Media Freelancers and Platforms:
How Beginner and Experienced Media Freelancers Perceive Online Platforms

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Abstract
The article presents the perspectives of media freelancers on digital platforms. This article is based on a qualitative study comprising 20 participants (10 beginners and 10 experienced media freelancers). Our findings indicate that the degree of flexibility is often overstated, as many freelance media workers on online platforms are compelled to adhere to tight deadlines, client demands, and offered prices. Regarding the issue of precarity, our study participants, particularly the beginners, understand the challenges they encounter serve as necessary steppingstones towards more established positions. The experienced freelancers are adept at navigating the challenges and threats that arise when working with online platforms. This collective knowledge leads us to reassess the extreme positions of either uncritically celebrating flexibility or outrightly rejecting the casualisation of work.

Keywords: Media Freelancers, Freelancing Platforms, Flexibility, Casualisation of Work, Remote Working

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Introduction

Our paper explores the viewpoints of beginner and experienced media freelancers regarding online platforms, in particular freelancing platforms. Conceptually, this paper considers three recent developments regarding the informal nature of freelance work, which are flexibility and precarity, informality of media freelancers, and limited 'shelf-life'.

Flexibility and precarity are two topics that are often discussed in relation to freelancers. For example, on the one hand, previous studies on the informal nature of freelance work have established the notion of flexibility (Edstrom & Ladendorf, 2012; Massey & Elmore, 2011). Flexibility is a situation where freelancers have the freedom to determine their work location and working hours concerning their own situations (Holton, 2016; Massey & Elmore, 2011; Mathisen, 2017). Additionally, freelancers also have flexibility in working with various clients (Johal & Anastasi, 2015; Popiel, 2017). On the other hand, earlier studies also emphasise precarity (Gill & Pratt, 2008; Neilson & Rossiter, 2008). This is a situation where freelancers, including media freelancers, face challenges in terms of irregular working hours and job security (Salamon, 2016; Wreyford, 2015). Freelancers find themselves in a situation where they must work within tight deadlines, and the absence of permanent employment contracts means they must move from one job to another to make ends meet. Furthermore, a recent study conducted by Wallis et al. (2020) on Media Production graduates from a UK university revealed that media careers are associated with a limited 'shelf-life' and that younger individuals are favoured in the industry.

Moreover, informal nature is also perceived by media freelancers in terms of its dimensions and ways to navigate the nature. In our own study (2022), we delve deeper into the dimensions of informality among gig workers and identify four primary dimensions that are of paramount concern to gig workers: the personal, professional, technological, and social dimensions. Firstly, the personal dimension revolves around the motivations of freelancers and their perceived long-term engagement in the informal aspects of working as media freelancers. Subsequently, the professional dimension encompasses freelancers' perceived characteristics associated with informal work, including career development and the future of the profession. Thirdly, the technological dimension pertains to participants' viewpoints on recent technological advancements that support the informal nature of working as media freelancers. Lastly, the social dimension explores the connection between the informal nature of media freelancers and social aspects, such as disclosure to the public as a freelancer, constructing a public image, and the availability of other infrastructure for freelancers' interactions. We have also contributed to the discussion on informality by presenting three points of discussion: motivations for engaging in freelance work, managing uncertainty through creativity and self-management, and the social-technological infrastructure (Luik & Aritonang, 2022).

Research Questions

Building on the majority of previous studies that did not solely focus on the relationship between media freelancers and the presence of digital platforms, we are keen to develop a deeper understanding of the perspectives of both novice and experienced freelancers. Consequently, this article will explore the varied viewpoints of media freelancers on digital platforms, specifically by addressing two key questions:

1. How do beginner and experienced media freelancers perceive online platforms?
2. How do their perspectives contribute to the discourse on flexibility and the casualisation of work?

Method

Regarding the methodology, our study utilised a qualitative approach, conducting two focus group discussions (FGDs) with a total of 20 participants. This group was evenly split between 10 beginner media freelancers and 10 experienced media freelancers, ensuring a comprehensive perspective on the industry.

Findings and Discussion

Emerging media freelancers, often embarking on their journey through digital platforms, regard these platforms as valuable avenues for career development, accumulating work experience, building portfolios, and generating income (Table 1). For many newcomers, the platform provides an opportunity to autonomously sustain themselves without depending on a partner or parents. The prevailing belief among these freelancers is one of resourcefulness, perceiving freelancing as a means to have income while working from home. It is notable that not everyone possesses established connections in their field of work, and the platform functions as an equalising space. Concerning long-term plans, the participants state that freelancing is perceived as a steppingstone while awaiting improved opportunities. This phase is utilised for acquiring experience, upskilling, and earning. Moreover, some novices contemplate the continuation of freelancing as a viable option, while others express aspirations of eventually establishing their own business, diverging from the prospect of indefinite employment under others. This dual perspective reflects the diverse motivations and ambitions within the cohort of beginner media freelancers.

Table 1. How the beginner and experienced media freelancers perceive online platforms.

	Beginner media freelancers	Experienced media freelancers
Motivations for joining	The platform can provide opportunities for career development, gaining work experience, building a portfolio, and earning money.	Platforms offer flexibility in terms of time and location, opportunities to earn a larger income, and the chance to pursue one's dreams or idealism.
Social factors	- Not relying on a partner or parents, - Having the mindset of "Since I'm at home anyway, I can increase my income," - Not everyone has connections in their work.	After several years, their social status has improved significantly from initially receiving comments like, o "What kind of job is that, just sitting in front of a laptop?" and o dealing with the stigma that "men should work in an office" or o being labelled negatively for "working from home."

For a long-term plan	• "To fill the time while waiting for a better opportunity, freelancing is used as a steppingstone, gaining experience, upskilling, and getting paid." • "Perhaps one may continue freelancing." • "They desire to start their own business and do not want to work for others indefinitely."	• "I took a daring step to establish a small agency, and I don't want to be solely dependent on platforms." • "I aim to build a strong brand for my own studio, with its unique characteristics, and so on." • "In the long term, careful planning is necessary because we consider these freelancers to be the main source of our family's income."

Experienced media freelancers discover that platforms provide a beneficial mix of flexibility regarding time and location, presenting opportunities to increase their income while pursuing personal dreams or idealism (Table 1). Over few years, their social status has markedly improved, overcoming initial comments such as "What kind of job is that, just sitting in front of a laptop?" and challenging stigmas like the belief that "men should work in an office" or facing negative labels for "working from home." Looking towards the long term, these freelancers have diverse plans. Some have taken daring steps to establish small agencies, aiming to avoid sole dependence on platforms. Others aspire to construct a strong brand for their own studios with unique characteristics. Emphasis is placed on long-term planning, recognising that these freelancers constitute the primary source of income for their families. This finding illustrates the varied and strategic approaches experienced media freelancers adopt in shaping their careers in relation to platform-based work.

Nevertheless, our research challenges the common notion that freelance work on online platforms offers unlimited flexibility. Many media freelancers are constrained by tight deadlines, client demands, and the prices offered by these platforms. The supposed flexibility of freelance work is often perceived as an unmitigated advantage. However, our research reveals that freelancers on online platforms frequently struggle with tight deadlines and demanding clients. These constraints can limit their autonomy and flexibility, as they must follow client specifications and meet project deadlines. Additionally, many freelancers encounter pricing structures set by the platforms that may not always align with their expectations, potentially compromising their financial freedom. In other words, as stated in a previous study, even though they appreciate the opportunity to manage their work hours, the majority of workers found themselves obliged to work demanding, non-traditional hours to fulfil client requests (Wood, Graham, Lehdonvirta, & Hjorth, 2018). It is essential to recognise that while flexibility is a defining feature of freelance work, it is not without its limitations.

Interestingly, both groups agree on the positive roles online platforms play. They support the remote working culture, contribute to social mobility, and legitimise freelance work as real jobs or employment. Our research affirms the significance of online platforms in modern work culture. These platforms have facilitated the growth of the remote working culture, enabling individuals to work from diverse locations and collaborate across geographical boundaries. They have also provided greater access to job opportunities, contributing to social mobility by allowing freelancers to secure work independently of their location, background, or industry connections. Moreover, online platforms have legitimised freelance work, shifting the perception of freelancers from those who perform casual tasks to professionals who are engaged in meaningful employment (Luik & Aritonang, 2021). A platform, serving as an intermediary between the seller/worker and buyer/client in creative work, significantly influences their views on the platform as a viable source of work, and ultimately, this shapes the degree to which photographers choose to participate or resist

(McDonald, Williams, & Mayes, 2021). In other words, these platforms have a substantial impact on shaping contemporary labour dynamics and inclusivity.

Conclusion

Our findings imply a re-evaluation of extreme stances concerning the endorsement or dismissal of work flexibility and casualisation. Those who endorse flexibility may implicitly desire greater stability, while those who reject casualisation appreciate the advantages of varied projects and an improved work-life balance. The dichotomy of either celebrating or rejecting work flexibility and casualisation is often overly simplistic. Our research uncovers that those seemingly endorsing flexibility may secretly yearn for increased work stability. Although attracted to flexible work arrangements, they may still yearn for the security that traditional employment can offer. Conversely, those rejecting casualisation might do so while subtly enjoying the benefits of freelance work on online platforms, including diverse projects and an enhanced work-life balance. This nuance implies that the discussion surrounding the gig economy and freelance work needs to consider the intricate and varied motivations and experiences of those involved.

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