

Book Review

Cohen, Nicole S. *Writers' Rights: Freelance Journalism in a Digital Age*. McGill-Queen's Press-MQUP, 2016.

“This is perhaps the greatest contradiction of freelance cultural work: it is precisely by relinquishing control over employees, precisely by workers themselves seeking to work outside a standard employment relationship, that capital is able to increase the extraction of surplus value from workers. Attending to the labor process makes clear that work conflicts and labour antagonisms do not disappear when workers exit an employment relationship, but rather deepen and intensify — not because of the inevitability of writing as inherently low-paid, insecure work, but because of the way media work is organized under contemporary capitalism.”

Nicole Cohen

Nicole Cohen's new book, *Writers' Rights: Freelance Journalism in a Digital Age*, explores the precarious working conditions of Canadian freelance journalists and how the digital age is rapidly exacerbating them. Cohen uses a Marxist political economic approach to understand the forces that shape freelance labour and, perhaps more interestingly, to challenge the established notion that freelance journalism is inevitably precarious and therefore changing its conditions is not possible.

The book first studies the working conditions of freelance journalists and dissects the cultural, political, and economic forces that shape them in Western capitalist societies. It then offers a historical account of freelance writing, filling an important gap in the literature about the occupation. The next section of the book studies the mechanics of freelancing, including the increasing need for

writers to market themselves. This serves as a segway into the following chapter, which focuses on the digital age, highlighting how technological advances are acting as a double-edged sword of sorts. On the one hand, they are luring more people into freelance journalism with the promise of an easy-access career as independent writers; on the other, this enhanced competition and the emergence of new media business models mean that workers are now receiving increasingly lower pay and exploitative copyright contracts. The last two chapters bring our attention to efforts by freelance workers to collectively organize to improve their declining working conditions, including four case studies in Canada.

Cohen's use of Marxist analysis is novel in the field of media and communication studies, where a traditional focus on institutions, technology and strong personalities in the history of print media has "marginalized the experiences of working journalists" (56). Cohen's theoretical lens allows us to contextualize media organizations (capital) and their workers (labour) within a capitalist framework, which serves the purpose of demonstrating that working conditions are the direct product of structural processes that shape freelance journalism, as opposed to an inevitable feature of an occupation that has always walked a fine line between labour and profession. By bringing Marx into her analysis, Cohen allows us to see freelance writing as both a site of struggle and a space of potential change.

One of the most enjoyable aspects of this book is Cohen's call to challenge our cultural perceptions of freelance writing as an idealized choice of work. Without denying that freelancing can be an enjoyable and lucrative career for many writers, Cohen draws from testimonials from a sample of Canadian freelance journalists that she surveyed to highlight the many contradictions that riddle this type of work. She finds that a majority of freelancers hold a positive view of their occupation when they think of it in abstract. They tout the benefits of flexibility, independence, and of having certain control over what they write. On the other hand, a majority of them admits that the social status granted by freelancing stands in stark contrast with the material realities of the work. A majority of freelancers are anxious over low pay rates, job insecurity, and an unclear vision of their career future. Many want to leave the industry or acknowledge having turned away from journalism in favour of corporate freelancing contracts. Cohen notes that this contradiction between idealized status and real precarity extends beyond journalists' own

identity perceptions and are part of a larger cultural phenomenon. She is critical of capitalist narratives positioning freelance journalists as entrepreneurs and self-actualized individuals “characterized by independence, autonomy, and control” (26). She points to the work of American economist and social scientist Richard Florida, who in her view has idealized “the creative class, the knowledge economy, and technologically enabled flexible work” thus promoting “visions of freelancing as liberating and of freelancers as agile, empowered free agents” (26).

This critique is both powerful and necessary as it speaks to a broader discussion about the benefits of technology in media industries. Some scholars have hailed the positive effects of technology in journalism and argue that journalists have become agents of innovation, suggesting that they have gained enormous power in the new digital age (Spyridou et al. 2013). Cohen’s analysis, however, urges us to resist the temptation to study media and journalism in the digital age only in function of technological advances. Rather, she reminds us that we must continue to understand that the presence of technology does not erase the power dynamics at play in the relationship between labour and capital. Whether we agree with her argument that digital advances are exacerbating these antagonistic power relations in detriment of journalism workers or not, we must pay attention to her call for questioning idealized conceptions of cultural work in the digital era. In Cohen’s view, this idealization of freelance journalists casts a shadow over an existing relationship of exploitation between workers and capital. Moreover, it obscures the fact that many journalists are not freelancers by choice but by necessity. Not every freelancer is an emancipated worker; as employment positions in struggling media organizations become ever more scarce, aspiring journalists must begin their careers by freelancing, just as many experienced journalists who are forced out of their jobs must do. As Cohen argues, this “independence” is not entirely desirable: “As freelance journalists demonstrate, exiting an employment relationship — or being denied one, as is rapidly becoming the norm — does not mean leaving exploitation and the labour-capital relation behind. Rather, freelance work arrangements permit capital to accelerate the exploitation of labour power” (83).

One aspect that could have received more attention in the book is the notion of marginalization as a consequence of precarity in

freelance media work. Cohen argues that fewer people are now able to get into journalism, an industry already suffering from lack of diversity. In her own survey, Cohen acknowledges that 93 per cent of respondents identified as white. Aspiring journalists are now required to pay high university fees, work in unpaid internships, and accept low-paid or unpaid “exposure” work well into their professional lives. Increasingly, only those with a strong support network, generous families, or a second source of income can afford to build a career in media, thus fuelling the marginalization of lower-income students, immigrants, and in many cases, women who are dependent on spousal income. To Cohen’s credit, however, her analysis has laid the groundwork for future research into this important issue.

Overall, Cohen’s book is an important contribution to media and communication studies. Her approach to journalism as labour opens the discussion into what precarity in media work means for the broader interactions of media and society. The book establishes a dialogue with other media studies scholars, such as Henrik Örnebring and Mark Deuze. Cohen takes Örnebring’s work on the relationship between journalists and technology and uses it to study the particular dynamic of freelance journalists and media organizations in a technology-driven environment. Throughout the book, she engages with Deuze’s extensive work on media as employers of cultural workers. She shares his urge to better understand the role of media managers and how their agency and limitations in the corporate hierarchy can shape the working conditions of journalists in today’s networked media environment. It will be interesting to see how these scholars continue their dialogue going forward.

Cohen’s commitment to journalism as a force for good carries this book beyond academia and into the realm of activism. While the author, a former journalist herself, is well aware that most journalism “is produced as a commodity for private profit,” she remains loyal to the idea that journalism “in its ideal form...contributes to public discourse and debate, enables citizens to hold those in power to account, and provides space for debate about how to organize political, economic, and social life” (7). Cohen believes that recent efforts by freelance journalists to collectively organize to gain bargaining power are as laudable as they are necessary. She ends the book calling for her readers to consider the consequences of letting journalism fail. She asks: “What kind of media can a labour force

made precarious produce? And, pressingly, who can afford to become a media worker under conditions of precarity?" (234). Both are certainly important questions and we can expect to see more research into these issues going forward thanks to Cohen's work.

- **Gabriela Perdomo**,
University of Ottawa

References

Deuze, Mark. "Managing Media Workers." *Managing Media Firms and Industries*. Ed. Gregory Ferrell Lowe and Charles Brown. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2016. 329–341. CrossRef. Web. 7 Dec. 2016.

Örnebring, Henrik. "Technology and Journalism-as-Labour: Historical Perspectives." *Journalism*, 11.1 (2010): 57–74. jou.sagepub.com. Web.

Spyridou, L.-P. et al. "Journalism in a State of Flux: Journalists as Agents of Technology Innovation and Emerging News Practices." *International Communication Gazette*, 75.1 (2013): 76–98. CrossRef. Web.