



# Precarious Times, Precarious Work

## A Feminist Political Economy of Labour and Communication

Catherine McKercher  
Carleton University  
[Catherine\\_McKercher@Carleton.ca](mailto:Catherine_McKercher@Carleton.ca)

May 2012



## Women students outnumber men, especially in journalism schools

In 2007, 61% of new Canadian university grads were women, up from 56% in 1992.

- Statistics Canada, 2007

In 2010, 73.5% of graduates of U.S. journalism and communication programs were women.

- Women's Media Center, 2012



## But men dominate newsrooms ...

Women made up 43.5% of the journalism workforce at news magazines, 37.4% in television, 36.9% in weekly newspapers, 33% at daily newspapers; 21.8% in radio, 20.3% at major wire services.

- Poynter Institute, 2003

40% of U.S. newspaper newsroom employees are women.

- American Society of Newspaper Editors, 2010

Women comprised 36.9% of newspaper reporters, 40% of the television news force, and 29% of the radio news force in 2011.

- U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011



## ... Especially in management

5% of media decision-makers in the Americas are women.

- International Federation of Journalists, 2001

17% of local TV news directors in the U.S. are women.

- Study prepared for the Radio-Television News Directors Foundation, 2011

Women account for 8% of editors-in-chief and 12% of publishers.

- Canadian Newspaper Association, 2002



**So where are the women?**



# Many of them are freelancing

Women freelancers outnumber men by almost 2 to 1.

- Professional Writers Association of Canada, 2006



# The typical Canadian freelancer

Female

Aged 35 to 55

Married to another wage earner

Holds a college diploma or university degree

Earned \$24,000 before taxes in 2005

- PWAC survey 2006



# The wage gap

Senior reporters earned \$63,500 at the Ottawa Citizen that year; \$82,000 at the New York Times; \$29,600 at the weekly Warkworth Journal.

- Communications Workers of America 2006





“The bottom line is... a shrinking bottom line.”

In 2006 full-time freelancers earned almost exactly the same income, dollar for dollar, that they did in 1979.

“Factoring in inflation over the past 30 years, independent writers in Canada have watched their standard of living drop by more than 60% in one generation.”

- PWAC survey 2006



# The gender gap

Male freelancers earned, on average, \$3,000 more a year than women.

The average highest rate per word was 90 cents for men and 92 cents for women. However, the average lowest rate per word was 40 cents for men and 31 cents for women.

- PWAC survey 2006



**Pressures on freelancers are  
increasing and come from many  
directions**

# The state of the economy

- [Paper Cuts blog](#)





# The rights grab

Ottawa Citizen 2012 freelance contracts seek:

- “Moral rights”
- In perpetuity
- The right to use the article in any and all properties, “in all electronic media now known or hereafter devised, including, without limitation, online, digital and optical media (“Electronic Use”), and any and all third party properties in print, online, digital, optical and all other media now known or hereafter devised and the right to repurpose and/or resell, for use in any media now known or hereafter devised, worldwide, other than by way of Base Use or Electronic Use (“Commercial Use”)”



# The pressure to work for free

“Internships” not “jobs.”

Longer internships in journalism; fewer paid internships.



# Equal pay for work of equal value?

Women hold three-quarters of all unpaid internships.

- Ross Perlin, Intern Nation, 2011



# “Tweets” = “news”?

- "Mari Ramos reads my tweet!"





# “You too can be a reporter!”

Terms of Use for CNN's iReport stretch to seven pages. The key point:

- “By submitting your material, for good and valuable consideration, the sufficiency and receipt of which you hereby acknowledge, you hereby grant to CNN and its affiliates a non-exclusive, perpetual, worldwide license to edit, telecast, rerun, reproduce, use, create derivative works from, syndicate, license, print, sublicense, distribute and otherwise exhibit the materials you submit, or any portion thereof in any manner and in any medium or forum, whether now known or hereafter devised, **without payment to you or any third party.**”



## It's the byline that counts

“The core of Huffington's justification for not paying is that the Huffington Post is a showcase for writers, and that exposure there leads to paying gigs and greater visibility. Huffington merely — and generously, by her estimation — provides the stage.”

- Michael Walker, LA Times, April 1, 2011



# Are we all journalists now?

“Citizen feedback, bloggers, virtual story meetings...these are just a few of the innovations in content creation under way in journalism. The editorial gatekeepers are standing aside and making way for you. Join us for a CJF Forum on the benefits and risks to editorial quality and find out how new ideas are building audiences.”

- Invitation to “We are All Journalists Now: A Canadian Journalism Forum on Participatory Journalism.” Toronto, April 19, 2012.



## Resistance is futile ... or is it?

- Writers groups launch boycott of Huffington Post.
- 9 high-profile contributors pull out of Quebec version of Huffington Post a week before launch.



## Resistance gets organized

- Canada's CEP Union launches freelance local in 2009.
- California Media Workers Guild, part of Communications Workers of America, forms freelancers unit in 2011.
- Worker associations step up support for freelancers, individually and collectively.



## When it's illegal ...

Unpaid Internships are “a lawsuit waiting to happen.” Ross Perlin, Intern Nation.



# Take them to court

- Former Harper's Bazaar intern sues Hearst over unpaid internship; seeks class action status.
- Former Charlie Rose Show intern sues over unpaid internship; seeks class action status.
- Two interns on the hit movie "Black Swan" sue Fox Searchlight, alleging the company violated minimum wage and overtime laws by hiring dozens of unpaid interns.



# Information labour, feminization and piece work

Some argue that feminization of a profession causes a decline in professional status. Others argue that feminization is a consequence of such a decline.

“... piece-wage is the form of wages most in harmony with the capitalist mode of production.” (Marx, Capital, chapter 21)