

Book Review

FROM AN EXCEPTION TO THE NORM: FREELANCE JOURNALISM

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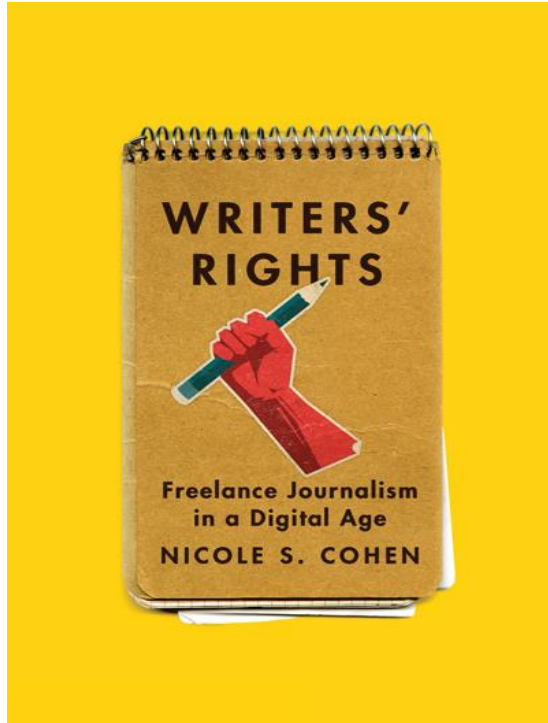
Cohen, N. S. (2016). *Writers' rights: freelance journalism in a digital Age*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press. 323 pages. ISBN: 978-0-7735-4796-4.

For many, freelancing as a form of work is a strategy to resist salaried labour – an effort to gain some control over the terms of commodification of their labour power and autonomy over their craft. Yet under contemporary conditions of media production, freelancing is at the same time a strategy for media firms to intensify the exploitation of freelancers' labour power, primarily through exploiting unpaid labour time and copyrights to writers' works (Cohen, 2016, p. 7).

The conflict situation which cited in the above epigraph refers to Nicole S. Cohen's description of freedom's double-edge: freelance journalism and precarity. The critical argument repeated in different parts of the book is the description of the freelance status as "a site of contestation in media and cultural work" because of the presence of two sides of the same coin for freelancers. On one hand, writers try to find a way apart from standard employment relationship in order to obtain satisfaction and control over their

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labour process, while the extraction of surplus value is significantly increased along with declining control over the work on the other, thanks to rising precarious material conditions and freelance status (pp. 7-10). In the 21st century in which digital journalism has spread around the world, *Writers' Rights: Freelance Journalism in a Digital Age* (2016) gives us an essential toolkit to explore the characteristics of freelance journalism in a digital age as a history from below, from the perspectives of the workers, that is writers in this case. Based on an extensive field study in English-speaking Canada, Cohen focuses on non-fiction writers, primarily freelance journalists, from a critical

political economy approach, specifically related to the labour process theory.

Cohen has been awarded to the Gertrude J. Robinson Book Prize from the Canadian Communication Association in 2017, for her book *Writers' Rights: Freelance Journalism in a Digital Age* (2016). The author of the book is an assistant professor at the University of Toronto. Her research interests include political economy of communication; particularly, work, labour and organization in the media and cultural industries, and journalism. Cohen's work is especially related to rather neglected and new areas of communication studies. Within this scope, she recently focuses on gender, race, and work in digital journalism. Her pioneering studies bring forward potential areas and topics to the research agenda of communication scholars.

In her book, Cohen employs different methods and inquiries for her field study. First and foremost, an online survey has been conducted among 206 Canadian freelance writers in 2010. Because of the difficulty to determine the magnitude and extent of the existing freelance writers, the representativeness of this sample is in question, so that Cohen uses this research to raise questions and points out inquiries, rather than taking it as definitive (p. 19). The main initial point of this study is Cohen's "own inability to earn a living as a freelancer", thus she is a member of an active email list for freelance writers and editors and she has benefited from this list as an active form of virtual participant observation. In addition, she has conducted semi-structured interviews with staff and

organizers of various organizations and unions for journalists and writers in general particularly for this research (p. 20).

Cohen's approach relates to the labour process theory which is in accordance with the works of Marx and Braverman. She rightly notes that the critical political economy approach is not preferred much to study media and cultural labour (p. 24). Following Smythe's (1977) well-known remark about communication as "the blind spot of western Marxism", Mosco (2011, p. 358) defines the labour as "a blind spot of western communication studies", mainly because most of the studies focus on media, messages and audiences. Cohen enlarges upon this definition by stating that labour process theory is relatively underused for media and cultural work (p. 42). Yet, by studying workers' subjectivities in the context of objective conditions of labour based on the legacy of Marx (pp. 36-7), labour process theory sheds light on the question of autonomy for writers, the increasing pressure for exploitation and the conditions for "earning a living" in the digital age (p. 25). In the news industry, most of the journalists have a "taken-for-granted belief" about the predomination of the technology in the news making (Curran, 2010, p. 31). Against the general tendency to blame technology for rising exploitation and spreading work in all spheres of life because of the digitization, Cohen studies the social, economic and political reasons behind this change (p. 143).

Rather than creative industries, Cohen prefers to use the term cultural industries because of "its critical edge" based on the critical tradition of Adorno and Horkheimer (p. 251). Therefore, she rejects to use the term "creative labour" because of the fact that it "draws attention to qualities which are specific to a person", however she wants to underline the organization of cultural production and the logic of the industry. Hence, she uses cultural industries mostly, and sometimes she uses media work when she wants to underline the characteristics of journalism as a particular form of cultural production (p. 19). In this context, she refers to "journalists as media workers and as cultural workers" (p. 18). Regarding to freelancing, Cohen employs the terms freelance writer and freelance journalist as substitutes for each other, but it is important to note that by the term writer, she means non-fiction writers and imply all types of work performed by them, while she uses the term journalist for arguments regarding "journalism as a particular form of (potentially democratic) communication" (p. 19). The utilization of particular terms and non-use of some others are of critical importance due to the implications of the terms which have been attributed value and the particular theories which they emerged from and used in.

Cohen examines the state of freelance journalism throughout seven chapters along with an introduction about freedom's double edge and a conclusion about journalism's precarity penalty. First, Cohen tries to theorize the freelance media work as a site of contestation. Based on the labour process theory, she sheds light on the question of writers' autonomy, material conditions of the journalistic work and the changing forms of exploitation in the so-called digital age. Afterward, she gives us a historical narrative from below, a labour history of freelance journalism since its emergence. Her historical narrative follows the footsteps of Örnebring's (2010) research about journalism-as-labour. Her examination of the essential elements of the precarious conditions of freelance journalists; their wages, contracts and the issue of copyrights reveal the material conditions of the journalistic practices. She deals with the dichotomy between freedom and precarity by focusing on the micro autonomy of the freelance work specifically. By describing the changing patterns of production with digitization, she inquires into the working conditions of journalists in "the content factory" of digital journalism. The last focus of Cohen's book is on the formation of collective organizations for freelancers, their challenges and potentials; and four contemporary examples of and lessons from organizing freelancers in Canada respectively. Cohen concludes the book by journalism's precarity penalty affirming that if journalism becomes more precarious, it will be less accessible to disadvantaged groups because of the rising marginalization, particularly to "women, people of colour, working-class people, racialized immigrants, young workers, aboriginal people, and other marginalized people" (p. 22).

Cohen's book gets significant attention from the scholars thus there are valuable reviews for her study on the condition of freelance journalists. In this regard, it may be logical to mention some of the crucial arguments at least. To begin with, Mirrlees (2017) underlines the concordance of Cohen's narrative with a critical political economy approach and the language she uses, because her study is holistic by connecting micro-level analysis to macro-level forces and relations, historical by giving a labour history of freelancers, geographically specific to post-Fordist neoliberal Canada, a moral, critical, dialectical work guided by praxis. In other words, it employs all the analytical, explanatory and argumentative strengths of the political economy approach. But, at the same time, one omnipotence of the book is apparently its language floating from academic professional to daily language, described as "an eminently readable and teachable" with its confident voice and welcoming tone (pp. 401-2). As Perdomo (2017) highlights, Cohen demonstrates the fact that freelance journalism may not be a choice

anymore but a necessity, with a strong objection against an idealized version of freelance working. However, Cohen supports mass unionization for all writers and journalists, but the way in which such a mass unionization for precarious workers become possible remain vogue particularly because of the diverse ideological orientations, which consequently causing some researchers to feel less optimistic about such “a super union” (Webb, 2017).

In order to be able to evaluate the issues the book has raised, it is necessary to give the essence of Cohen’s argument together with its strengths and weaknesses. The starting point of Cohen’s argument is based upon a rightful evaluation about “the valorization of freelancing as a form of journalistic work”, emphasizing the spreading of freelancing “under neoliberalism; the growing flexibility of work; and the simultaneous expansion of digital technologies, media and cultural industries” (p. 26). Nevertheless, Cohen challenges such a valorization by uncovering it as “a strategic business practice used to increase productivity and lower labour costs, offloading the risks of producing journalism from corporations onto individual workers” which is particularly evident in the cases of libel insurances together with declining budgets for foreign correspondence and war reporting (p. 17).

Cohen’s research has three strong points. First of all, her extensive field research about freelance journalists reveals the myths and unknowns about the current trends in digital journalism with respect to the working conditions as follows; very long working hours but limited and mostly late payments, different types of unpaid labour, increasing individualization and atomization thereof, high competition, intensified time pressure, diminishing control and autonomy and increased exploitation. Both in subjective and objective levels, it is difficult to identify the class character of freelance journalists (p. 35), due to the feeling of autonomy and self-satisfaction for freelancers as a result of their self-employed status depicting them as entrepreneurs, not workers (p. 39). As independent contractors, they are described as “solo self-employed” or “own-account” self-employed workers (p. 9), sometimes they are even called “culturepreneur[s]” (p. 26); although they do not have control over their labour processes in a broader sense (p. 46). In the marketplace of ideas and news, the commodification of journalism goes hand in hand with the commodification of the self for freelancers (pp. 161-2), that is why self-promotion, self-branding and self-marketing are critical for freelancers’ entry into the industry (p. 53).

The second strength related to the freedom's double-edge argument mentioned above is Cohen's description of freelance work. Though generally working with their own equipment and tools such as tape recorders and cameras, it is crucial to note that freelancers neither own the means of production nor have the necessary networks and relations in the cultural industries (p. 26). While the cost of reproduction has been decreased to virtually nothing with digital technologies, copyrights are used in multiple formats in order to increase exploitation in the cultural industries (p. 51). Therefore, Cohen defends that there are multiple contradictions for freelance media workers relating to their working experiences, rather than defining them in two extremes either as "empowered, entrepreneurial members of a creative class who enjoy autonomy and control over their craft" or as "members of the precariat, a growing global class of overeducated, underemployed workers" (p. 9). These contradictions constitute "a site of struggle" in which freelance cultural work should be studied (p. 53).

The third point is the successful piecing of Cohen's background as a freelance journalist and her academic inquiry together. She accomplishes to convey the daily issues, problems and trends of freelance journalism by merging her background knowledge and experiences as a journalist with her scientific capacity. As Mirrless (2017, p. 401) rightly argues, "Given Cohen's background as a precarious freelance journalist and apropos the feminist mantra that the 'personal is political,' it is no surprise Writers' Rights' writing of the voices of workers is self-reflexive and savvy about the complexities and contradictions of cultural production".

Despite all the strength of its arguments, the book has some weaknesses and some areas in which it remains silent. In the first instance, the author takes for granted an idea of journalism for democracy and is not occupied with it, not even once. Although she challenges freelance journalism, she is also dedicated to an idealized journalism by defining it as "a form of communication essential for meaningful participation in democratic life" (p. 7). Even if the problems are solved related with the freelancers and the working conditions in general, journalism will still function in a capitalist industry which meets the needs of the ruling classes, and it will have boundaries for an emancipatory democratic future. At this point, a detailed analysis related to the news content is necessary. The British case, for instance, shows us a very controversial picture about the newspaper industry with hacking scandals, manipulating the truth and declining standards of the journalism with the rise of "churnalism" (Davies, 2008).

Related with the first argument Cohen's study could also have compared and contrasted the issues, problems and trends of the full-time reporters and journalists with that of freelancers. Although she limits herself with the freelance journalism in a digital age, at least similar points and trends could have been discussed in the book in order to give the reader a more general picture about the news production processes. Whether freelance or not, insecure and precarious employment become very widespread inside the newsrooms. For instance, Lee-Wright et al. (2011) reveal the changing patterns of journalism in different mediums of news journalism particularly in regard to technological developments in the context of changing economic and political structures. With a solid reaction to technological determinism, their research presents a very similar picture about the declining control and autonomy of the journalists in the so-called multi-skilled universe which actually turns out to a feeling of de-skilling for journalists. More and more journalists start to lose control and autonomy over the product of their labour with the separation of conception and execution of the news production, as in the case of reporters working at corporate media in Turkey (Yeşilyurt, 2014). A prominent Turkish journalist describes this news production process as similar to the Taylorist factory workers performing similar tasks in front of the desk and with no control over the final product (Mavioğlu, 2012, pp. 108-110).

Last but not least, Cohen's study remains silent about the pressures from political powers in an age in which authoritarian governments are elected to power in different regions of the world. For one, it may be acceptable for a study based on a field research in Canada, but still, this problem is too big to ignore for a study regarding contemporary journalism. Compared to the journalistic practices and the industrial relations in Turkey, it can be argued that similar trends are observable in regard to labour-capital relations and the working conditions of journalists with English-speaking Canada, as it is shown elsewhere based on a field research in corporate media (Yeşilyurt, 2014). Yet it is necessary to note that freelance journalism, despite its expansion particularly by the spread of digital newsrooms, may still be considered rather as an exception in Turkey preferred mostly by alternative news media vis-à-vis the traditional media outlets. However, one crucial difference is the overwhelming existence of the political power in news media in Turkey and accordingly the political pressure, censure and self-censorship during different aspects of news production. The case of Turkey also shows that censure and self-censorship are still critical issues remain to be studied for the future of democracy.

Huws (2017, p. 68) argues that more bureaucratization together with less autonomy is apparently observable in all fields, despite R. Florida's "creative class" discussion on one hand and different arguments about "digital nomads" on the other. In this context, Cohen's book gives us a historical account of freelance journalism as an example of diminishing autonomy in cultural industries. Based on an extensive field study, Cohen's book discusses the changing patterns of journalistic work from a critical political economy approach with a special focus on the labour process theory. As the title of this review suggests, she argues that freelance journalism undergoes a significant change from an exception to the norm. Consequently,

Freelancing and other forms of contract work are becoming the norm, either as the form a career takes, as an entry point, or as a stopgap while looking for more secure work. Yet declining wages, increased competition, and restrictive contracts are also becoming the norm (Cohen, 2016, p. 242).

The author successfully depicts the freelancing as "a site of struggle" (p. 53) or "a site of contestation in media and cultural work" (p. 10) by elaborating on the freedom's double-edge. In the meantime, she also highlights the potential of freelance work for the discussion of the refusal of work "as a model of independent, autonomous work" against capitalist exploitation and alienation of workers. At this point, collective organizations could be the potential pioneers of a change not only for transforming the lives and working conditions of journalists but also for the media content produced (p. 54). However, the potential of freelance work for an emancipatory perception of non-capitalist work remains open to a discussion as a food for thought.

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