a part-time basis, compared to 11 per cent of employed journalists. This level of part-time working amongst self-employed journalists is higher than for self-employed people across the whole economy.

This begs the question as to the reason for this level of part-time working – is it enforced or is it a chosen route? National data shows that 87 per cent of the self-employed journalists who are working part-time state that they are doing so because they did not want a full-time job, a much higher rate than for any other group.

Table 20: Contract status

	All in employment		All journalists	
	Employees	Self-employed	Employee journalists	Self-employed journalists
Contract status				
Full-time	74	71	89	57
Part-time	26	29	11	43
Total (000s)	25,953	4,484	47	25
Reason for part-time work				
<i>Student or at school</i>	14	3	3	1
<i>Ill or disabled</i>	2	3	4	2
<i>Could not find full-time job</i>	17	14	10	9
<i>Did not want a full-time job</i>	65	79	81	87
Total (000s)	6,832	1,283	5	11

Source: Labour Force Survey, 2013 – 2015

There is another issue here which the data can only partially help explore. The LFS data covers only respondent's first (and main) job, but they are also asked if they have a second job. Because of small sample sizes, the ONS do not release this data at the same level of detail as 'first jobs' and so the occupational detail is at a higher level – data is only available at the 3rd SOC level, which is 'media professionals' (SOC 247)¹³. However, this suggests that there are a further 10,000 people who are working in this media professional area as a second job, the majority of whom (83 per cent) are self-employed.

The freelance journalists responding to our survey worked an average of 34 hours per week, but the spread is large. A minority (13 per cent) worked two days a week or less. A larger proportion worked longer than 40 hours (23 per cent).

Table 21: Hours of work

Number of hours	n	%
None	4	1
1 – 8	24	4
9 – 16	50	8
17 – 24	91	14
25 – 32	123	19
33 – 40	178	28
41 – 48	47	7
More than 48	101	16
Varies too much to say	15	2
Total	633	100

Source: NCTJ Freelance Survey, 2016

Base: all respondents (633)

It is, however, useful to note, that the majority – 87 per cent – consider the hours that they normally work to be reasonable.

¹³ And which covers three detailed occupational groups of journalists, newspaper and periodical editors (SOC2471), public relations professionals (SOC 2472) and advertising accounts managers and creative directors (SOC2473).

Table 22: Views of hours of work

	n	%
Reasonable	554	87
Unreasonable	82	13
Total	636	100

Source: NCTJ Freelance Survey, 2016

Base: all respondents (636)

Related to this, of course, is the extent that freelance journalists work in other occupations as well as being a journalist. In the main, they do not (65 per cent), though 35 per cent do so.

Table 23: Whether freelance journalists work in any other occupation than as a journalist?

	n	%
Yes	223	35
No	413	65
Total	636	100

Source: NCTJ Freelance Survey, 2016

Base: all respondents (636)

Those that work in other jobs in addition to being a journalist are engaged in a range of occupations. The most common (26 per cent) are for jobs in other areas of the media – either PR, as a photographer or in digital media. Just less than a quarter (24 per cent) are engaged in education or research, with 18 per cent in some kind of writing activity, either as writers or novelists, copywriting or acting as editors.

Table 24: Other occupations

	n	%
Other media	58	26
Other media	27	12
PR	20	9
Photographer	7	3
Digital media	4	2
Education and research	55	24
Educator, lecturer, teacher, trainers	49	22
Research	6	3
Writing	41	18
Writer/novelist	23	10
Copywriting	12	5
Editor	6	3
Consultant	15	7
Volunteer/charity	11	5
Translator	10	4
Other	39	17
Total	226	100

Source: NCTJ Freelance Survey, 2016

Base: all respondents worked in other occupation as well as journalism (226)

These other sources of work and income are considered to be important:

I also teach sometimes: this is a common source of income for mid-career onwards journos, so it's important.

Freelance journalist

4.5 Earnings

The final point that the data can add insight into is earnings levels. The sample sizes for the earnings data in the LFS do not allow this data to be released for occupations which are the size of journalists and so for this we need to turn to an alternative data source, which is the Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings (ASHE). For our purposes this has limited use as it is a survey of employees only, not of the self-employed, but it serves to give an indication of salary levels for journalists.

This suggests that median gross annual pay for journalists in 2015 was £30,884 (full-time journalists was higher at £31,294, the data on part-time journalists has been restricted due to sample sizes). This is considerably more than the average yearly salary for all employees of £22,487 (£27,645 for full-time employees, £9,275 for part-time employees).

Table 25: Gross median weekly pay: United Kingdom, 2015

	All employees	Journalists (SOC 2471)
WEEKLY		
All	£425.80	£592.60
Full-time	£527.70	£613.30
Part-time	£167.00	*
ANNUAL		
All	£22,487	£30,884
Full-time	£27,645	£31,294
Part-time	£9,275	*

Source: *Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings, 2015*

Note: * indicates that the sample size is too low to give reliable estimates

The data from the freelance survey is a useful comparator to this national data source. The range is considerable – 14 per cent earn less than £5,000 a year whilst a small minority (two per cent) earn more than £75,000. The mean yearly income is £22,984 whilst the median salary is £19,499¹⁴. This data, whilst not directly comparable does suggest that self-employed journalists are paid substantially less than employed journalists.

¹⁴ The median indicator is regarded as being a better measure of average earnings as the mean income can be skewed upwards by a small number of high values. Both the median and the mean have been calculated by taking the mid-points of the ranges: the median income has been calculated by taking the range in which the median value fell (£15,000 – £19,999) and dividing this into a number of sub-ranges within this and aligning this to the median value.

Table 26: Income from freelance journalist work over last year?

	n	%
Less than £5,000	73	14
£5,000 – £7,499	40	8
£7,500 – £9,999	30	6
£10,000 – £12,499	42	8
£12,500 – £14,999	30	6
£15,000 – £19,999	56	11
£20,000 – £24,999	51	10
£25,000 – £29,999	60	11
£30,000 – £39,999	72	14
£40,000 – £49,999	35	7
£50,000 – £74,999	25	5
£75,000 – £100,000	10	2
More than £100,000	2	*
Total	526	100
Mean salary	£22,984	
Median salary	£19,499	

Source: NCTJ Freelance Survey, 2016

Base: all respondents who gave a response (526)

There are considerable concerns about levels of pay reflected in the qualitative responses gathered in the survey. Many respondents clearly see a trend for freelance journalism earnings to have decreased over recent years, either because the number of commissions available have declined (as a result of shrinking numbers of outlets which require content) or because rates have decreased or remained static:

“In real terms the potential earnings from freelancing have taken a drastic downturn over the last ten years.”

Freelance journalist

“In the 15 plus years of freelancing I don’t think my rates have gone up at all.”

Freelance journalist

“The basic problem with freelance journalism now is that the rates for the job have collapsed as has the amount of commissioned work publications will entertain. So in a nutshell very little work and if there is its now at very low rates.”

Freelance journalist

Some cite the impact of the availability of free content as an issue – either driven by employers, or by some journalists themselves:

“The entry to the market of “citizen journalists” who are happy to give content away in exchange for a credit – and the papers’ pursuit of this model means that the hard work of committed working freelance photographers is further devalued.”

Freelance journalist

“The growing trend for outlets (especially online) to offer no payment for work citing ‘exposure’. Pay has already fallen dramatically in the past 10 years.”

Freelance journalist

“Freelance rates are poor and due to the sheer number of freelances, companies can keep rates low as they can pick and choose who they use.”

Freelance journalist

This is corroborated when we examine national data sources which shows the extent to which an individual is eligible to claim state benefits or tax credits. This shows that over a third (36 per cent) of self-employed journalists are claiming benefits or tax credits – a rate higher than employee journalists (17 per cent), but also higher than all self-employed workers (30 per cent).

Table 27: Whether claiming state benefits or tax credits

	All in employment		All journalists	
	Employees	Self-employed	Employee journalists	Self-employed journalists
Yes	25	30	17	36
No	75	69	83	64
Total (000s)	25,953	4,484	47	25

Source: Labour Force Survey, 2013 – 2015



5 Skills and learning

5.1 Skills of self-employed journalists

As we have seen in section 3 above, journalists tend to be highly qualified, though there is little difference between qualification levels of employee and self-employed journalists. This concurs with IES research which suggests that at the top end of the skill spectrum (which is where journalism lies), there is no evidence that the self-employed have different levels of skills than employees in the same occupation. So, as the education levels of journalism freelancers tend to reflect the education levels of journalists as a whole, they tend to be highly educated with the majority having completed a degree.

As well as needing 'journalism skills', individuals also need skills to be self-employed. The IES research suggests that when it comes to the generic competences required for success in self-employment (over and above any occupational skills which may be required), a wide range are important, including:

- values, beliefs and attitudes (eg action orientation, desire for independence, initiative, creativity etc);
- 'soft' skills including interpersonal, communication and networking skills;
- realistic awareness of the risks and benefits of self-employment;
- functional business skills (financial, HR management, market research);
- relevant business knowledge (legislative, taxation, sources of finance *etc*).

The relative importance of each of these may vary between the nature of the business (growth-oriented or lifestyle, for example), and between the different stages of the self-employed lifecycle (pre-entry; entry and survival; growth etc). But it is important to note that the evidence shows that compared with employees, the self-employed need the ability to combine and deploy a wider range of competences.

5.2 Journalism skills and qualifications

What is of interest here is how journalist freelancers specifically gain their journalism skills. The freelance journalism survey shows that freelance journalists are roughly equally split between those that hold a journalism qualification (48 per cent) and those that do not (50 per cent). A minority (one per cent) are working towards a journalism qualification.

Table 28: Whether freelancer has a journalism qualification

	n	%
Yes	281	48
Working towards one	4	1
No	290	50
Don't know	8	1
Total	583	100

Source: NCTJ Freelance Survey, 2016

Base: all respondents (583)

Amongst those who have a journalism-related qualification, the most common (half of these journalists) is the NCTJ. 17 per cent have a university degree which is not accredited and a further 10 per cent have an overseas, non-UK qualification (most often a degree). Following this, minorities have qualifications accredited by other bodies, including the PPA (five per cent), the BJTC (three per cent), or internal company schemes or qualifications (five per cent).

Table 29: Body approving or accrediting the journalism qualification

	n	%
National Council for the Training of Journalists (NCTJ)	140	50
Non-accredited university degree	49	17
Overseas, non-UK qualification	29	10
Periodicals Training Council (PPA)	15	5
Internal company scheme or diploma	13	5
National Vocational Qualification (NVQ)	10	4
Broadcast Journalism Training Council (BJTC)	9	3
Other	5	2
Don't know/cannot recall	12	4
Total	282	100

Source: NCTJ Freelance Survey, 2016

Base: respondents who have a journalism qualification (282)

This data suggests that the proportion of journalists who (i) have a journalism-related qualification and (ii) hold an NCTJ-accredited qualification is lower than the population of journalists as a whole. Research indicates that 63 per cent of all journalists have a journalism qualification (compared to the 49 per cent of freelance journalists above) and that of these the majority (73 per cent) hold an NCTJ-accredited qualification.

Table 30: Proportions holding journalism-related qualifications: freelances compared to all journalists

	JaW 2012	Freelance Survey, 2016
Holding a journalism-related qualification	63	49
Holding a journalism-related qualification approved or accredited by the NCTJ	46	24

Source: JaW, 2012 and Freelance Journalism Survey, 2016

This finding is obviously of some interest and there are different interpretations that could be placed on it:

- freelance journalists tend to be older, and older journalists are less likely to have journalism qualifications than younger ones, a pattern common to all occupations across the UK economy;
- freelance journalists are not in formal learning situations in which they can work towards accrediting their skills with qualifications – such as the National Qualification for Journalists; and
- other research has shown a positive relationship between those that pass journalism qualifications (and pass at a higher level) and positive labour market outcomes¹⁵ as people who obtain a journalism qualification are more likely to be in work and more likely to be working as a journalist than those who failed their qualification. On this logic freelances are more likely to be freelance because they do not have qualifications which would get them a job.

Just less than half of the respondents who have a journalism qualification regard it as being important to their work as a freelance journalist – either ‘very important’ (25 per cent) or ‘important’ (23 per cent). 31 per cent regard their journalism qualification as ‘not very important’, with a fifth (18 per cent) stating that it is ‘not at all important’.

Table 31: Importance of the journalism qualification in work as a freelance journalist

	n	%
Very important	70	25
Important	65	23
Not very important	88	31
Not at all important	51	18
Don’t know/cannot recall	8	3
Total	282	100

Source: NCTJ Freelance Survey, 2016

Base: respondents who have a journalism qualification (282)

¹⁵ See M Spilsbury, *Destinations of NCTJ Diploma in Journalism students*, NCTJ, 2015, available at <http://www.nctj.com/downloadlibrary/NCTJ%20Destinations%20Diploma%20Final%20low%20res.pdf>

The respondents were asked why they said that the qualification was important or not important. The most common response (46 per cent) was that the qualification gave the individual knowledge and skills to enable the individuals to do their jobs. Comments included:

“Everything I learned via my NCTJ-accredited course is just as relevant and useful in my freelance career.”

Freelance journalist

“The training gave me knowledge that is vital to the job.”

Freelance journalist

“Good grounding in journalism.”

Freelance journalist

The second most common reason (24 per cent) why the qualification is regarded as important is that it gives them credibility. This was frequently specifically mentioned in the context of the increase in the ‘citizen journalist’:

“It makes it all the more authoritative in a society with growing numbers of ‘amateur journalists’ ie bloggers.”

Freelance journalist

“It differentiates me from “citizen journalists”, many of whom don’t have basic reporting skills. For instance, they often don’t know who they’ve interviewed or photographed.”

Freelance journalist

The final substantial response from those positive about their qualification (23 per cent) was that the qualification was important because, in general, journalism jobs required it and, more specifically, employers asked for it.

Those who were less positive about the importance of their journalism qualification most commonly stated that this was because employers simply did not ask for it (33 per cent), or that experience was more important (28 per cent). 14 per cent responded that the qualification had helped them get their first job, but not after that, a response which overlaps with those who stated that their qualification was gained some time ago (seven per cent) – for these respondents, it is not that their journalism qualification was never important, but that this importance has lessened over time and with job experience gained along the way. A minority stated that the skills that they had learnt in their qualification were not relevant – often this appears to be because the individual has gained work in a different sector than that which their qualification was designed for – so someone who gained a qualification in print journalism now works in TV, and the extent of skills transfer/overlap is limited.

Table 32: Reason why the journalism qualification was important or not important

	n	%
Those ranking the qualification as very important or important		
The course content/skills development	51	46
It is a recognized qualification	27	24
Employer or job requirement	26	23
Development of contacts	7	6
Other	11	10
Total	112	100
Those ranking the qualification as not very important or not at all important		
Not asked for by employers	43	33
Experience more important	36	28
Helped with gaining first/initial job but not after that	18	14
Skills not relevant	11	9
Qualification gained a long time ago	9	7
Other	13	10
Total	130	100

Source: NCTJ Freelance Survey, 2016

Base: respondents who have a journalism qualification and who gave a response on why they rated it important or not important

Similarly, more than half (57 per cent) of those with a journalism qualification believed that qualification was relevant (31 per cent saying that it was very relevant, 26 per cent fairly relevant). 42 per cent do not believe that the qualification is relevant to their current work – with 26 per cent saying not very relevant and 16 per cent not at all relevant.

Table 33: Relevance of the journalism qualification in work as a freelance journalist

	n	%
Very relevant	86	31
Fairly relevant	74	26
Not very relevant	74	26
Not at all relevant	44	16
Don't know/cannot recall	4	1
Total	282	100

Source: NCTJ Freelance Survey, 2016

Base: respondents who have a journalism qualification (282)

The main reason (59 per cent) that the journalism qualification is seen as important is because it gives journalists the skills that they need to do their jobs.

“It was the foundation on which the rest of my career and experience was built.”

Freelance journalist

Specific mention is made of particular aspects of their qualification, including shorthand and law.

12 per cent stated that having the qualification boosted their credibility amongst employers – both in initial jobs but, as freelancers, on an on-going basis:

“It’s more important as a freelance as you have to prove yourself even more when not in a permanent position. You need to prove yourself all the time.”

Freelance journalist

The most important reason why the qualification is not seen as relevant is that experience is regarded as being more important (23 per cent), again compounded for many respondents in that they gained their journalism qualification a long time ago (15 per cent).

Table 34: Reason why the journalism qualification was important or not important

	n	%
Those ranking the qualification as very or fairly relevant		
Skills	67	59
Credibility	14	12
Employer requirement	4	4
Other	29	25
Total	114	100
Those ranking the qualification as not very or not at all relevant		
Experience more important	23	23
Qualification gained a long time ago	15	15
Skills not relevant	14	14
Employers do not ask for qualifications	10	10
Other	39	39
Total	101	100

Source: NCTJ Freelance Survey, 2016

Base: respondents who have a journalism qualification and who gave a response on why they rated it important or not important

5.3 Learning activities

Sapseed (*op cit*) suggests that continuous learning and the acquisition of skills and knowledge is vital for freelancers, evidenced by the fact that 59 per cent of freelancers have engaged in learning activities in the previous 12 months. The most important means is by 'learning on the job' (the most important method of skills acquisition for 49 per cent of freelancers), followed by self-learning (28 per cent) and through a Higher Education degree (15 per cent).

However, IES found that, compared with employees, the self-employed are only half as likely to participate in work-related training or education. In part this is likely to reflect the over-representation of people with no qualifications among the self-employed (people with no qualifications are less likely than others to participate in training). It may also be partly because many self-employed have low earnings and work long hours, making it difficult for them to afford the money or time to invest in skill development. The research evidence does not, however, reveal whether the self-employed compensate for this by finding other ways to update their skills, through informal learning or on-the-job skill development. It does, however, raise an important question about whether, over time, this lower level of work-related training leads to a widening skills gap between employees and the self-employed, as the latter fail to update and develop their skills and competences (certainly there is some evidence that this may be an issue in particular sectors, such as construction).

Sapseed reports that the most significant barriers to learning are lack of time (51 per cent), excessive costs (40 per cent) as well as a fear of losing work due to committing time in advance (29 per cent).

To explore this with regard to freelance journalists the NCTJ survey asked, whether (since starting work as a freelancer) they had taken part in any learning activities related to their work¹⁶. Half (50 per cent) of the freelance journalists had undertaken some learning, with half having not done so. In line with the wider research findings, this is considerably less than the finding from the 2012 *Journalism at Work* survey which found that 71 per cent of journalists had undertaken some form of learning in the past 12 months.

Table 35: Whether have taken part in any learning activities related to their work

	n	%
Yes	289	50
No	288	50
Total	577	100

Source: NCTJ Freelance Survey, 2016

Base: all respondents (577)

The subject matter for this learning is very wide. The two main areas relate to the developments in social media – either writing for social media, writing for the web or digital journalism skills – or business-related (including starting as a freelancer, pitching and marketing or related to law).

¹⁶ Which was defined as including taught courses, evening classes, supervised training while doing their job or learning on the job.

Table 36: Subject matter of learning activities related to their work

	n	%
Social media and digital journalism, including	88	31
<i>Social media</i>	42	15
<i>Writing for the web</i>	33	11
<i>Digital journalism skills</i>	8	3
<i>Search engine optimisation</i>	5	2
Business-related, including	80	28
<i>Starting as a freelancer</i>	27	9
<i>Pitching and marketing</i>	29	10
<i>Law</i>	10	4
<i>Other management and business-related</i>	14	5
Writing skills (including feature writing, investigative journalism, copy writing, script writing, etc)	59	20
Photography (including digital photography)	37	13
Design (including design software tools such as InDesign, etc)	31	11
Other, including	74	37
<i>IT-related</i>	17	6
<i>Editing</i>	7	2
<i>Shorthand</i>	4	1
<i>Data journalism</i>	4	1
Total	289	n/a

Source: NCTJ Freelance Survey, 2016

Base: all respondents who have undertaken a learning activity (289)

The training that has been received is generally regarded as being a positive experience – nearly half (48 per cent) found it to be very useful with a further 36 per cent saying it was fairly useful. Less than a fifth found it to be of variable quality (11 per cent) or not of great use (six per cent).

Table 37: How useful was the learning activity

	n	%
Very useful	136	48
Fairly useful	102	36
Of variable quality	32	11
Not very useful	15	5
Not at all useful	15	1
Don't know/not answered	3	*
Total	289	100

Source: NCTJ Freelance Survey, 2016

Base: all respondents who have undertaken a learning activity (289)

5.4 Skill needs

Generic information about the **skills needs** of the self-employed is limited. The main data source on skills issues is the UK Employer Skills Survey (conducted every two years), but this explicitly excludes the self-employed, with the sample being defined to include those businesses with 2 employees or more. IES suggest that there is **little robust or systematic evidence** on how far the existing self-employed, or the potential self-employed (whether currently unemployed, employed or inactive) possess these skills and competences, although several small scale studies suggest that many self-employed or potentially self-employed may have difficulties due to:

- insufficient self-awareness of own skill needs, and lack of self-assessment as ‘business people’;
- lack of business experience and/or lack of relevant business training: with particular reference to skills such as cash flow/financial management, marketing/winning business, creating and management business systems;
- insufficient ‘soft’ skills, including interpersonal skills; and
- lack of staff management skills (where relevant).

To explore this further, the freelance journalists were asked about their skill needs. In the first instance, the majority (61 per cent) believe that they require new or additional skills in order to be more efficient as a freelance journalist. 39 per cent believe themselves to be fully skilled.

Table 38: Whether there are any new or additional skills that you require in order to be more efficient as a freelance journalist

	n	%
Yes	350	61
No	223	39
Total	573	100

Source: NCTJ Freelance Survey, 2016

Base: all respondents (573)

The journalists who said that they had skills needs were asked about the nature of these skills. These have been grouped into a number of areas, shown in Table 39. As this shows:

- the most common area where new or additional skills are needed is in ‘Business finding’ (37 per cent of these respondents), required by 37 per cent of these respondents – with 29 per cent feeling that they need to improve their ‘pitching’ skills and seven per cent that they need to build better networks;
- 30 per cent stated that they had skills gaps in the area of writing for new media platforms, whether social media (22 per cent) or writing for the web and new media (eight per cent);
- a group (27 per cent) relating to other media skills: 17 per cent highlighting skills relating to TV and video, six per cent in photography and four per cent relating to radio;
- a further 26 per cent note that they have skill gaps in more technical aspects of websites – IT skills (11 per cent), web skills (10 per cent) and other digital skills (five per cent);
- just less than a quarter (23 per cent) noted gaps in the areas of business and legal skills. The area of business skills (19 per cent) are wide ranging and include book-keeping, business planning, risk management, rights management, taxation advice. Four per cent also cite law/legal skills;
- a fifth (20 per cent) highlight a series of writing-related skills area, with 17 per cent journalism-related skills (writing articles, investigative journalism, travel writing, copy editing, ghost writing, etc), five per cent noting a gap with regard to data-related skills (database skills, data visualisation, data journalism, etc) and three per cent noting a need for improvement in their shorthand skills;
- nine per cent highlight a need for new or additional skills in some aspect related to design – either a generic statement relating to ‘design skills’ or specific design tools such as InDesign or Wordpress; and
- an ‘other’ group (20 per cent which covers a wide range of assorted skills, including language skills, teaching skills, hostile environment training and so on.

Table 39: Nature of the skills

	n	%
Business finding skills	128	37
<i>Pitching</i>	102	29
<i>Networking</i>	26	7
New media	106	30
<i>Social media</i>	77	22
<i>Writing for web and new media</i>	29	8
Other media	94	27
<i>TV and video</i>	61	17
<i>Photography</i>	20	6
<i>Radio</i>	14	4
Technical, web and digital skills	90	26
<i>IT skills</i>	39	11
<i>Web skills</i>	36	10
<i>Digital skills</i>	16	5
Writing-related	87	25
<i>Journalism, writing and editing</i>	59	17
<i>Data related</i>	17	5
<i>Shorthand</i>	11	3
Business and legal skills	82	23
<i>Business skills</i>	68	19
<i>Law/legal skills</i>	14	4
Design	31	9
Other	69	20
Total	350	n/a

Source: NCTJ Freelance Survey, 2016

Base: all respondents who had a skills need (350)

These business skills can relate to the fundamentals of running a business – such as managing customers and cash flow:

“My problem isn’t getting work, it’s getting organisations to pay on time!”

Freelance journalist

“There is the additional issue of constantly having to battle people for payment.”

Freelance journalist

“The real downside to freelance work is not being paid on time (or being paid less than agreed) and the humiliation of having to chase for what you are due.” Freelance journalist

“Major issues facing freelancers are late payments. This can be brutal as a self-employed journalist and difficult to handle without straining the relationship with clients.” Freelance journalist

And perhaps not a traditional ‘skills gap’ per se, some respondents did refer to specific problems that have arisen precisely because they are freelances – particularly relating to accessing people, interviewees and information:

“As a freelance, I have had difficulty with garnering responses both from companies, employees, and people I want to interview. Perhaps I can learn to get to people but I find it too easy for others to brush me off and this can be disheartening. I imagine if I had a big job with a national paper this would be different.”

Freelance journalist

“To work successfully as a freelance access to news events is critical. This is not easy to get, and can be expensive to subscribe to the likes of Foresight/FENS.”

Freelance journalist

Despite acknowledging that they have skills gaps, less than half of these respondents (48 per cent) have tried to undertake learning to address the skills gap area, with 52 per cent not having done so.

Table 40: Whether have tried to undertake learning or training in the skills gap area

	n	%
Yes	166	48
No	183	52
Total	349	100

Source: NCTJ Freelance Survey, 2016

Base: all respondents who have identified a skills gap (349)

Those that had tried to undertake training were asked whether they had faced any barriers in obtaining the learning to address the skills issues that they had identified. 13 per cent of these respondents did not think that there were any barriers. Where barriers were perceived to exist, the most common are financially-related – 59 per cent believed that fees were too high and 36 per cent were concerned about the loss of earnings. There are also some concerns about supply of training – 34 per cent believed that there is a lack of suitable courses or training, 29 per cent that it was difficult to assess the quality or relevance of learning provision, 24 per cent that courses are put on at inappropriate times, 21 per cent that courses or training are difficult to get to and 18 per cent that there was a lack of information about learning provision.

Table 41: Whether experienced any barriers in obtaining the learning in the skills required

	n	%
No barriers	21	13
Fees too high	98	59
Possible loss of earnings	59	36
Lack of suitable courses/training	54	34
Difficult to take time off	50	30
Difficulty assessing quality or relevance of courses/training	48	29
Bad timing of the courses/training	40	24
Courses/training difficult to get to	34	21
Lack of information about courses/training	29	18
Domestic/personal reasons	28	17
Employers not prepared to pay for training	27	16
Other	20	12
Total	166	100

Source: NCTJ Freelance Survey, 2016

Base: all respondents who have identified a skills gap and who have tried to obtain learning to address the skills issue (166)

Regarding the costs of training courses, specific mention was made of the extra costs or logistical difficulties that relate to the courses being located in London, where travel and accommodation costs increase the costs:

“It would be great if free or inexpensive training courses could be organised. I find the price of the training courses in London too expensive to come over for.” Freelance journalist

“I would welcome access to online training/live-streamed events: as the mother of a small baby, my ability to travel (especially as most events/courses seem to be in London) is limited.” Freelance journalist

“I would like to do more training but am unable to afford the courses and train fare to and accommodation in London, if there were more available regionally, I think that would benefit a lot of freelances.” Freelance journalist

A particular skills issue is the ‘fusion’ of skills – the extent to which occupational boundaries and borders are breaking down and individuals are working across other occupational areas. To examine this, respondents were asked whether their freelance journalism work involved ideas from other areas of creative design and technology. For the majority of respondents (57 per cent) their work does not do so, but for a substantial minority (43 per cent) it does – either for ‘most of the time’ (15 per cent) or ‘some of the time’ (28 per cent).

Table 42: Whether freelance journalism work involves ideas from other areas of creative design and technology

	n	%
Yes, most of the time	85	15
Yes, some of the time	160	28
No	323	57
Total	568	100

Source: NCTJ Freelance Survey, 2016

Base: all respondents)

The most common areas of cross over for these journalists are in design (57 per cent) – most often print design, page layout or graphic design, photography (20 per cent) and film and TV (11 per cent). There are minorities who use a range of skills relating to new media and technologies – web design (15 per cent), social media (nine per cent) and ICT/technology (four per cent). Four per cent use marketing skills (four per cent). The ‘other’ category contains a wide range of skills including music or music technology and a range of others who write in their journalism about specific areas which form the cross over – crafts, motor sport technology, space exploration, astronomy and so forth.

The nature of these crossover skills may reflect the evolution of journalism as a profession – it is likely that many journalists might regard the skills which are listed here as skills and ideas from other parts of creative design and technology as now being an essential part of journalism.

Table 43: Other areas of creative design and technology used by freelance journalists

	n	%
Design	57	23
Photography	48	20
Web design	36	15
Film and TV	26	11
Social media	21	9
Marketing	9	4
ICT/technology	9	4
Other writing	3	1
Other	42	17
Total	245	100

Source: NCTJ Freelance Survey, 2016

Base: all respondents who use ideas from other areas of creative design and technology (245). Percentages total more than 100 because some respondents gave multiple answers

This ‘fusion’ of skills is being led by business need – the need for freelance journalists to be able to provide a rounded ‘package’ of services to clients as a one-stop shop:

“My journalism work is closely related to my work providing graphic design and marketing services to charities and social enterprises. It is really all part of a wide package of services I provide as a sole trader business.” Freelance journalist

5.5 Support when starting in self-employment

It has been a longstanding tradition for governments to promote and support self-employment, with programmes offering mentoring, advice and guidance. Such support is generally regarded as being beneficial. The different stages (pre start-up, start-up and survival; and growth) require a different balance of support between financial support and human capital support. Equally the precise nature of any support (eg formal training, or mentoring, or other kinds of advice and guidance) is likely to vary between the different stages of self-employment, and the kinds of providers best placed to provide that support will also vary. Provision needs to be designed flexibly to accommodate this variation.

More generally successful self-employed people need to possess and deploy a wide range of competences (both ‘hard’ and ‘soft’); this needs to be taken into account in the selection process and in the advice given to potential start-ups, especially when they are subsidised by the state. It is not simply a question of whether this person has a viable business idea, but also of whether they have (or can reasonably be expected to acquire) the full range of competences necessary to make a go of it. More suitable support may include:

- highly tailored provision taking account of participants’ skill levels and experience;
- packages including ‘holistic’ support addressing other (non-skill) elements of personal circumstances which may act as barriers;
- taking account of related personal development needs including confidence-building and basic soft skills;
- helping participants to establish realistic expectations about running a business (including chances of success, and likely income levels).

Of course, it may be expected that when people first start into self-employment is when they are most likely to face skill gaps and are therefore most likely to have needed advice. Indeed, whilst 28 per cent said that they did not need any advice, nearly three quarters (72 per cent) believed that advice would have been useful. The most common area (51 per cent) wanted advice on areas relating to tax, 38 per cent on book and record keeping and 36 per cent would have liked advice on cash flow and financial planning. A substantial number also responded with an ‘other’ response. In the most cases these related to finding work – either pitching or networking – with many wanting advice on the negotiation skills involved in freelancing – negotiating and agreeing rates of pay, getting paid on time, etc.

Table 44: Whether needed advice in any areas when started as a freelance journalist

	n	%
No	170	28
Yes, of which:	443	72
Would have liked advice on tax returns and tax matters	311	51
Would have liked advice on book keeping and record keeping	232	38
Would have liked advice on cash flow/financial planning	223	36
Other	126	21
Total	613	100

Source: NCTJ Freelance Survey, 2016

Base: all respondents (613)

Although there are a number of advice services available, and many freelance journalists have taken advantage of these, the relevance of the advice from such sources was doubted, and advice more specifically geared to the needs of journalism and its related fields is perhaps necessary:

I would have liked relevant and knowledgeable advice about building my own business in broadcasting. Local advice like Business Link, and banks, etc all seemed geared at setting up your own hairdressing or window-cleaning business, or taking on business loans and subsidised premises – even though I needed neither, indeed would have been liabilities. Freelance journalist

The majority (69 per cent) had sought advice, with the main advice sources being family, friends and peers (50 per cent), with 44 per cent having asked an accountancy firm for advice and 39 per cent looked on the internet. 27 per cent sought advice from HMRC and 21 per cent from a trade association.

Table 45: Whether needed advice in any areas when started as a freelance journalist

	n	%
Whether sought advice		
Yes	304	69
No	138	31
Total	442	100
Body sought advice from:		
Friends, family and peers	153	50
Accountancy firm	134	44
Looked on the internet	119	39
HMRC	81	27
Trade associations	64	21
Local authorities	21	7
Law firm	5	2
Other	78	26
Total	304	n/a

Source: NCTJ Freelance Survey, 2016

Base: all respondents who felt they needed advice on starting out as a freelance journalist (442) and all those who sought by 304.

The working assumption is often that the need for advice for freelance journalists is centred around these ‘business aspects, an assumption which rests upon the perception that freelance journalists being older and more experienced – which is certainly the case for the majority. However, if there is a trend for young people to enter journalism as a freelancer, then this will bring with it support needs related to journalism skills:

I think freelance journalists, particularly young freelancers, would really benefit from mentoring schemes in journalism at the beginning of their career. Entry level work is so rarely full time but I feel we then miss out on having a real relationship with a line manager and working out how to progress our careers. Freelance journalist



6 Issues for the self-employed

Being self-employed does bring with it a number of downsides. The RSA suggest that:

- self-employment is associated with relatively low levels of income for many. The RSA cite (i) the IFS in suggesting that 30 per cent of the self-employed are in the bottom 10 per cent of earners and (ii) the Family Resources Survey in suggesting that since 2000 real incomes of the self-employed have fallen and that they are now nearly 20 per cent worse off than their employed equivalents. And this low level of income may be exacerbated by its irregularities, with peaks and troughs. Self-employed people also miss out on the financial benefits they would have had in a 'typical' job – pensions, life insurance, medical insurance and maternity and paternity cover.
- for those not working part-time, long working hours can be another issue. The RSA suggest that 16 per cent of the self-employed work more than 50 hours per week compared to nine per cent of those in work;
- self-employment can be associated with spells of isolation, with half working from home all or some of the time. However, the development and growth of co-working spaces are serving to provide a sense of community and which also encourage creative collaboration.

But at another level, the self-employed appear to be content at work and happier overall in their lives. In the PSA research, 84 per cent felt that being self-employed meant that they were more content in their working lives. Part of the reason for this is that self-employment can confer 'softer' benefits – work that is more meaningful than that found in a typical job (82 per cent), more freedom to do the things they want (87 per cent). And also there are practical benefits for being self-employed – being able to work around a physical health condition or to allow time for other things such as caring for elderly relatives. Many studies have shown that one of the reason why the self-employed are more content is that they have greater autonomy, which in turn gives these people flexibility to work around their needs and the needs of those that they care for.

It appears that, for some of the self-employed at least, self-employment is a sacrifice to allow them to have a life style that would otherwise not be available – including control of own time, holidays, control of where to live.

To explore this further we asked the respondents whether they had 'problems' with a range of issues that occur with working freelance. We have calculated a 'weighted score' which gives 'not a problem' a value of one, 'something of a problem' a value of two and 'a big problem' a value of three. On this basis, the higher the weighted score the bigger the issue is perceived as a problem for the freelance journalist who responded to the survey.

The issues which are regarded as being most problematic are financial-related – not knowing how much income will be earned from month to month (with 50 per cent saying this is something of a problem and 31 per cent that this is a big problem), not getting paid if they fall ill or take time off (39 per cent something of a problem, 35 per cent a big problem) and not being able to save enough for the future (37 per cent say something of a problem and 35 per cent a big problem).

At the other end of the scale, least problematic is the issue of isolation or working alone (51 per cent regard this as not being a problem), understanding how to do paperwork, (42 per cent do not regard this as a problem) and the balance of work and family life, with 47 per cent regarding this as not being a problem.

Table 46: The extent of problems of working freelance

	Not a problem	Something of a problem	A big problem	Weighted score
	%	%	%	n
Not knowing how much income I will have from month to month	19	50	31	2.12
Not getting paid if I fall ill or take time off	26	39	35	2.09
Not being able to save enough for the future	29	37	35	2.08
Not having enough customers or work	29	45	26	1.97
Not having the security of paid work	28	45	27	1.99
Struggling to balance work and family life	47	34	18	1.69
Understanding how to do paperwork eg tax rules and reporting	42	47	11	1.69
Isolation or working alone	51	35	14	1.63

Source: NCTJ Freelance Survey, 2016

Base: all respondents

The sense of a trade-off between these different aspects of the level of pay, the security of income and the benefits of an improved work/life balance is reflected in qualitative inputs:

“It’s really hard work, especially to make ends meet, but I still love it.”

Freelance journalist

“I’ve found freelancing both liberating and tough. It’s great to have the freedom of not being tied to one editor/one role, however there is constant stress, the fear of not knowing when the next ‘job’ might come from. I enjoy the highs and they make it hard for me to imagine wanting to return to a job... however income security is a massive lure.”

Freelance journalist

Nearly two thirds (63 per cent) of freelance journalists would like further opportunities, with 37 per cent saying they would not.

Table 47: Whether want further opportunities to network with other freelance journalists

	n	%
Yes	351	63
No	209	37
Total	560	100

Source: NCTJ Freelance Survey, 2016

Base: all respondents (560)

Respondents would most prefer events which are aimed specifically at freelancers (77 per cent), training courses (64 per cent) and online networks (61 per cent). There is less interest in shared physical working spaces, with 36 per cent saying they would like these kind of networking opportunities.

“Please try to make an online networking resource for freelancers, free for members of NUJ. A mailing list or group forum to talk about issues related to work, find other freelancers locally and even plan social events would be fantastic.”

Freelance journalist

Table 48: Type of network opportunities with other freelance journalists preferred

	n	%
Events aimed specifically at freelances	270	77
Training courses	224	64
Online networks	212	61
Shared physical working spaces	127	36
Total	350	100

Source: NCTJ Freelance Survey, 2016

Base: all respondents who would like further networking opportunities (350)

There may be a 'gap in the market' for representation of these people's needs. The RSA research suggests that at present the self-employed largely feel as though they are overlooked by the state. Only 14 per cent agreed that the Government adequately supports people like them and only 11 per cent agree that the welfare system is fair to those that wish to work for themselves. The RSA suggests that trade unions should be encouraged to support the self-employed, and of course, the NUJ already does this and respondents were positive about the role it can play:

“The NUJ has helped considerably. Both joining the local group and getting advice from the freelance officer in London.”

Freelance journalist

“I’m a Life Member of the NUJ and would recommend joining the Union to any aspiring freelance.”

Freelance journalist

“The role of the union is very important for freelance journalists, who are otherwise at the mercy of employers. I haven’t needed to call on the union very often but the NUJ has been an important safety net for me; the website is full of vital information and help, and in the event of a conflict with an employer about payment or commissioning, they have always given me good advice and support.”

Freelance journalist



7 Discussion points

The report thus far has concentrated on factual reporting: describing the findings with relatively little discussion on the information that has been found. This section contains a series of discussion points based on this data and which tries to develop wider themes. One aspect of the research is that it allows us to consider anecdotal views about freelance working and to examine these in the context of the data that we have gathered.

For many, the ‘popular’ image of freelance journalism is that it is because people have been pushed out of employed jobs due to the changing industrial structure – a declining regional and local media and shrinking national newspapers and, as a result, the freelance journalism workforce is in some way a ‘reluctant’ one. Whilst there are undoubtedly a number of freelance journalists for whom this is true, the evidence from this research is that this is not the case for the majority, in that:

- the number of freelance journalists who chose to go freelance because of its attractiveness are more than double the number who were pushed into it because of a lack of jobs or of attractive jobs. This sense – that people are being pulled into being self-employed, rather than being pushed – is supported by wider research across all occupations working across the UK economy.
- we might also expect that if freelance journalists had been pushed, unwillingly, into self-employment that they might be looking to leave it, but this is not the case. The evidence is that the majority (82 per cent) are not seeking to leave freelancing, and a similar proportion (of those who were able to give an answer) think they will still be working as a freelancer in five years’ time.

This is not to say that there will not be a number of freelance Journalists who feel marginalised and devalued by their move into self-employment, but the evidence from this survey suggests that these are in the minority.

A second common, anecdotal, picture of freelance journalists is that they are either (i) working for their ex-employer on a part-time or piecemeal basis (and surrendering their employment rights in doing so) or (ii) working in PR, holding onto their ‘journalism’ title but not actually producing work that they might previously have regarded as ‘journalism’. Again, our data does not support this, and the extent to which this is happening seems limited:

- only a minority (28 per cent) work for their previous employer and the majority of these individuals work for this previous employer only for a minority of their time. The data suggests that only a small minority (four per cent) are dependent on their previous employer for a significant (80 per cent) proportion of their work; and
- only relatively few (six per cent) give PR as their main sector. These are outweighed by the proportion who say that their main sector of work are magazines (27 per cent), newspapers (23 per cent) and online (19 per cent).

A third anecdotal view of freelance journalism is that their earnings are relatively low, and our evidence is more supportive of this perception. Whilst the average pay for all journalists from national data sources is £30,884, data from the freelance journalist survey suggests that for freelance journalists it is in the region of £19,500. 44 per cent of freelance journalists in our research earn less than £15,000. This relatively low level of earnings is supported by data from national data sources are more than twice as likely as employed journalists (36 per cent compared to 17 per cent) to be eligible for state benefits or tax credits. These rates of pay are seemingly created by (i) low levels of commissions, (ii) low (and possibly falling) rates for freelance work offered by those commissioning work and (iii) the availability of others willing to work for free.

There are mitigating factors we need to consider regarding this level of pay. Freelance journalists have a high rate of part-time working (27 per cent work for three days or less) and a third (35 per cent) have other jobs – most frequently in related

fields (other media, writing or education and research) and earnings in these areas most likely supplement journalism-related earnings. However, it is clear that issues related to income and earnings are the biggest concerns to the self-employed: not knowing how much income they will have from month to month is the single biggest issue facing freelance journalists, with 31 per cent regarding it as a big problem and 50 per cent something of a problem, followed by not getting paid if they fall ill or take time off (35 per cent saying it is a big problem, 39 per cent something of a problem) and not being able to save enough for the future (35 per cent saying it's a big problem and 37 per cent something of a problem). On balance, it appears that the findings of other research holds true for journalists – that becoming freelance brings with it many benefits regarding flexibility, but with associated sacrifices, particularly lower and more fragile income.

The data also suggests that there may be some issues regarding the skills of journalists. A number of issues suggest some concern:

- over a third (37 per cent) have become freelance journalists without prior experience of working as a journalist – with people entering freelance journalism straight from education or from other jobs which are not directly journalism-related;
- whilst the general level of educational attainment of freelance journalists is high (as it is for employed journalists, less than half (49 per cent) hold a specific journalism-related qualification, which compares to nearly two-thirds (63 per cent) of all journalists;
- 61 per cent believe that they have skills gaps, with new or additional skills needed in order that freelance journalists can be more efficient; and
- half (50 per cent) have taken part in learning activities over the last year, which compares with 71 per cent of all employed journalists.

This combination of lower levels of prior journalism experience, lower probabilities of holding journalism specific qualifications, high levels believing that they have skills gaps and lower levels actually taking part in training does raise some concerns, which may need to be addressed.



Annex 1: Methodology

A1: Defining the self-employed and freelancers

The issues surrounding the definition of the self-employed and freelancers are very well summed up by Sapseed et al in their study of freelancers in the Brighton Creative Digital IT Economy¹⁷. This notes:

- there is not a unique and absolute definition of freelancers in the UK, and they can work under different legal forms eg sole traders, sole director of their own limited business without employees;
- the terminology used to define them can assume importance, since not all call themselves 'freelancers', but use other terms like contractors, developers, consultants, commissioned, independent professionals;
- the ONS's Labour Force Survey definition is deliberately broad enough to encompass all freelance categories and mixes legal forms (like sole trader) with other definitions which are not legal entities, like working for yourself. Self-employed people can actually be any one of the following:

- working for yourself/sole trader;
- working as a freelancer/contractor/consultant/independent professional;
- sole director of their own limited company (with no other employees);
- a partner in a professional practice;
- paid a salary or wage by an employment agency;
- working under an umbrella company.

A further issue with the Labour Force Survey is that individuals self-select both their self-employment status and nominate themselves as journalists. On self-employment, individuals decide whether they fall under a number of subcategories that come under the banner of self-employment, which includes 'running a business', 'doing freelance work' and 'working for themselves'. On their occupation, individuals either choose an occupation or write in their occupation which is then coded. The individuals who say that they are journalists may not all be doing work which in some people's eyes may not be regarded as being 'journalism' (PR, corporate communications, etc).

In this survey respondents were asked to first describe their 'current' employment situation, with a range of options being given as shown in the table below. Respondents who stated that they worked for their own company were then asked whether they had any employees in their own company. People who were freelance or self-employed, a sole trader or working for their own company were allowed to progress through the survey, whilst all other options were excluded on the basis that they did not meet our definition of self-employment.

¹⁷ *Brighton Fuse 2: Freelancers in the Creative Digital Economy*, Sapseed J, with Camerani R, Masucci M, Peterman M, Rajguru M and Jones P, University of Brighton, 2015

Table A1: Definition of freelance journalist

	Condition	Treatment
Permanent contract		Excluded
Fixed-term contract		Excluded
Trainee		Excluded
Working for your own company	With employees	Excluded
	Without employees	Included
Freelance or self-employed, with a temporary contract of 364 days or less		Included
Freelance or self-employed with a temporary contract of 365 days or longer		Included
Freelance or self-employed with no contracts		Included
Sole trader		Included
Work placement		Excluded
Volunteer on an unpaid basis		Excluded
Other		Excluded

Source: NCTJ Freelance Survey, 2016

A2: Survey methodology

The survey was carried out in June and July, 2016. It had 621 respondents.

The questionnaire was designed specifically for this study. It was based on issues which had been identified in the literature review and considered as important by individuals representing in the industry. It was tested on a small number (three) of self-employed individuals to ensure that questions were meaningful and easy to answer.

As with other journalism-based research, there is a lack of an adequate sampling frame as there is no one single, central all-inclusive list of journalists. To avoid sample bias, the survey has been made available to all freelance journalists either working across the UK, UK-based or with links to the UK via a multiple approach, including e-mailing all journalists registered as freelance or self-employed on the NUJ's database and notification/articles via the NUJ's Freelance newsletter and notifications through the Society of Editors' newsletter, the Women in Journalism newsletter and via the Chartered Institute of Journalists. HoldtheFrontPage ran a story on the survey, with an advertised e-mail link and a Twitter campaign highlighted the research.

We have examined the data for signs of bias (discussed in section 3 above) and overall are confident that our sampling strategy has resulted in a sample that is broadly representative of the general population of freelance journalists.



NCTJ
The New Granary, Station Road
Newport, Saffron Walden
Essex CB11 3PL

Tel: 01799 544014
Fax: 01799 544015
Email: info@nctj.com

www.nctj.com