

Freelance journalists

A survey of earnings, contracts,
and copyright





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Executive Summary

This report presents the findings of **a survey of UK-based freelance journalists, totalling almost 500 respondents**. The survey included information on freelance journalists' earnings, including factors that affect earnings, such as contracts and copyright. Given the importance of independent journalism, the report asked exploratory questions about the feasibility of, and sustainability of, reasonable working conditions for freelance journalists. We find that the contingency of independent journalism is dependent on several, precarious, support structures.

The findings of this report focus mainly on primary occupation freelance journalists, being defined as those who allocate at least 50% of their working time to freelance journalism. For those journalists we find that their freelance activities earn them a **typical median income of £17,500 per annum**; a figure less than minimum wage in the UK, assuming a typical 35-hour work week. Due to low earnings, most journalists subsidise their income with 'day jobs' or from the income of other household members. In the context of proposed regulatory changes surrounding online platforms, we find that **only 7% of primary occupation journalists have ever received a payment as a result of existing (international) licensing agreements between press publishers and online platforms**, suggesting that these have not been conducive to increasing their income in their present configuration, at least up to the present day.



This report also investigates earning differences for demographic groups. We see an encouraging **reverse gender gap, with more women than men among our respondents, and with women earning slightly higher earnings than men.**

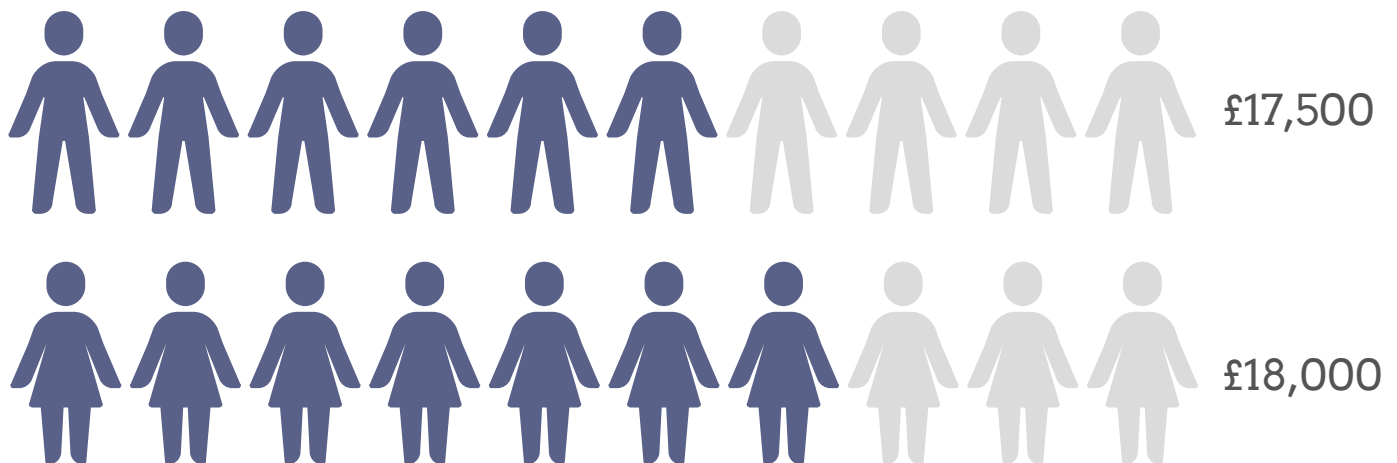


Figure 1: Pictogram depicting typical income difference between cisgender men (upper) and cisgender women (lower) (GBP 2023)

We also find that there is a **higher percentage of LGBTQIA+ journalists in the freelance industry when compared with the general population, and that they too earn on average more than their heterosexual counterparts** (with LGBTQIA+ journalists earning a typical median income of £18,000 compared to £17,500 of heterosexual journalists). On the other hand, other marginalised demographic groups have a smaller presence in the profession, and earn far less. Journalism is overwhelmingly a white profession, and whilst we caution that there is a very small number of minority ethnicities represented in these survey findings, those **black journalists who responded to the survey earn seven times less than white journalists.** Journalism also appears to be a privileged profession, with **most journalists hailing from a privileged socio-economic background**, and earning more than those with lower socio-economic backgrounds.



In our assessment of contracts and copyright, we find evidence of informal, ‘back of the envelope’, contractual practices between journalists and news publishers. **Off-hand emails, WhatsApp’s, and oral agreements are routinely employed** in this industry, which lessens the security of a freelance journalist if they are exposed to a dispute. More worryingly, **40% of freelance journalists undertook work without any contract at all.** We also find evidence of a rush to ‘rights grab’, referring to more encompassing copyright transactions and longer claims on exclusivity. We find that **nearly half all journalists assign their copyright (47%)** to news publishers, and that half **have signed an exclusivity clause (47%),** some which have lasted in perpetuity.



The Wild West of freelance journalism

The metaphor of freelance journalism as the Wild West is not ours: instead, it is the metaphor adopted by a surprising number of respondents to our survey. We find it apt for many reasons – not least because in their own words, this is the lived reality of the modern freelance journalist.

In the Wild West, the journalist is the cowboy – the eponymous, lone ranger white-hat – and descendant of the knight-errant. To say that journalists are important in our society is trite, having a career with an explicit tie to the promotion of a politically informed citizenry. Societies rely on journalism for accountability, transparency, democracy, civic engagement, and freedom of information free from state influence. Independence requires conditions that facilitate it: stability and sustainability of reasonable working conditions. The key question of this report is therefore exploratory: does the (high) value of the independent journalist translate to a commensurate (high) value in a liveable wage?



Existing evidence to this effect is only partial: our Authors' Earnings Report of 2022 gave some preliminary salary data on journalists earnings in the UK;[1] national statistics capture information for salaried journalists;[2] and some crowdsourced resources offer an (albeit less rigorous) overview of the landscape.[3] To give a more comprehensive account in response to our key question of value, this report combines the study of the freelance journalist, as a site of independent journalism, with the rigour of independent academia.

The Wild West is also an apt description for the increasingly sparsely populated landscape of journalism: deserted ghost towns, and those sites that have survived are left without much structure. Whilst newsrooms have been known to cyclically wax and wane, the past two decades have seen a dramatic challenges. The 2008 financial crisis, Brexit, the Covid-19 pandemic, and the cost-of-living crisis have had disproportionately destabilising effects on the journalistic profession which often relies on access to a wide range of people and events. Combined with a long term shift in advertising from traditional media to digital platforms, the result is shrinking newsrooms, mass redundancies, reductions in the frequency of publications, and the decline of regional news (with the corresponding rise of the 'news desert'). Despite attempts to explore new revenue streams, there is indisputably less funding, fewer opportunities for stable employment, and poorer working conditions, for the modern journalist. With the movement away from salaried careers, this report presents the freelance lifestyle as one being borne of necessity rather than choice; policymakers should be prepared for the possibility that freelancing will be the dominant mode of journalism and consider optimal working conditions accordingly.[4]

[1] <https://www.create.ac.uk/blog/2022/12/07/uk-authors-earnings-and-contracts-2022-a-survey-of-60000-writers/> see also <https://www.nctj.com/life-as-a-journalist/salary/>

[2] <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/earningsandworkinghours/bulletins/annualsurveyofhoursandearnings/2023>

[3] <https://www.journoresources.org.uk/journalism-salaries-how-much-journalists-paid/>

[4] <https://www.nctj.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/EXPLORING-FREELANCE-JOURNALISM-FINAL.pdf>



Finally, and most (in)famously, the Wild West is a lawless place, lacking regulatory oversight.

Whilst this report reveals many areas for policy intervention, the main focus of regulators has been on holding online platforms to account where they host journalistic content. At their inception, these platforms had the capacity to evolve and transcend boundaries for journalists, promising larger audiences than ever before and new modes of communication, creating the vlogger, the TikToker and many other new forms of content creation. In more recent years, these platforms have been accused of using journalistic content without permission or appropriate recompense. [5] Returning to the imagery of the white hat freelancer, the online platform can be understood to play the opposing role of the 'black hat'. Policymakers have considered a range of regulatory options with a view to bringing big tech to the negotiating table, to facilitate meaningful payments to press publishers and – we assume – ultimately to sustain independent journalism. Internationally, these have manifested in explicit legislative changes in copyright law (the EU press publishers right), [6] media regulation (the Canadian Online News Act) [7] and competition law (Australian Media Bargaining Code). [8]

[5] <https://www.intellectbooks.com/digital-platforms-and-the-press>

[6] <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dir/2019/790/oj>

[7] <https://www.canada.ca/en/canadian-heritage/services/online-news.html>

[8] <https://www.accc.gov.au/by-industry/digital-platforms-and-services/news-media-bargaining-code/news-media-bargaining-code>



In the UK context, despite the recommendations of the 2019 Cairncross review, no similar mechanism has been adopted at a domestic level.[8] Now, post-Brexit, UK policymakers have also urged a 'swift remedy' for journalism vis-à-vis online platforms, envisioned within the scope of the Digital Markets Unit,[9] provided with a statutory basis in the Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers bill.[10] In giving this broader context for the report, we caution against putting the cart before the horse where regulatory options are concerned. Instead, we return to our central object of study and the assumed beneficiary of any policy change in this area - the freelance journalist as an embodiment of independent journalism. By presenting empirical evidence as to their lived reality, we hope that the underlying factors affecting the sustainability of this career can be accurately identified, and indeed remedied.[11]

Throughout this report, we include quotes from the qualitative responses to our survey to capture the subjective experiences of the modern freelance journalist, allowing them to narrate, in their own words, their own experience of the 'Wild West'.

“

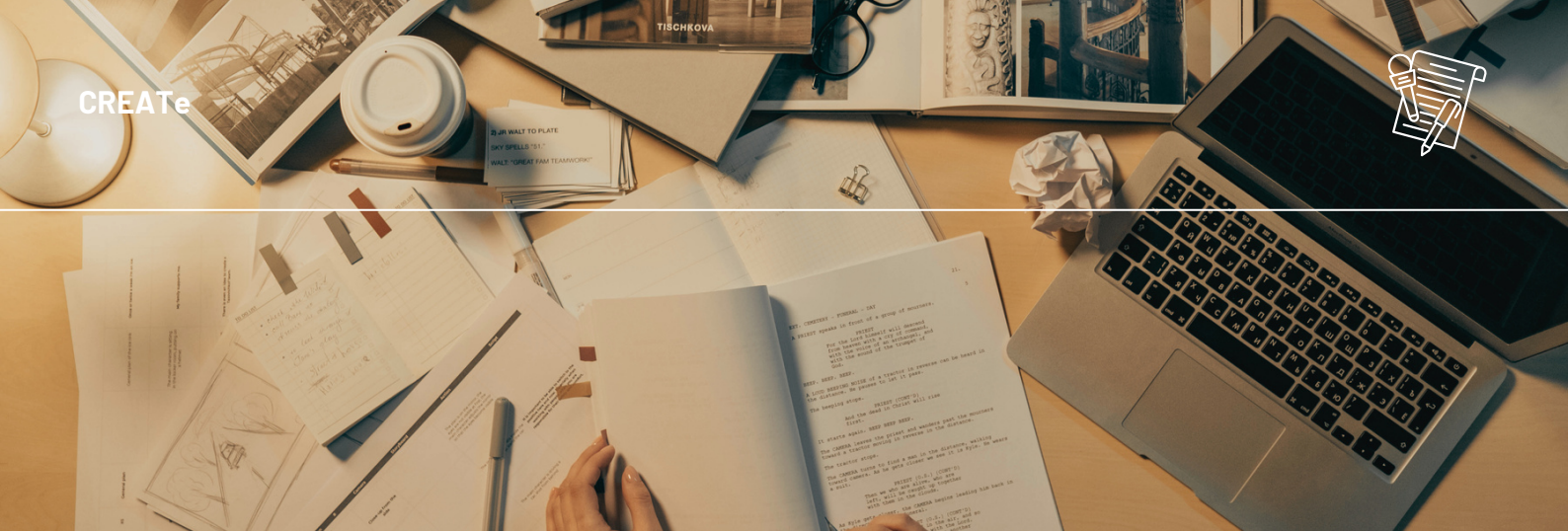
There is a failure across the whole publishing industry to understand that without quality content, publications or channels will fail - it's simply a matter of time. And producing quality content takes time, which people have to be paid for. There are no short-cuts.

[9] <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-cairncross-review-a-sustainable-future-for-journalism>

[10] <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/3707/documents/36111/default/>

[11] <https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/3453>

[12] <https://www.create.ac.uk/blog/2021/06/04/21-for-2021-journalists-and-press-publishers-are-their-interests-aligned/>



Method

Data collection

The survey was designed according to a standardised model adapted from previous longitudinal surveys of UK authors who, as part of a publication-based cultural market, share similar characteristics to freelance journalists.[13] In adopting this standardised model, we are able to track trends over time and compare between different populations across other creative industries. The standardised model was lightly adapted where appropriate to take account of market particulars, e.g., sources of earnings, and a more detailed demographic profile was implemented in line with metrics employed in national statistics. The survey was implemented on an online survey management tool, Qualtrics, which is among the most used types of software for surveys of this type. Respondents were offered an incentive to complete the survey, with a randomised cash award of £50 distributed to five respondents. Whilst we gathered email address to identify awardees, for all other purposes, respondents remain anonymous. A copy of the survey is available in a static link.[14]

[13] <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/creative-industries-economic-estimates>
<https://ria->

[14] my.sharepoint.com/:w/g/person/amy_thomas_glasgow_ac_uk/EU9Q3neSr4FAI0dxMRifr-hMROVone4FioV1-bfc1AW_nSi0?a=vSN40h



On 3 September 2023, the survey was issued to all freelance members of NUJ (totalling 4,500) and to members of ALCS who had at least one magazine article registered on their database (totalling 6,537). In sum, we estimate that the survey was sent to a population of approximately 11,037. Our choice to limit - as far as is possible with an online format - the distribution of the survey to a defined population of journalists is deliberate. By purposively limiting the scope to this defined population, we control for assumed shared characteristics in this population that is commensurate with both their earning potential and career trajectory. In other words, by limiting our analysis to those journalists who are members of professional bod(ies) in the UK, this is a proxy for the most policy relevant group of a broad spectrum of 'serious' freelance journalists. This is based on two samples with different characteristics: membership to ALCS, as a collecting society for literary works, indicates the existence of publications generating money from secondary licensing; and membership to NUJ, as a trade union for journalists more broadly construed, indicates a subscription to a minimum standard of professional working conditions.

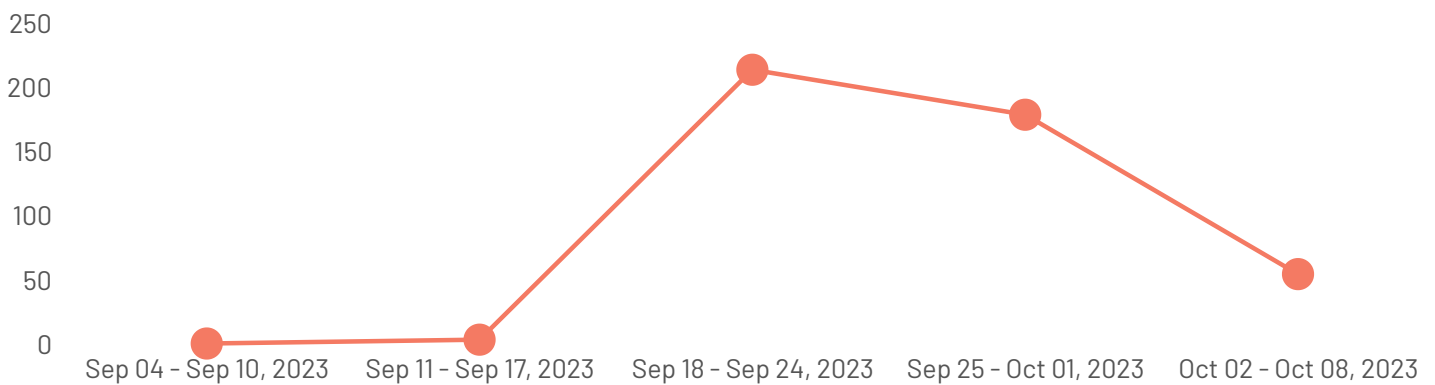


Figure 2: Survey response rates over time

The survey closed on 2 October, with a total of 458 responses (a response rate of 4.14%). We note that there is a high likelihood of duplication across membership of the NUJ and ALCS, suggesting that the overall population is likely to be smaller (and thus, the response rate higher). As the survey was designed so that participants could skip irrelevant or uncomfortable questions, we also included partial responses as valid observations within this total. The findings presented in this report therefore may not account for 100% of all 458 responses.



Data analysis

All quantitative data, including earnings data, were analysed using Stata. Upon receipt of responses, we did not attempt to correct or amend any data, except for clearly erroneous answers, which were mostly in relation to freeform fields (e.g., non-numerical data in earnings fields).

Despite efforts to control the population of potential respondents, due to the online format and shareability of the link, there is an inherent uncertainty as to who has access to the survey. We did not apply any statistical weights to make the survey more representative for the total journalistic population, because the characteristics of the population are not known. However, we focus for comparative purposes on the sub-sample of Primary Occupation journalists who are defined (across previous studies) as those who allocate at least 50% of their time to the profession under survey.

In a context like this, the average value (i.e., mean) is likely to be strongly affected by a few outliers reporting very large values (e.g., 'superstar' journalists). To account for the skewness in the earnings profile, all income analysis in this report is based on median (typical) amounts. The median (the value of the respondent that leaves half of the distribution above and half of the distribution below them) is a more reliable measurement of income where data is highly skewed by non-representative answers (outliers) which differ from the majority of respondents. As respondents had the option to report income data based on either a categorical banding (e.g., £5,000 - £9,999) or precise amounts (which approximately 40% of all respondents provided), we merged responses by converting banded responses to a hypothetical midpoint between bands for the purposes of creating synthesised variable data.



The analysis that follows focusses on three samples of the freelance journalist population: (1) all respondents to the survey, (2) respondents for whom freelance journalism is their primary occupation (defined as those that spend more than 50% of their time on freelance journalism), totalling 48% of all respondents, and (3) respondents whose only occupation is freelance journalism, totalling 29% of all respondents. From a policy perspective, groups 2 and 3 are most relevant, given the relative importance of freelance journalism to their overall earnings.

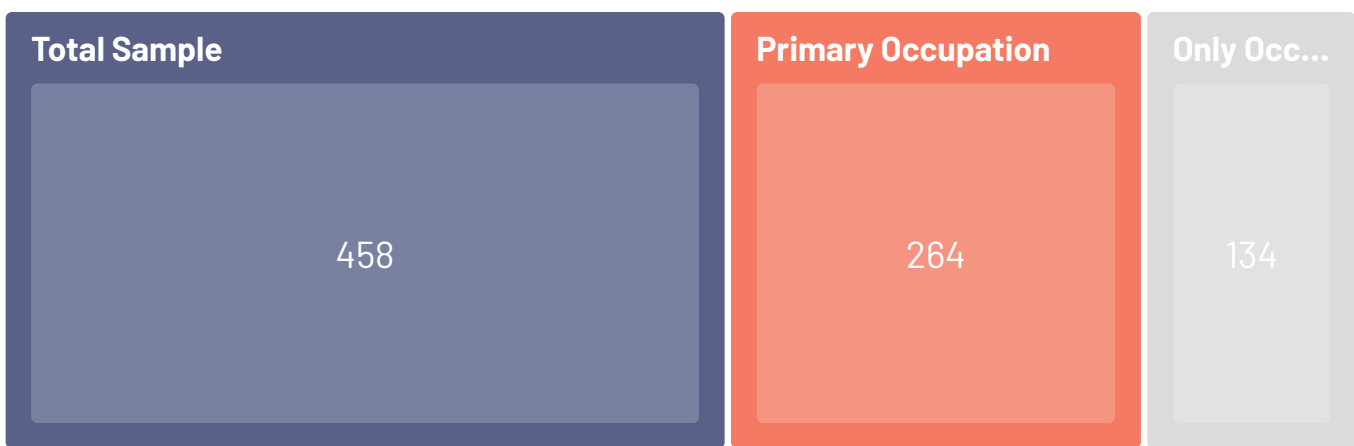


Figure 3: Observations of respondents across samples

As a sub-section of the creative and digital industries, we anticipated that the earnings profile of freelance journalists would share similar characteristics as other cultural markets, particularly in relation to the ‘winner-takes-all’ distribution of income (where a large percentage of overall income is condensed within a few earners). To measure the level of inequality of income distribution in this industry, we used the Gini coefficient, which reflects the difference in net worth between individuals. The higher the Gini, the higher is the income inequality in the sample. Whilst we find that levels of income inequality are not as extreme as in the broader writing market, there are indications that income is skewed.

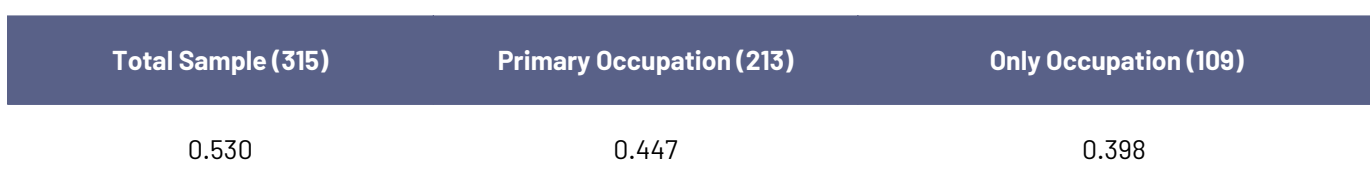


Figure 4: Gini measurement of freelance income across all samples



Demographic profile



Freelancing is a very different profession for those of us who don't live in London, and/or who don't have friends, family and school connections within the industries we work in. It's very different for those from marginalised backgrounds.

Age

Most journalists across all categories cluster around the 45-54 and 55-64 age bands. By contrast, there are few very young journalists across all categories among the respondents (less than 1%).

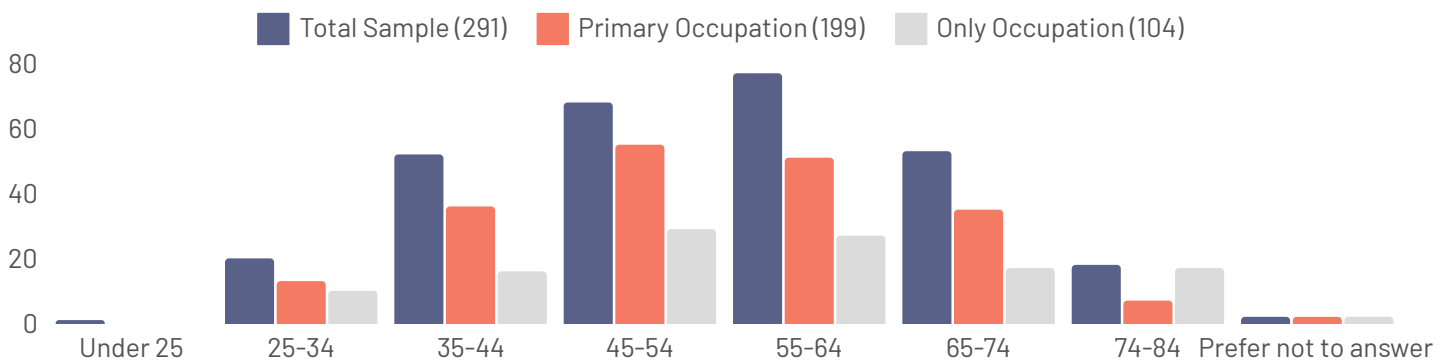


Figure 5: Observations and percentages of journalists by age

Most journalists started their career in, or post, 2004. This influx in new journalists is commensurate with other milestones in online journalism, including the advent of Facebook, and a rise in the availability and promotion of other digital-born news websites such as BuzzFeed and Vox. [15]

[15] <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/3707/documents/36111/default/>

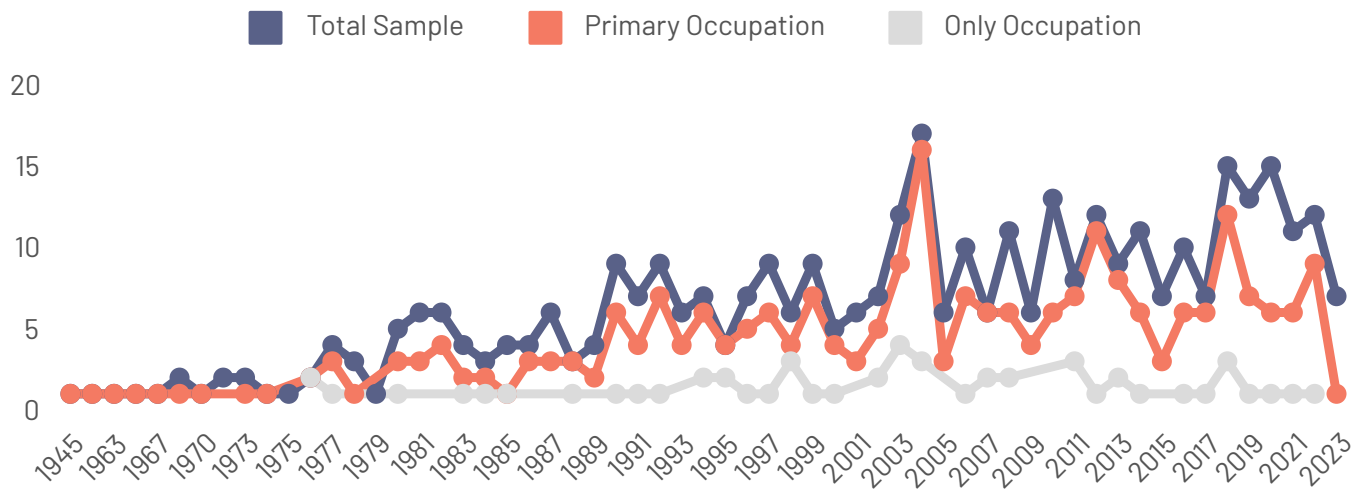


Figure 6: Frequency of years in which journalists started earning an income from journalism

Background

We added a new demographic category to the standardised survey model to capture the Social Mobility Commission’s recommendations for measuring socio-economic backgrounds (formally or colloquially known as ‘class’) which broadly correlate with more or less social and economic privilege.[16] These categorisations are based on the occupation of the respondent’s main household earner when they were aged approximately 14.

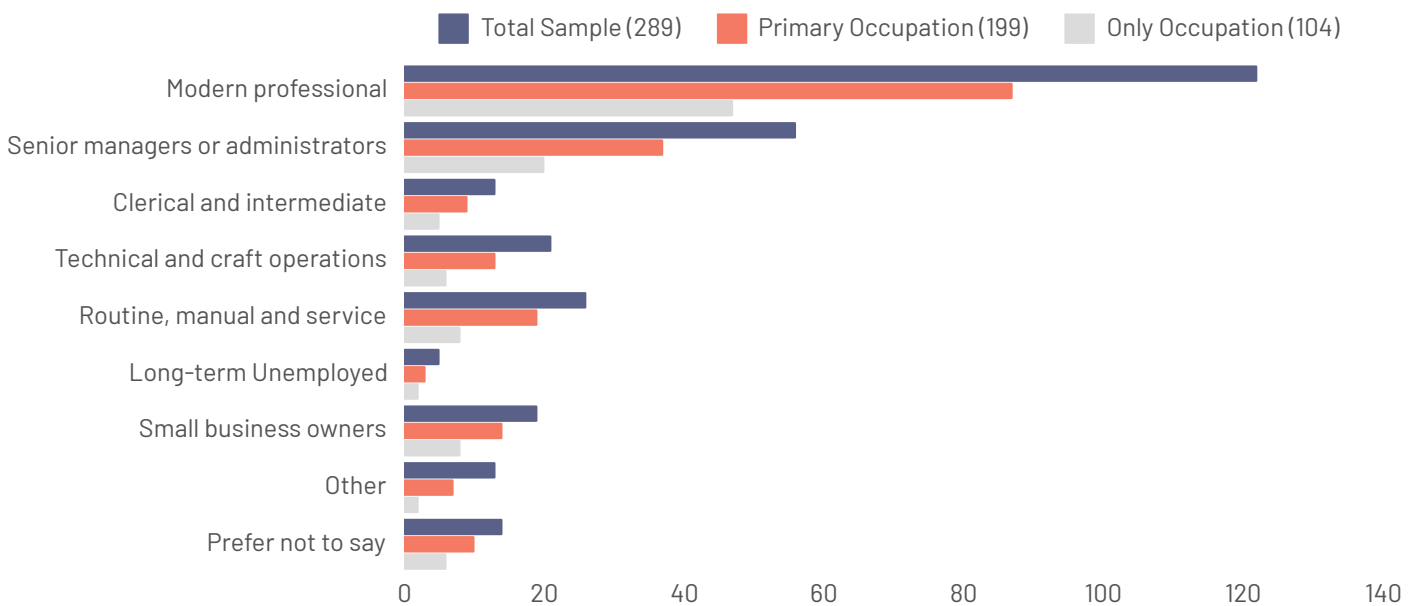


Figure 7: Observations and percentages of journalists by socio-economic background categories

[16] <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/understanding-a-workforces-socio-economic-background-for-change/simplifying-how-employers-measure-socio-economic-background-an-accompanying-report-to-new-guidance>



Most journalists come from a professional background, with 63% of primary occupation journalists falling into this category. This is normally correlated with the highest levels of social and economic privilege. By contrast, only 12% fall into the ‘intermediate’ category, and 19% are from ‘lower’ socio-economic backgrounds. These figures should be contextualised alongside the social grades of the general population in the UK, where only 23.5% of the population fall into the highest social grade.[17] These findings suggest that freelance journalism is an ‘elite’ profession which is overwhelmingly the remit of those who have, on the face of it, benefitted from more social connections and economic facilitations to support their career.

Disability

6% of primary occupation journalists have a disability, of which 44% have an unseen disability and 36% have a physical impairment.

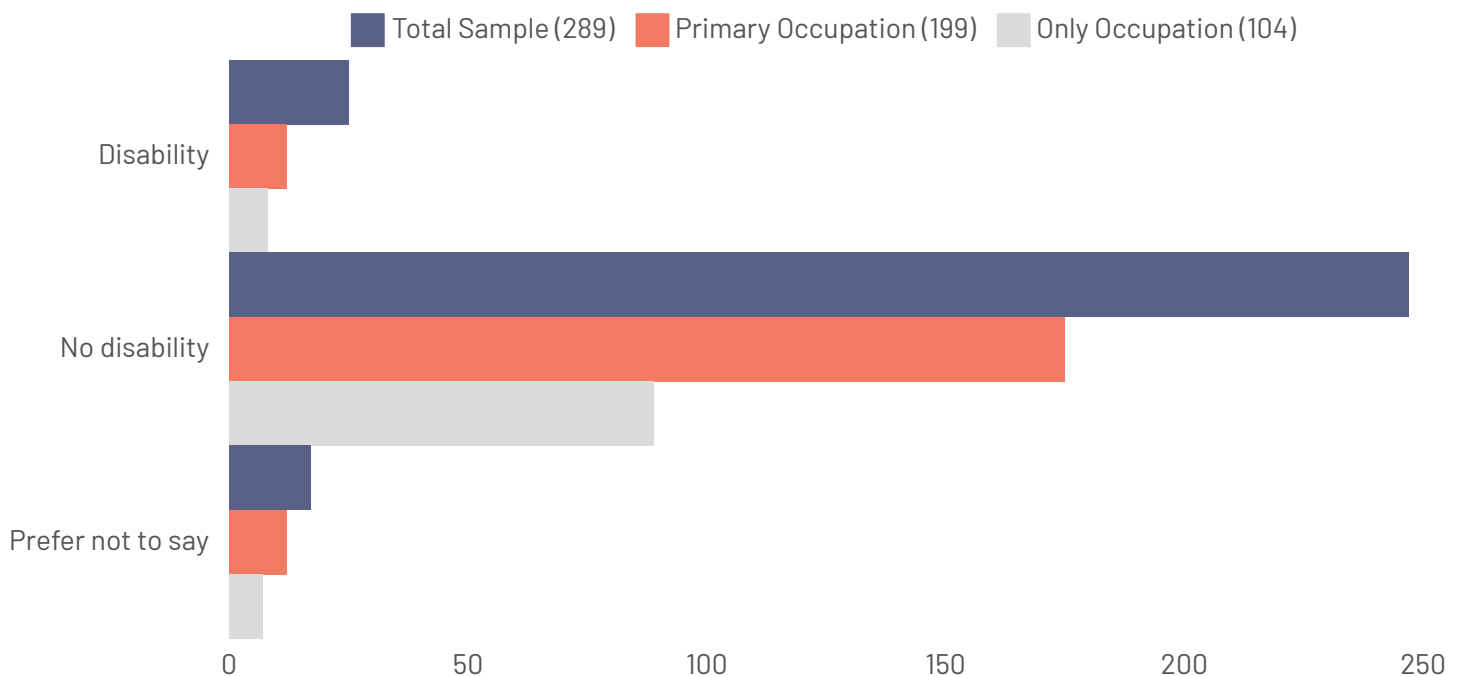


Figure 8: Observations and percentages of journalists by disability status

[17] <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/bulletins/approximatedsocialgradeenglandandwales/census2021>



Education

Most journalists hold a qualification in higher education, with 44% of primary occupation journalists possessing a degree, and 37% a Masters qualification or PhD. This profile is in keeping with our findings of the broader writing population in the UK.

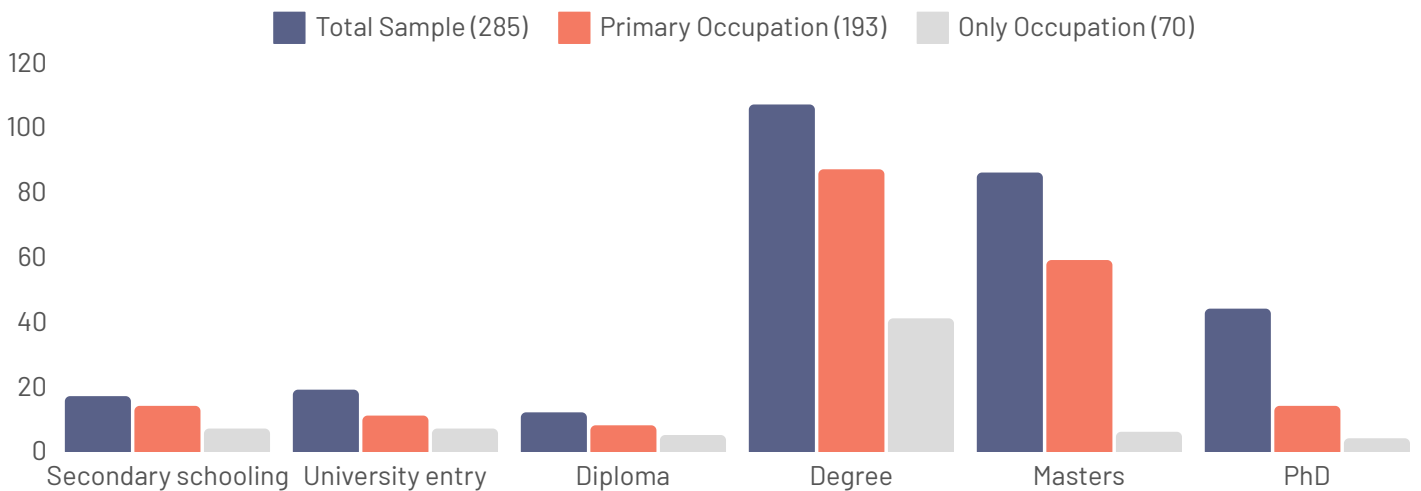


Figure 9: Observations and percentages of journalists by highest level of education attained

Ethnicity

Freelance journalism is overwhelmingly white across all samples, with white journalists making up 87% of all primary occupation journalists. Whilst striking, this figure is roughly proportionate with the broader population of ethnic groups in the UK, with 82% of the population in England and Wales being white as of 2021.[18]

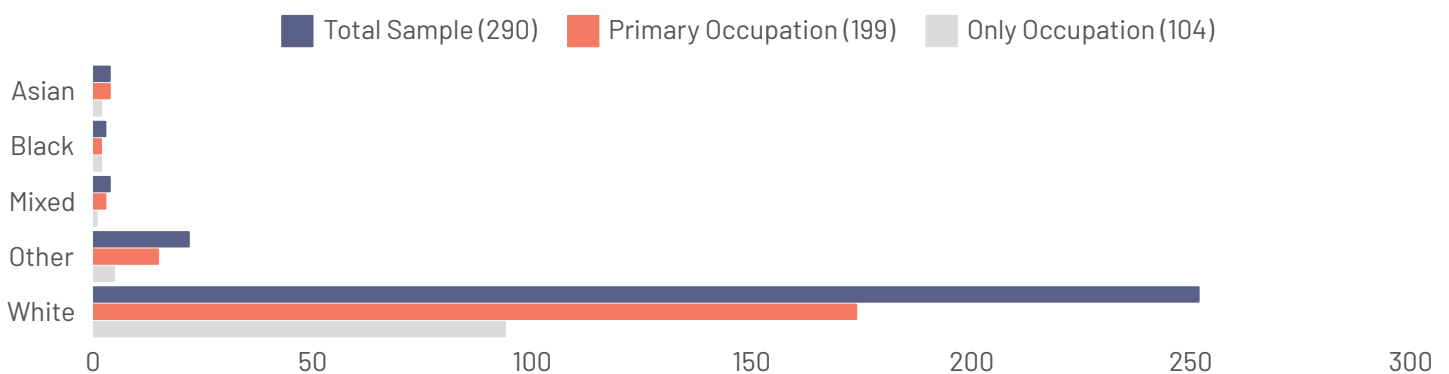


Figure 10: Observations and percentages of journalists by ethnic group

[18] <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/>



Gender

There are more women than men in freelance journalism (50% of primary occupation journalists are women, versus 37% men). The number of trans men and trans women in the industry is very low (in aggregate, 1%), but is in keeping with expectations of 0.5% of the general population of the UK. [19] Due to the very low number of respondents for trans men and trans women, these categories have been merged.

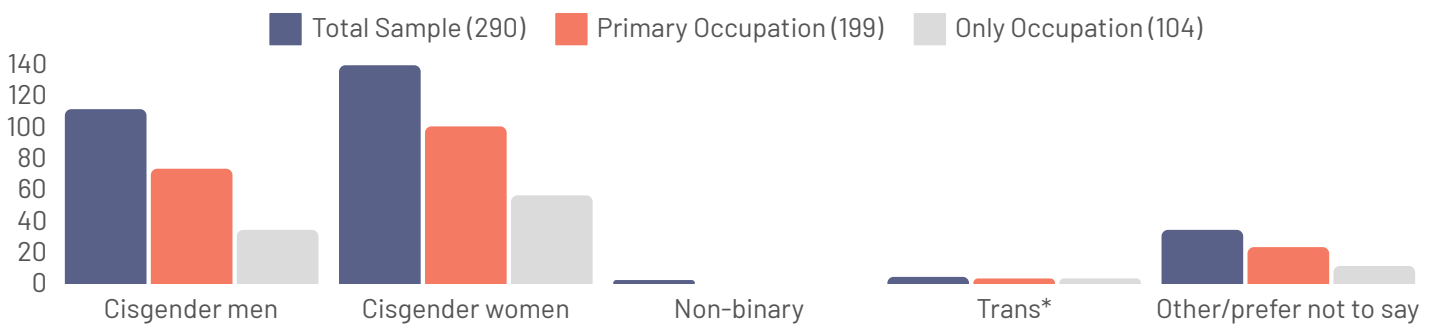


Figure 11: Observations and percentages of journalists by gender

Sexual orientation

The majority of journalists are heterosexual (72% of primary occupation journalists). Notably, the number of LGBTQIA+ journalists at 7% is more than double than in general population of the UK (at 3.2%). [20] This is a similar trajectory to our findings of higher percentages of more diverse sexual orientations in our study of indie authors. [21]

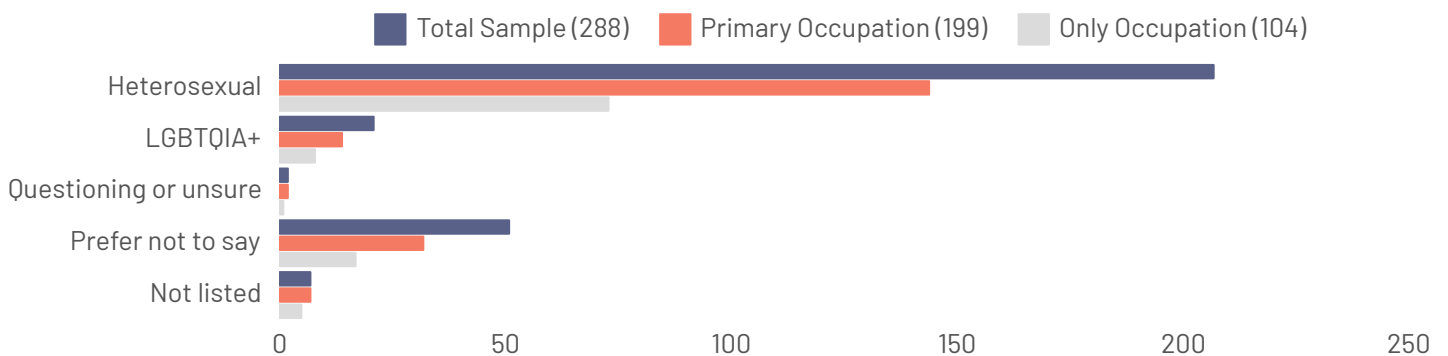


Figure 12: Observations and percentages of journalists by sexual orientation

[19] <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/genderidentity/bulletins/genderidentityenglandandwales/census2021>

[20] <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/sexuality/bulletins/sexualorientationenglandandwales/census2021>

[21] <https://www.create.ac.uk/blog/2023/06/21/indie-authors-earnings-2023-the-first-global-study-published/>



Location

As with other creative and digital industries in the UK, freelance journalists are mostly concentrated in the London area (78% of primary occupation journalists).

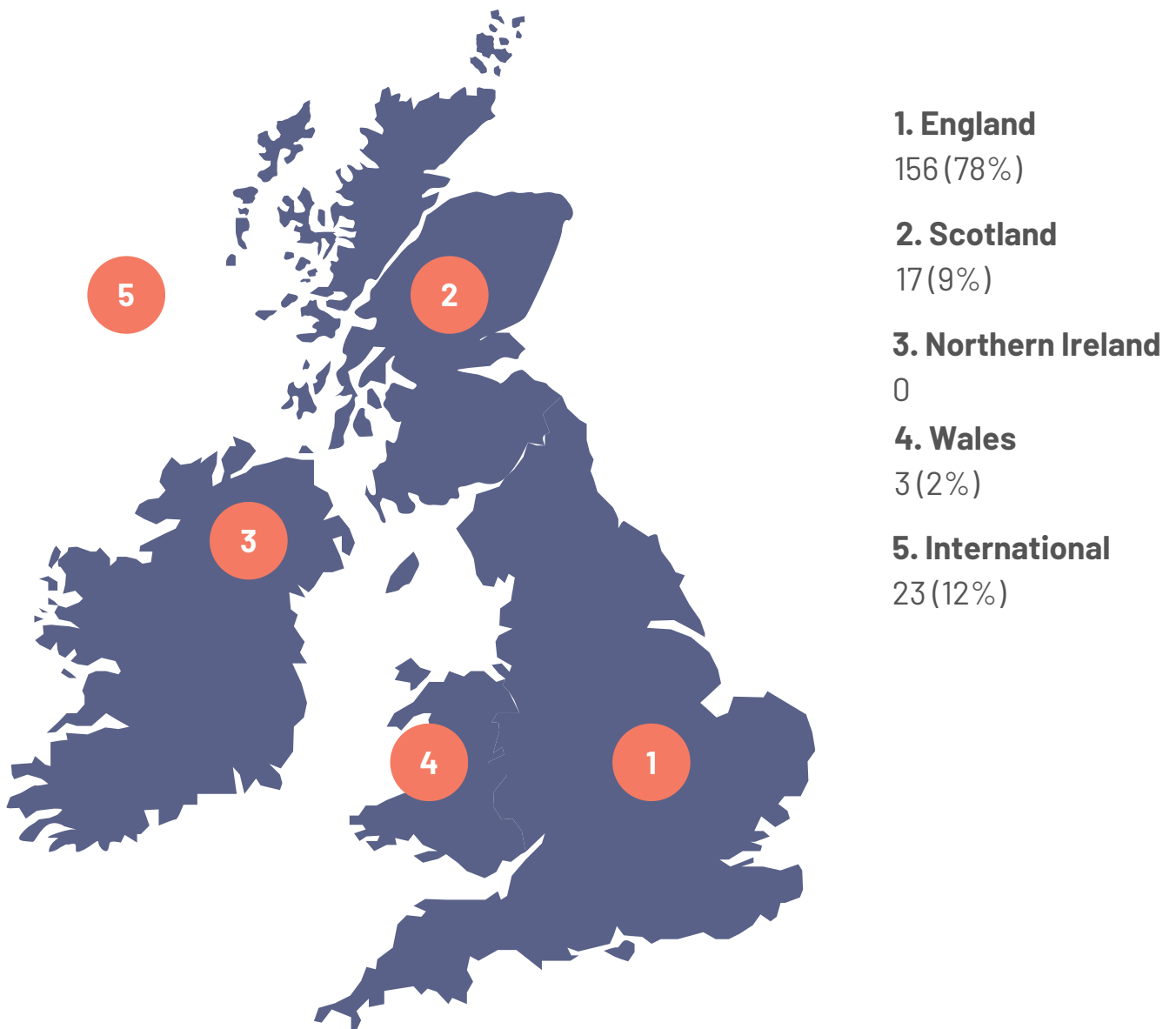


Figure 13: Observations and percentages of primary occupation journalists by location



Professional profile



Freelance journalism has always had a mixed reputation as a career path and has been seen as a paid-for hobby. It has been seen as a buyers' market – now more than ever.

Areas of journalism

Overwhelmingly, freelance journalists work in arts and entertainment (23% of primary occupation journalists). The next closest categories fall somewhat behind, with travel and tourism at 9% and lifestyle at 8%.

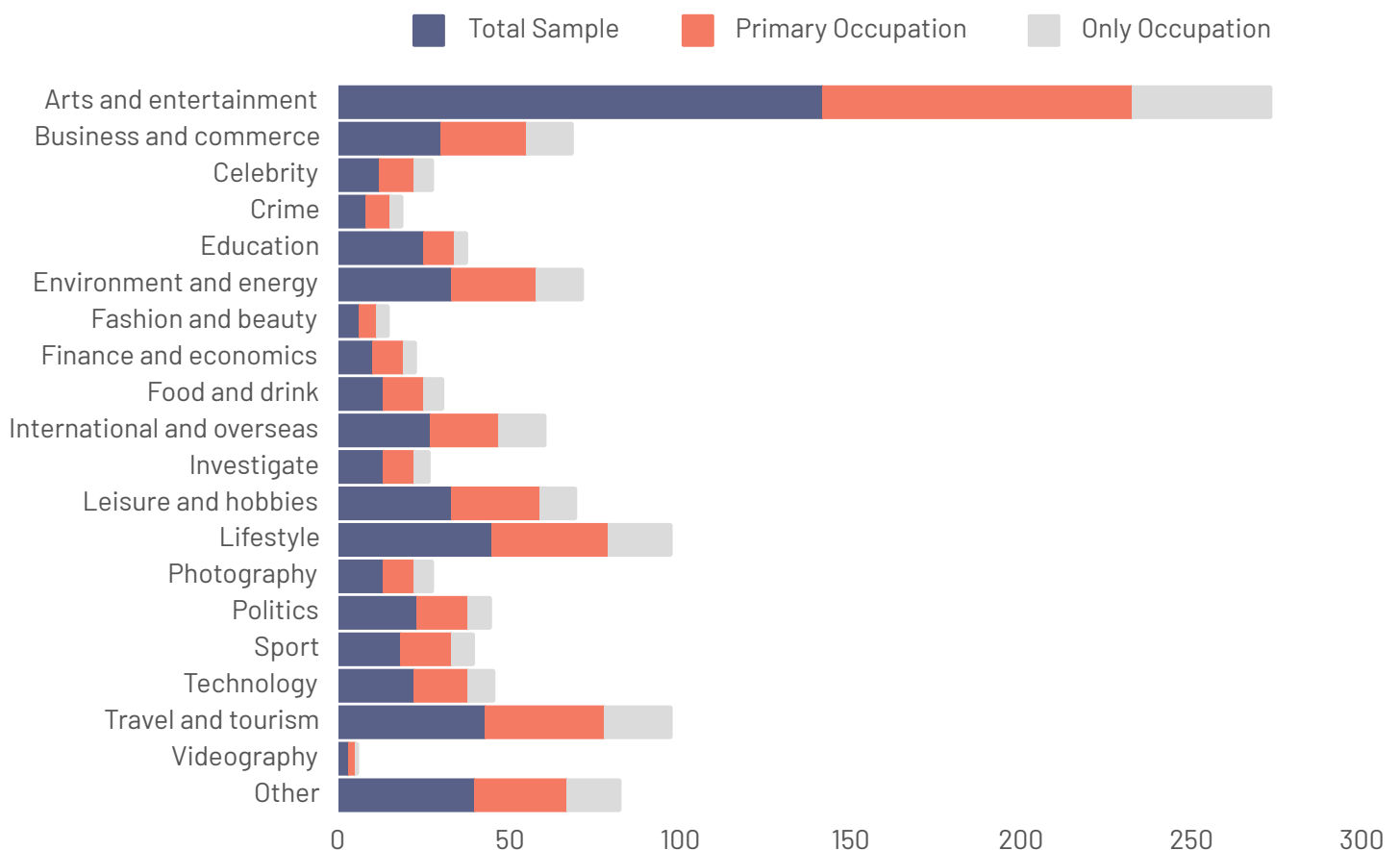


Figure 14: Observations and percentages of journalists by primary area of journalism



Main activities

Journalists spend most of their time writing (60%), followed by editing (12%) and researching (11%).

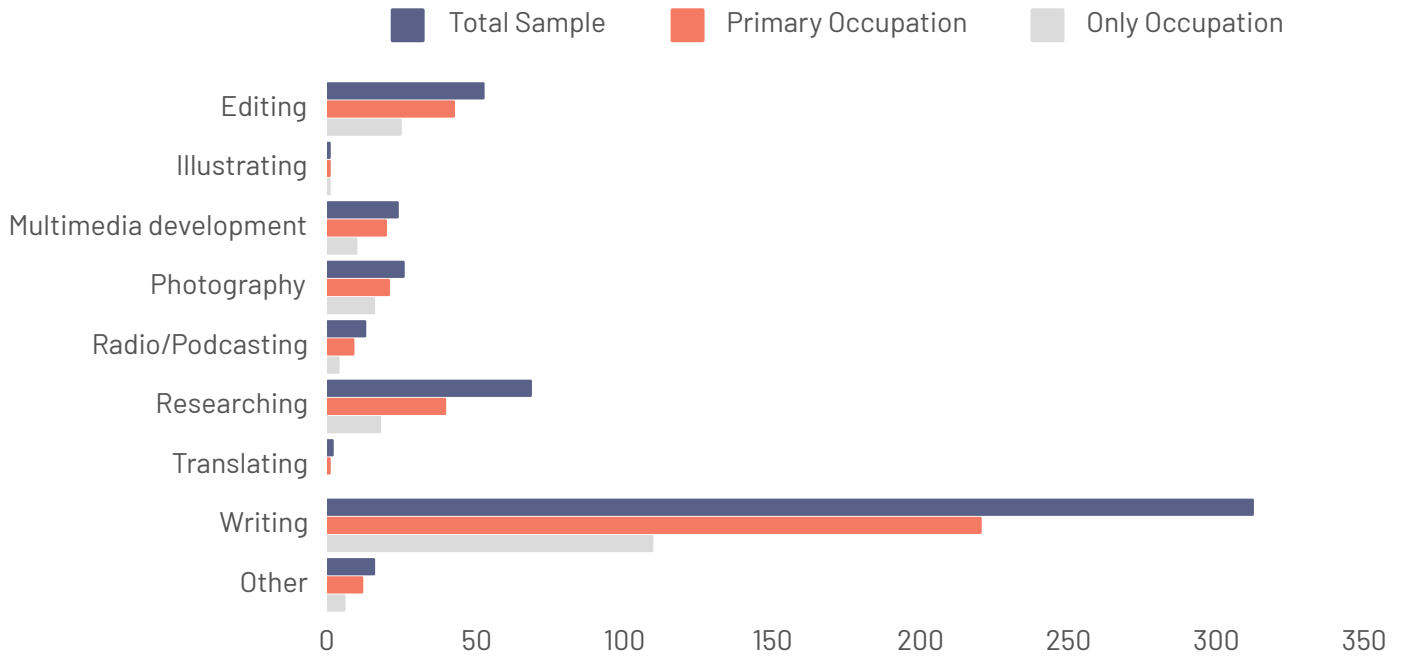


Figure 15: Observations and percentages of journalists by primary journalistic activity

Main outlets

The majority of journalists write for national publications (60%). The very low figure of local journalists (7%) is commensurate with the decline and closure of local and regional newsrooms.[22]

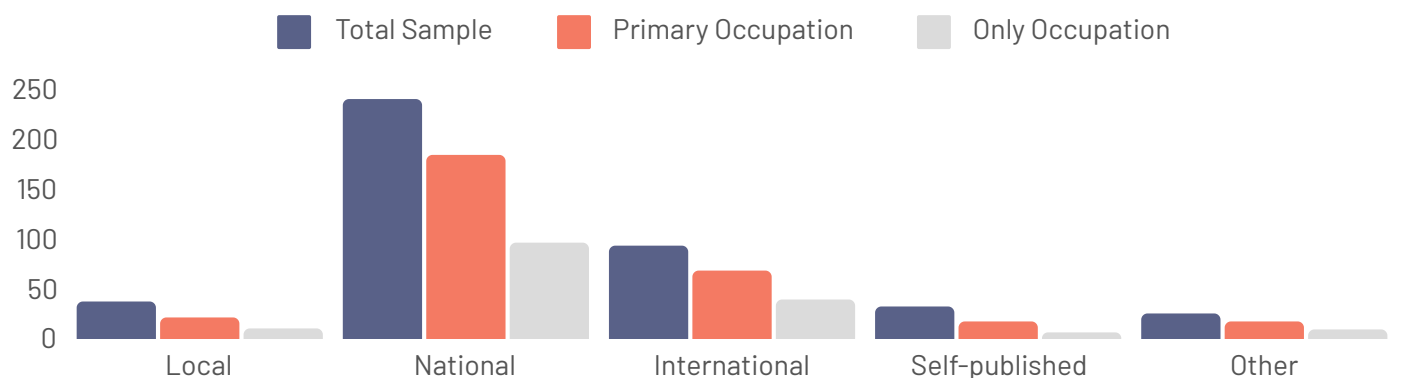


Figure 16: Observations and percentages of journalists by main outlet of publication

[22] <https://committees.parliament.uk/work/6536/sustainability-of-local-journalism/>



Main formats

Surprisingly, given the salience of online news, journalists continue to rely on offline (print) formats: 57% mostly use a 'mixed' format of both online and offline models, and 29% are mostly offline. This is commensurate with the consumption habits for journalistic content in the UK, which confirms that, compared with other countries, the level of engagement with online news is overall very low.[23]

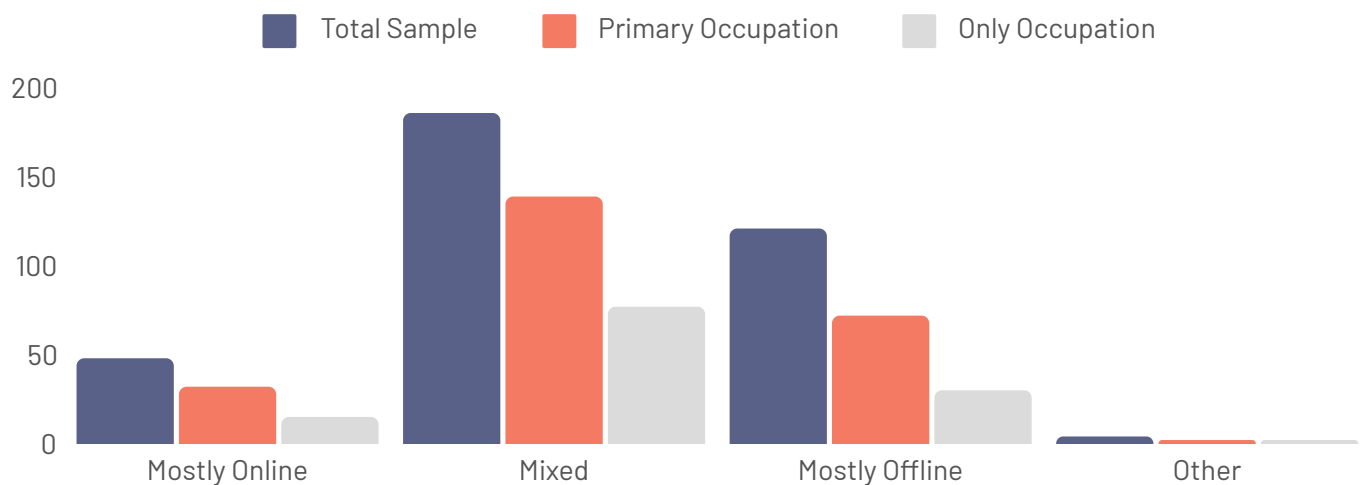


Figure 17: Observations and percentages of journalists by format of publication

[23] <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2023/dnr-executive-summary>



Earnings



In general, journalism has become a much more unstable and challenging profession. It is not well rewarded - and I'm one of the luckier ones. I've never felt secure in 35 years. Every day doing the job is a small victory.

Typical earnings from journalism

The typical income from freelance journalism activities of primary occupation journalists is £17,500 per annum (in the tax year ending 5 April 2023). Assuming a 35-hour work week, this is less than the equivalent UK annual minimum wage.[24]

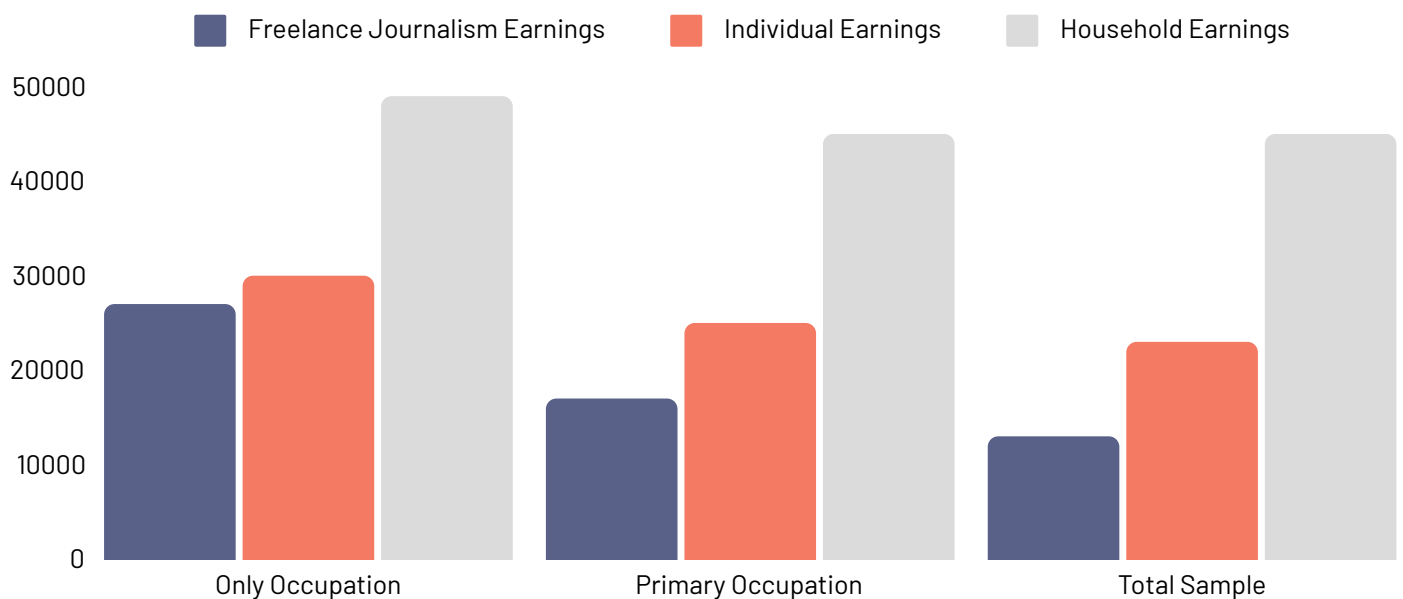


Figure 18: Typical (median) incomes of journalists across all samples (in GBP)

[24] <https://www.gov.uk/national-minimum-wage-rates>



Freelance journalism is not a lucrative career by comparison.

Given this low earning profile, journalists supplement their income with additional paid work (which may or may not be adjacent to journalism), increasing their typical income to a more palatable £25,500. This number almost doubles from the provision of other members of their household to increase the median overall household income to £45,000.

As we would expect, for those for whom freelance journalism is their only occupation, they earn considerably more at £27,000. What is more curious is the levelling out of income – stagnating at individual and household level between £24,000 – £30,000, and £45,000 – £49,000 respectively. Given that most journalists are based in London, it is notable that the £45,000 total figure for the household is close to the average individual earnings for full time employees in 2023 (£44,370).[25] In this context, freelance journalism is not a lucrative career by comparison.

[25] <https://www.statista.com/statistics/416139/full-time-annual-salary-in-the-uk-by-region/>



As this is the first survey of its kind, we have limited access to longitudinal data to determine the earning trajectory. Preliminary evidence from our Authors’ Earnings 2022 report (capturing data for the tax year ending 5 April 2021) indicated that the median earnings for journalists in the individual sample was £25,000, suggesting a small increase of £500 per annum since that time. Indeed, when we asked journalists as to whether they perceived their income as increasing or decreasing year-on-year, the majority reported that it had stayed the same (25%). In the context of an annual inflation rate of around 9% over that period, this is akin to a pay-cut.

As indicated above, the distribution of income in cultural markets is highly skewed. At freelance level the top 10% of earners earn 37.31% of the total earnings pie – less extreme than in the market for writers surveyed in 2022 where the top 10% earned 47%. and the top 1% earned 7.69% of total earnings.

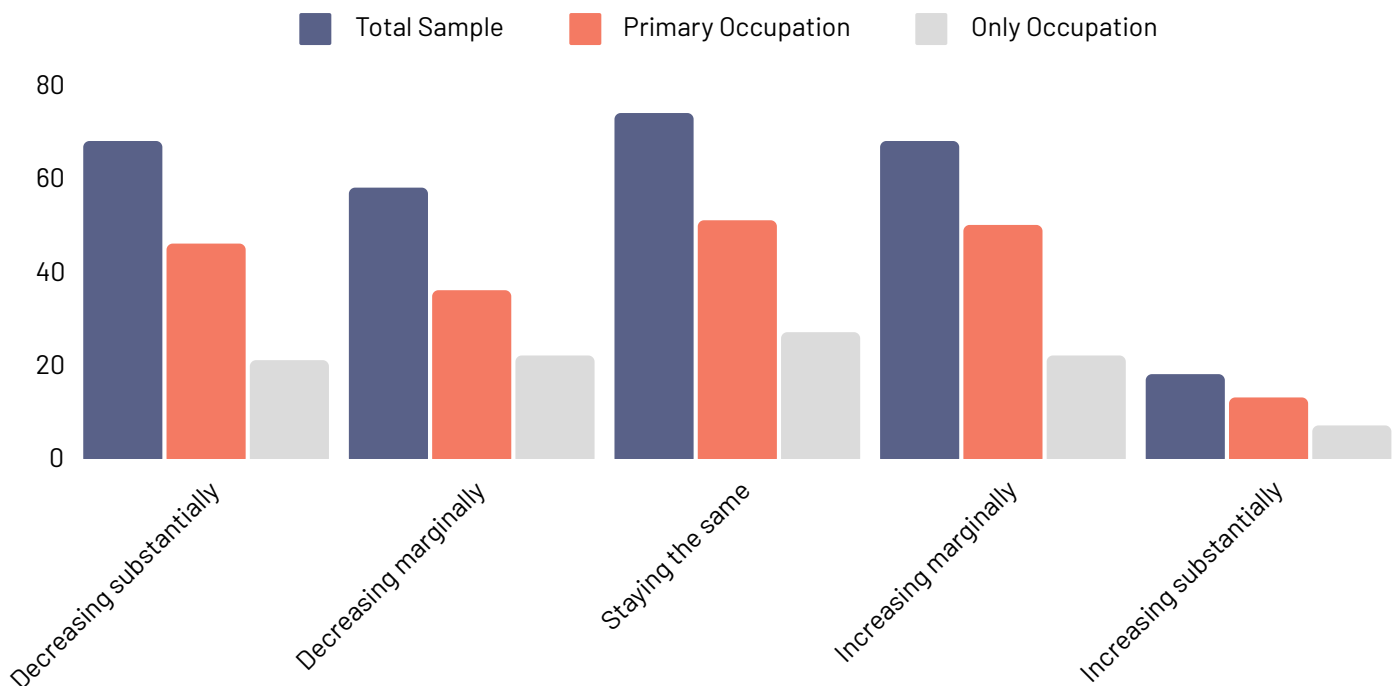


Figure 19: Self-perception of year-on-year journalistic income across all samples



Sources of earnings

We asked respondents to rank (on a scale of 1 – 10, with 1 being the most important, and 10 being the least important) the most important sources of their freelance earnings. We find that, across all three samples, one-off payments from publishers are on average, the most important source of freelance earnings, followed by appearances, lectures and talks, secondary licensing fees and royalties. By contrast, many contemporary routes to payment, memberships and subscriptions from readers, online platform revenue shares, and ‘influencer’ income, are among the least important sources.

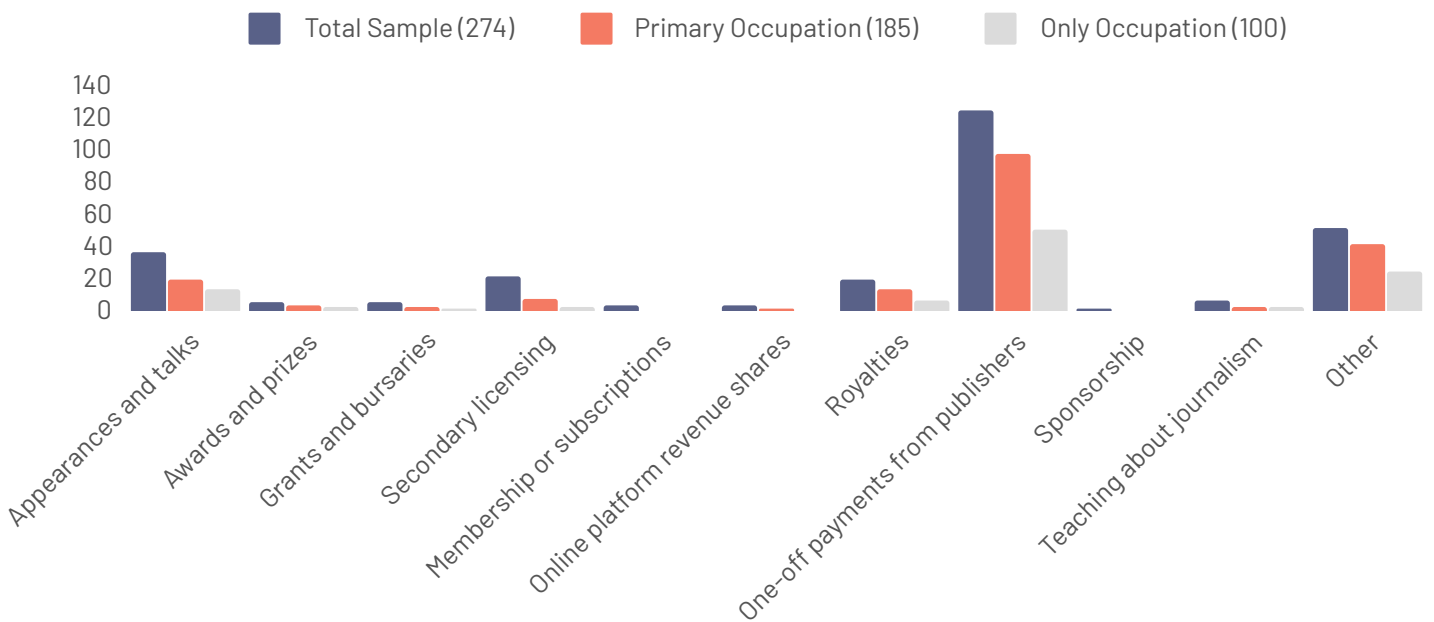


Figure 20: Observations of most important sources of journalistic income for primary occupation journalists

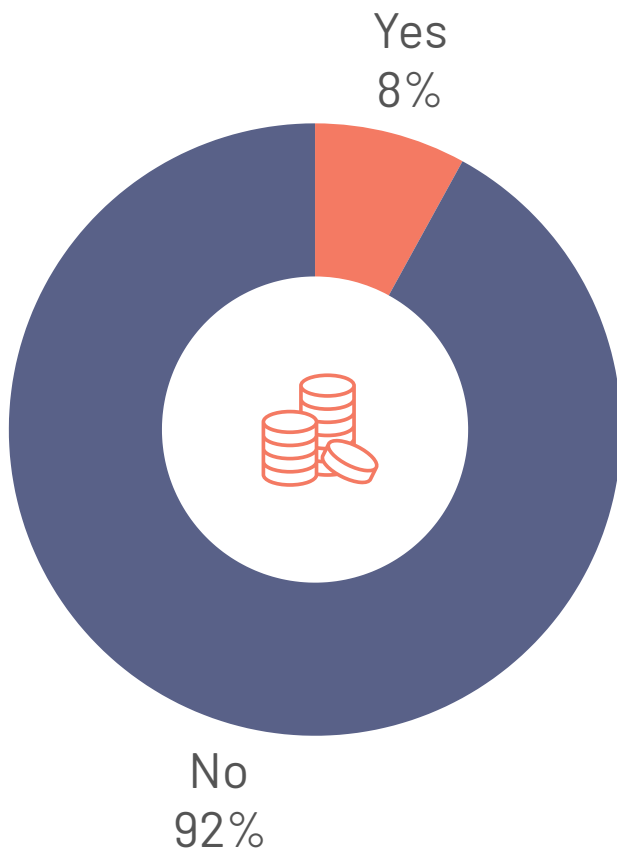
On the face of it, the relative importance of secondary licensing fees (e.g., from ALCS) is surprising, given that the scope for remuneration to journalists is narrowly applied – specifically secondary licensing fees are available for magazine articles but does not cover periodicals like newspapers or (an issue that was brought up recurrently in qualitative responses to the survey) online articles. We highlight that, when contextualised alongside the relative importance of e.g., one-off payments from publishers as the most important source of earnings (52%), secondary licensing remains a very low comparator (4%). Further, this relative importance may in turn be explained by the salience of offline methods of publishing for UK journalism, making magazine articles still an ongoing source of earnings.



Payments from platforms

An important, and undocumented, potential source of income are those payments made to journalists as a result of licensing agreements between news publishers and online platforms, such as Google and Facebook, for the use of journalistic content on their services. Whilst there is no legal regime that mandates this for UK-based publications, UK-based journalists may nonetheless have received a payment from these licensing agreements if they have published content with a relevant online platform.

We found that only the minority of freelance journalists have ever received a payment from these licensing agreements – between 5% and 8% across all samples. From those who said yes, the typical payment was characterised in qualitative responses as a figure ‘per item’. After cleaning the data, we calculated a median payment of £500 per annum as a result of these licensing agreements.



	Total Sample	Primary Occupation	Only Occupation
Yes (%)	7.97	6.94	5.43
No (%)	92.03	93.06	94.57

Figure 21: Pie chart showing percentages of journalists in total sample who have received a payment as a result of a licensing agreement between press publishers and online platforms



In seeking to contextualise these earnings within the overall monetary value of UK news used by digital platforms, it is notable that empirical evidence in this area is lacking.[26] However, indicative figures from Australia on the amounts negotiated between press publishers and digital platforms, as a result of a compulsory bargaining code, offers some insight.[27] These findings indicate a variance in yearly payments from digital platforms of around £16,000 to smaller publishers, to upwards of £2.5 million per annum to the largest publishers. The comparative 'slice' being paid to UK journalists in this context does indeed appear relatively small by comparison, but further research is needed to assess whether in context (e.g., to size of outlet from which the payment was made, the size or number of contributions of the journalist), this is proportionate.



Figure 22: Typical (median) earnings of journalists who have received a payment as a result of licensing agreements between press publishers and online platforms, across all samples

We expected that most payees from these licensing agreements would be located outwith the UK, or more frequently publish in international outlets or online formats than the broader freelance sample. However, their demographic and professional profiles closely resemble the 'typical' trajectories we find with other respondents. Nor do we find that the ability to benefit from these payments is associated with a much higher income.

These findings suggest that there is no strategy within the scope of the variables of this survey – in choice of journalistic area, outlet etc. – that makes a journalist more or less likely to benefit from a payment as a result of these licensing agreements. The reasoning behind the method of distribution of these payments thus remains rather opaque.

[26] See preliminary evidence here: https://newsmediauk.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Value_of_UK_News_to_Digital_Platforms_-_Final.pdf and <https://pressgazette.co.uk/platforms/meta-to-end-facebook-news-tab-stop-funding-community-news-project/> which indicates that individuals on the Community News Programme in the UK were paid around £51,000 over 22 months from Meta (noting that the programme has been since withdrawn)

[27] <https://www.statista.com/statistics/416139/full-time-annual-salary-in-the-uk-by-region/>



Factors affecting earnings

Age



I have loved my work and know the huge importance of journalism but, sadly, would hesitate to encourage a young person today to become a freelancer.

Journalists between the ages of 45-54 typically earn the most (£27,250). As with the overall low respondent numbers of very young and very old journalists overall, it is unsurprising that these categories also earn lower amounts on average (£22,500 and £13,750 respectively). This is a similar trajectory to the broader writing population in the UK.

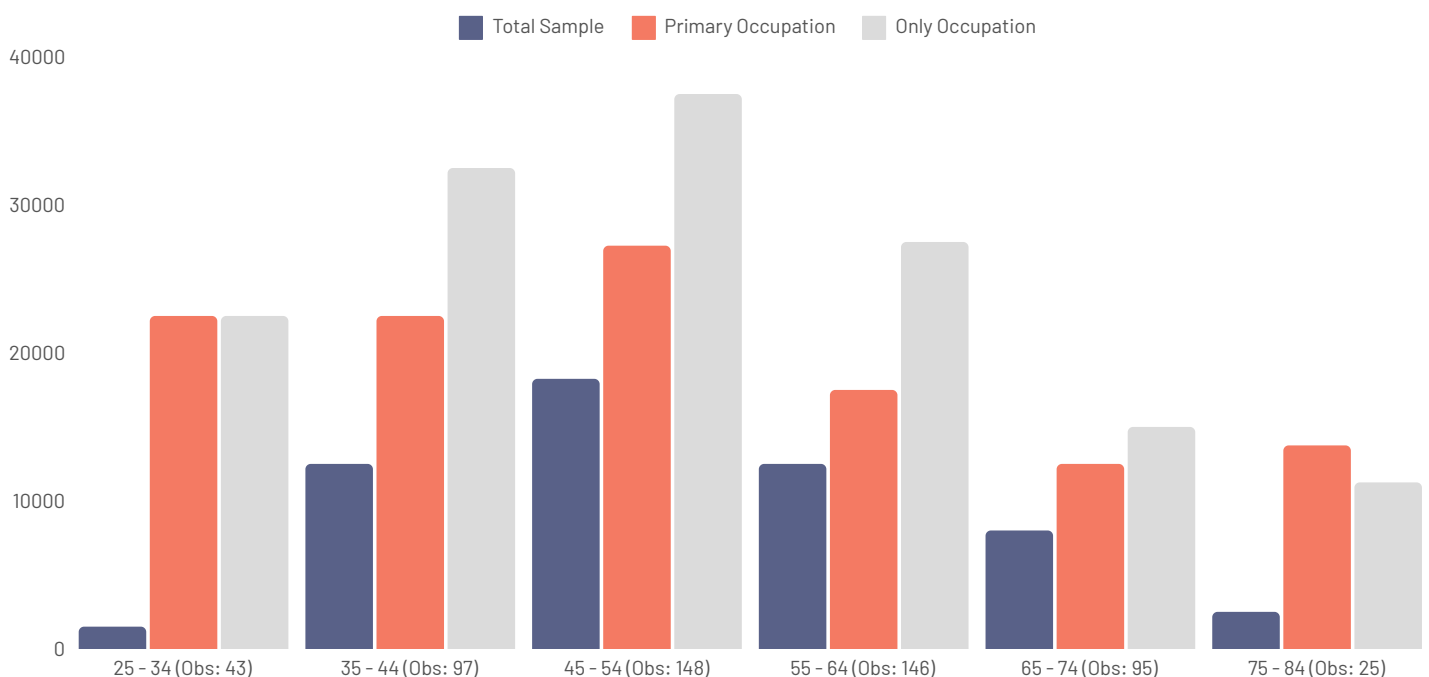


Figure 23: Typical (median) income of journalists by age group across all samples



Background



Everyone seems to assume you've got a private income – so class is a factor. It makes me furious.

Journalists from more privileged backgrounds earn more (£22,500 from professional backgrounds, and £26,250 from intermediate) compared with journalists from lower socio-economic backgrounds, who can comparatively expect to earn up to £12,500 – nearly half compared with those from more privileged backgrounds.

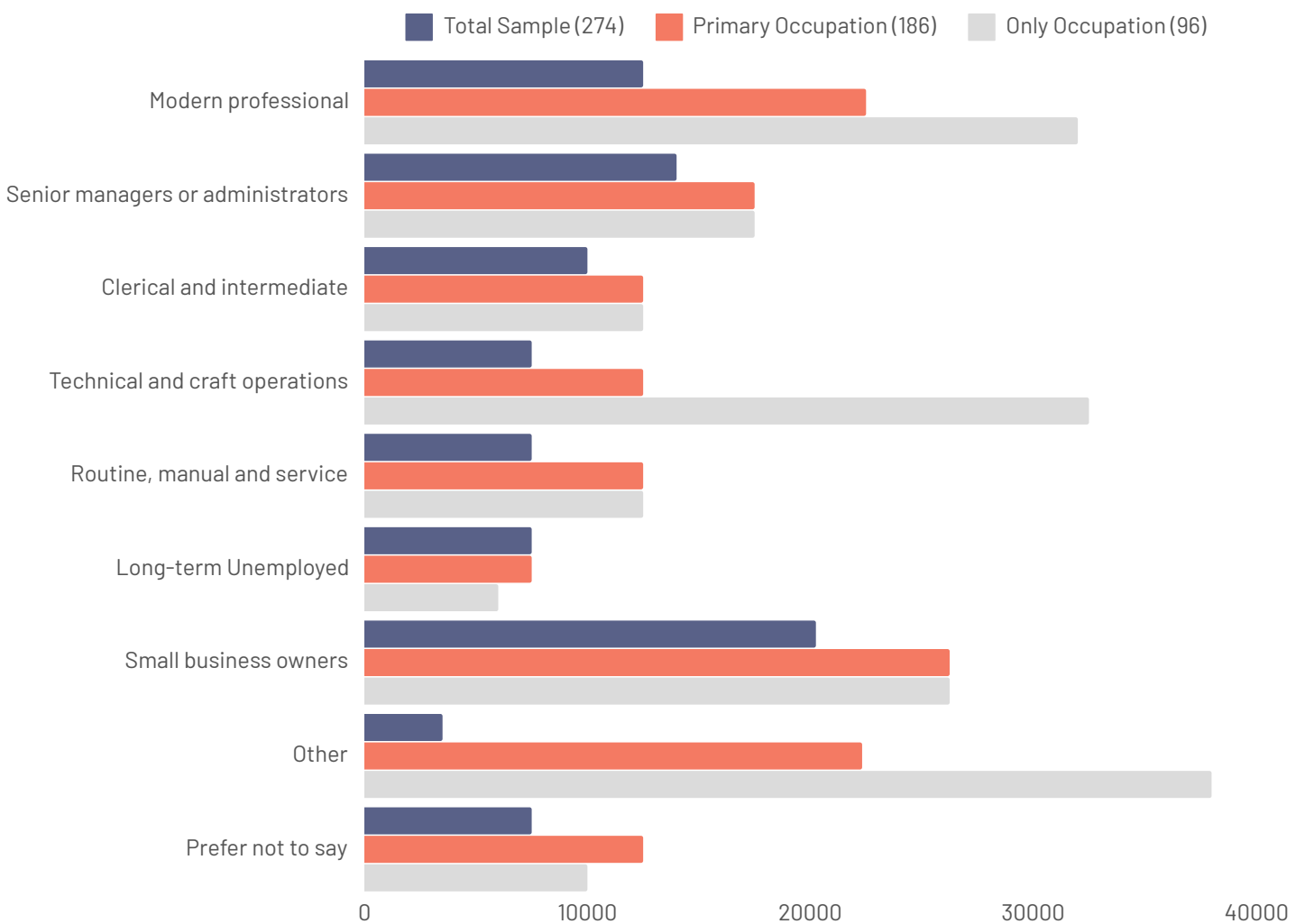


Figure 24: Typical (median) income of journalists by socio-economic background across all samples



Disability



There's a great deal of invisible exclusion, masked a lot by performative inclusion.

Journalists with disabilities earn less than able-bodied journalists, typically earning £11,250 compared with £17,500.

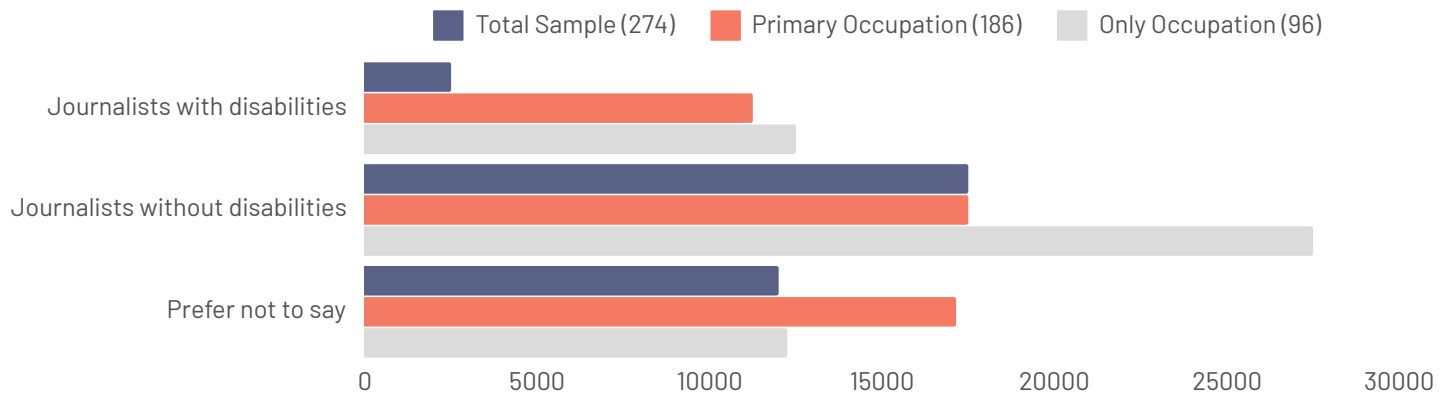


Figure 25: Typical (median) income of journalists by disability status across all samples

Education



You shouldn't have to be friends, or University or Groucho club buddies with your publisher. The job is between you and the client and should be emotionally unloaded.

There is a sliding scale in earnings of journalists with those who have higher degrees of education earning more than those with lower levels. At the highest levels, those journalists with a Masters or PhD will typically earn £22,500, compared to those whose highest level of education was in secondary school (£12,750).

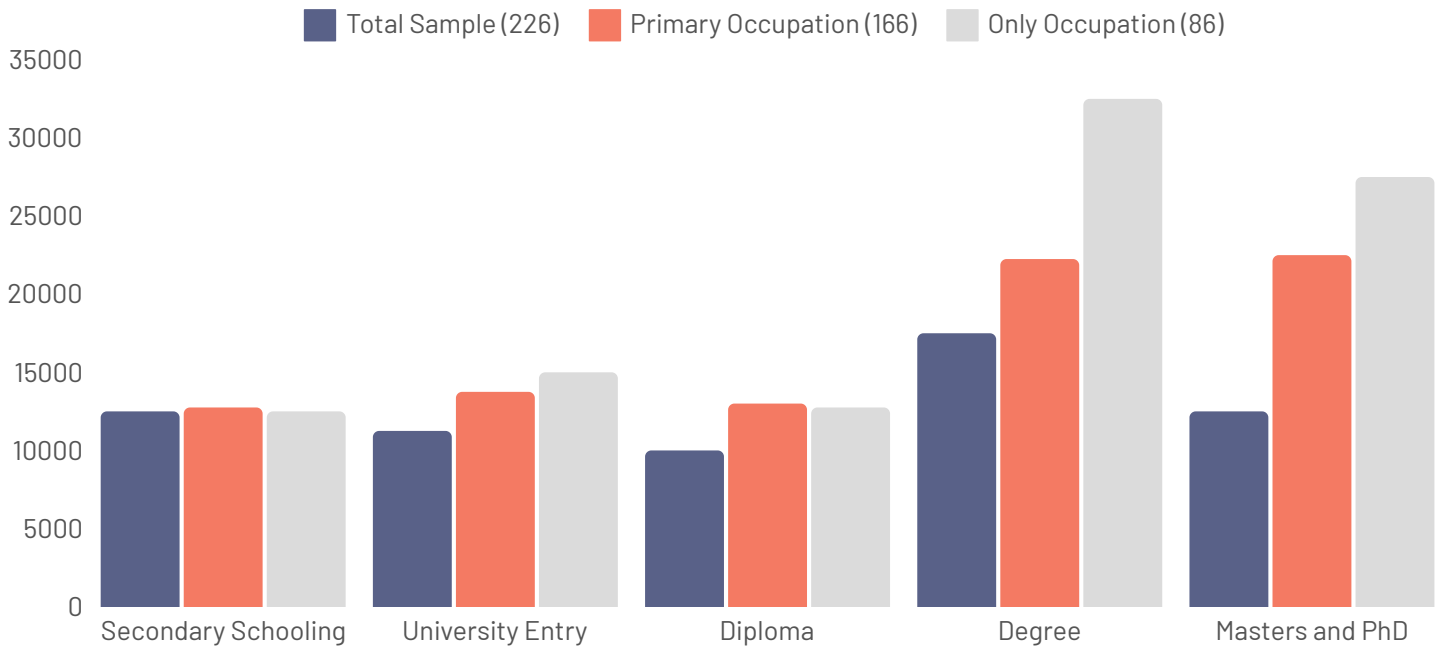


Figure 26: Typical (median) income of journalists by highest level of education across all samples

Ethnicity



There are an increasing number of competitions and publishers who actively want to work with people of colour. My colour doesn't count.

Whilst we caution that there is a very small number of minority ethnicities represented in these survey findings, there is nonetheless a sizable earnings gap between white journalists (£17,500) and black journalists (£2,500). Despite the encouraging findings of diversity elsewhere in this survey (especially for gender and sexual orientation), this systematic factor appears to be pervasive in both excluding, and not sustaining, black journalism. Whilst the quote above from one of our respondents suggests that more opportunities may be being offered to journalists of colour, it is not clear that the economic benefits are in fact trickling down.

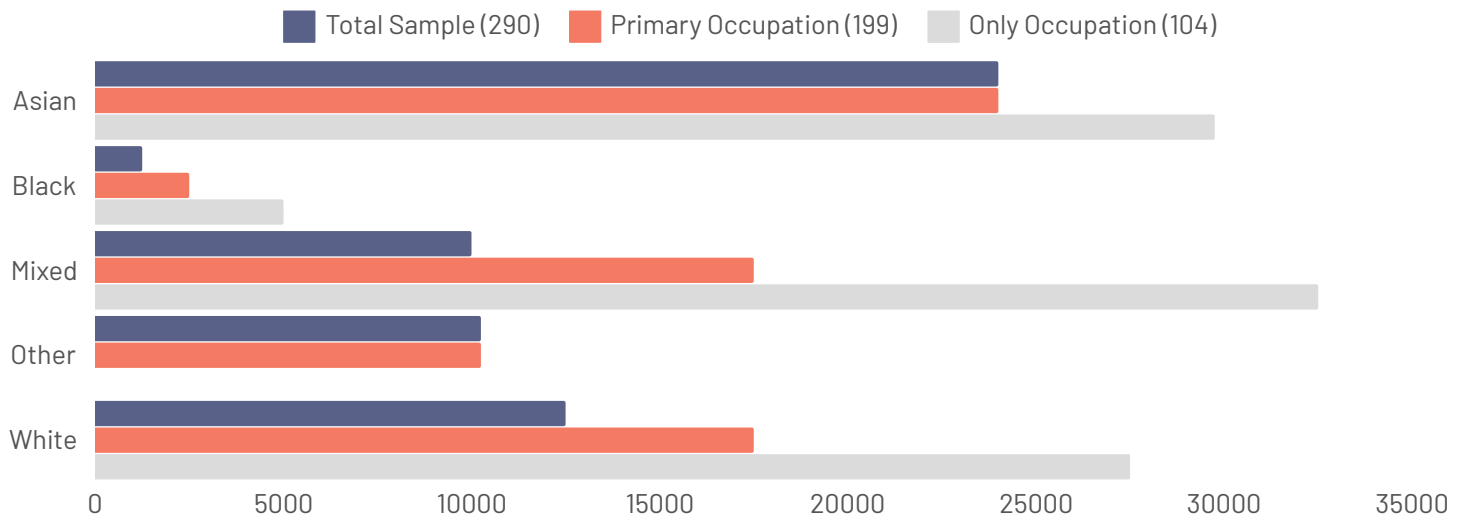


Figure 27: Typical (median) income of journalists by ethnic group across all samples

Gender



There is a lack of career opportunities in the industry, particularly for post career break women who are forced into a freelance work pattern due to non-existent jobs and gender-based discrimination.

We find a reverse gender gap, with cisgender women earning more than cisgender men (£18,000 compared with £17,500). Again cautioning on the very low number of respondents in this category, trans (merged) journalists earn less than half by comparison (£7,505). This is a similar pattern as we observed in our study of indie authors, which we attributed to a lack of cultural ‘gatekeeper’, especially if self-publishing, as being potentially more enabling for certain demographic groups.[28] However, the quote above, from one of our respondents, also suggests a cyclical effect caused by broader problems in the industry: women are more present, and thus more likely to be better paid, because of a lack of opportunities in more stable employment.

[28] <https://www.create.ac.uk/blog/2023/06/21/indie-authors-earnings-2023-the-first-global-study-published/>

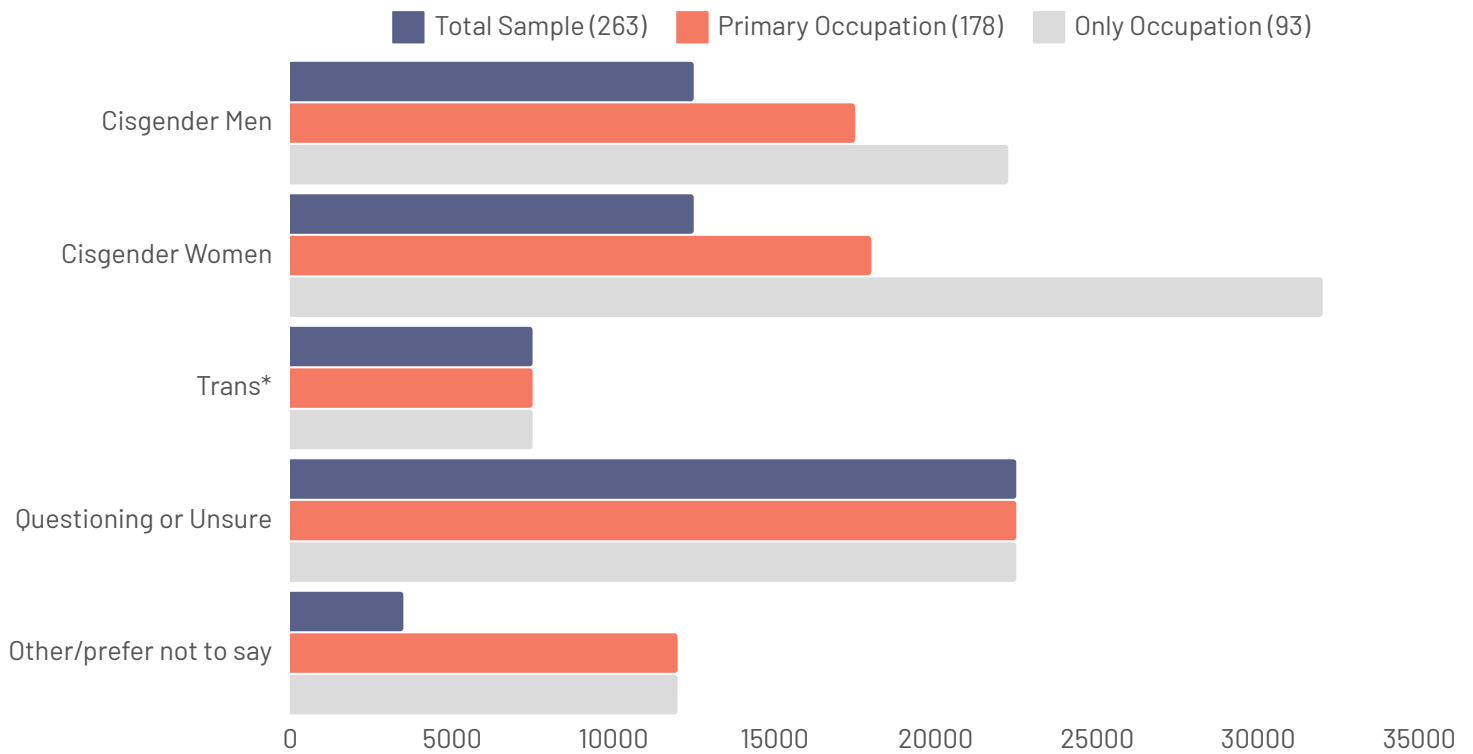


Figure 28: Typical (median) income of journalists by gender across all samples

To give further explanatory difference to the difference in earnings between genders (which differs significantly from the broader writing population in the UK), we explored differences in the primary areas of journalism worked in by cisgender men and women. We confirm that certain areas of journalism are indeed ‘gendered’: lifestyle and fashion and tourism are dominated by cisgender women; whereas, photography, technology and sport are the domain of cisgender men. The population of cisgender men in photography (nearly 80% of the sample) is of particular note given the inherent differences this causes for the mode of work (image-based, rather than text), and differences in outlets. Indeed, we find above that photographers earn substantially less than the typical income of a freelance journalist at £10,000 per annum. There may indeed be other gender-based discriminatory factors exacerbating this, but on the face of it, this may be more indicative of differences in earning factors in this particular mode of journalism.

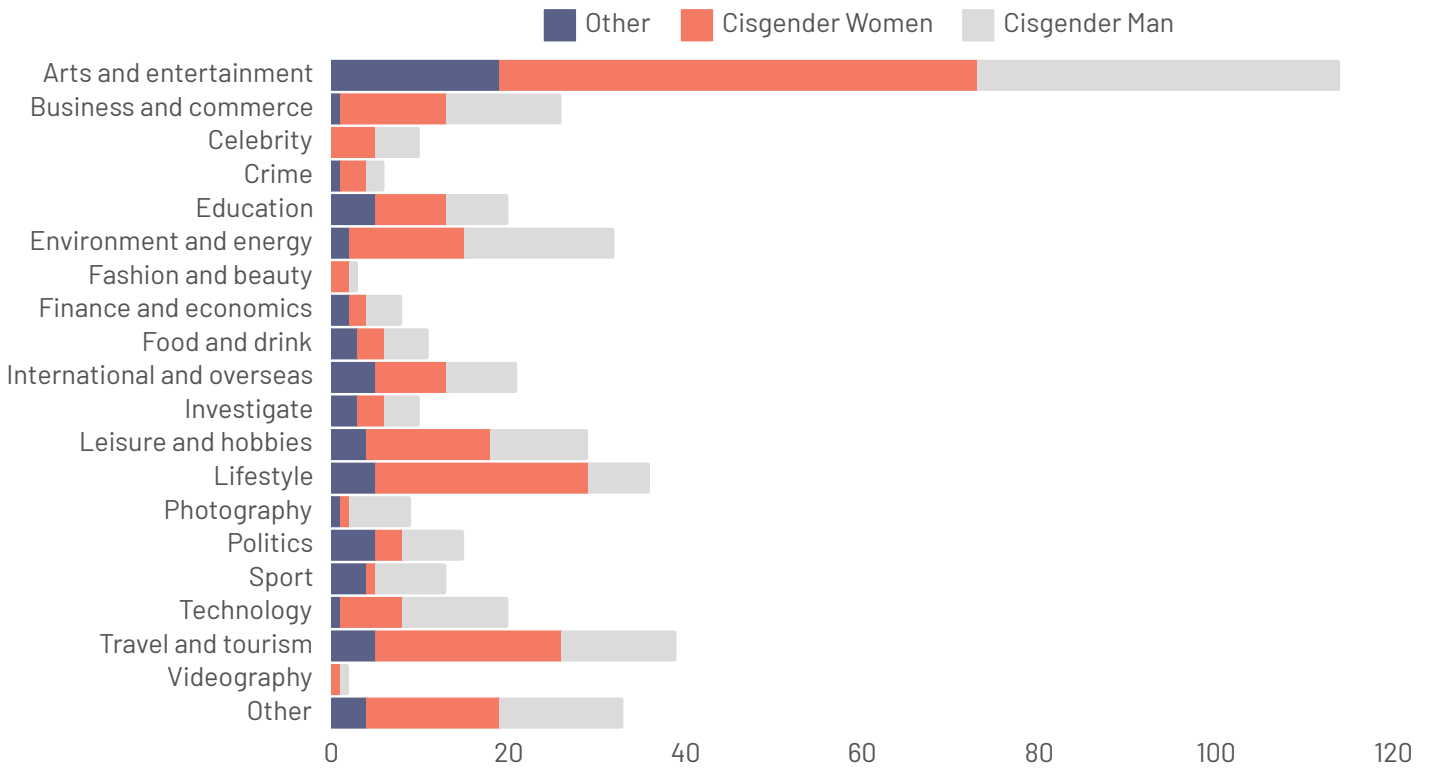


Figure 29: Percentage of primary areas of journalism by gender

Sexual orientation

LGBTQIA+ journalists earn slightly more (£18,000) than their heterosexual counterparts (£17,500). These findings indicate a similar trajectory as our study of independent authors, as also noted above with gender, as potentially being a more enabling environment for marginalised groups. [29]

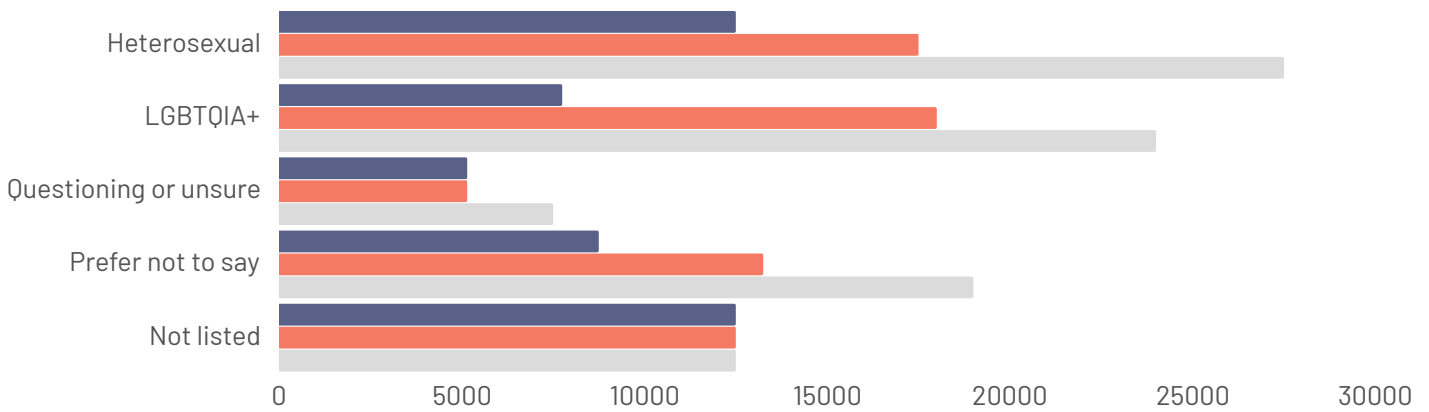


Figure 30: Typical (median) income of journalists by sexual orientation across all samples

[29] <https://www.create.ac.uk/blog/2023/06/21/indie-authors-earnings-2023-the-first-global-study-published/>



Location



There are incredibly low rates for UK publishers - I make the lion's share of my income from US based publications.

Journalists based in England and Scotland (each typically earning £17,500) earn more than those based outside of the UK (£15,000). Whilst there are very few Welsh respondents, their earnings are, typically, the lowest of all groups – just £3,000 per annum.

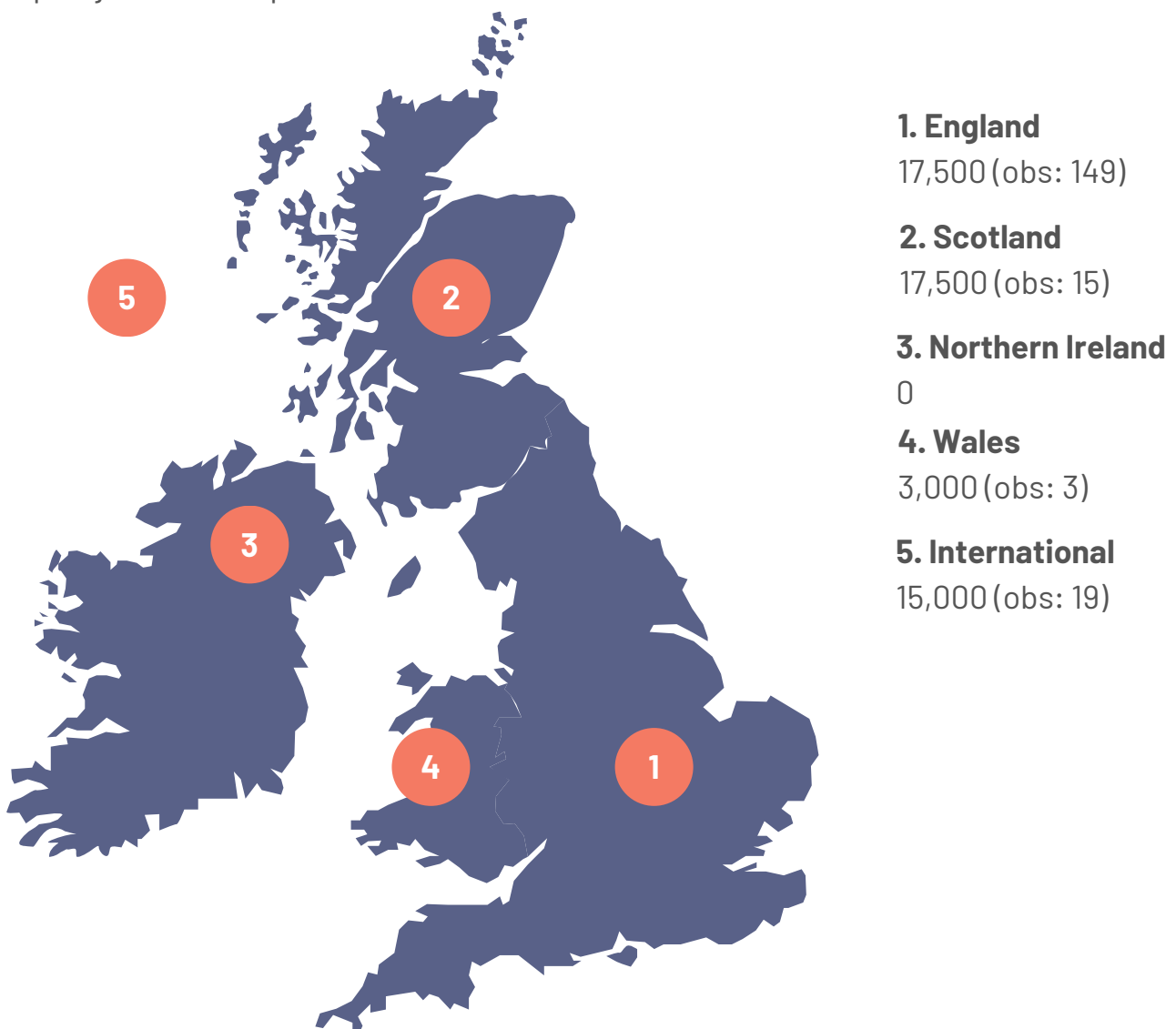


Figure 31: Typical (median) income of primary occupation journalists by location (in GBP)



Areas of journalism



The combined effect of Brexit and the pandemic have slashed my foreign travel from which a fair proportion of my freelance earnings was derived. At the same time, these changes have badly affected arts publications; a number of magazines have folded or gone online.

Despite being the most popular area of journalism, journalists in arts and entertainment do not receive the highest income overall (typically £17,500). Whilst very few journalists occupy videography, it is very well paid by comparison (typically £51,500). Comparatively, education (£2,500) and sport (£8,000) make for some of the lowest earning areas of journalism.

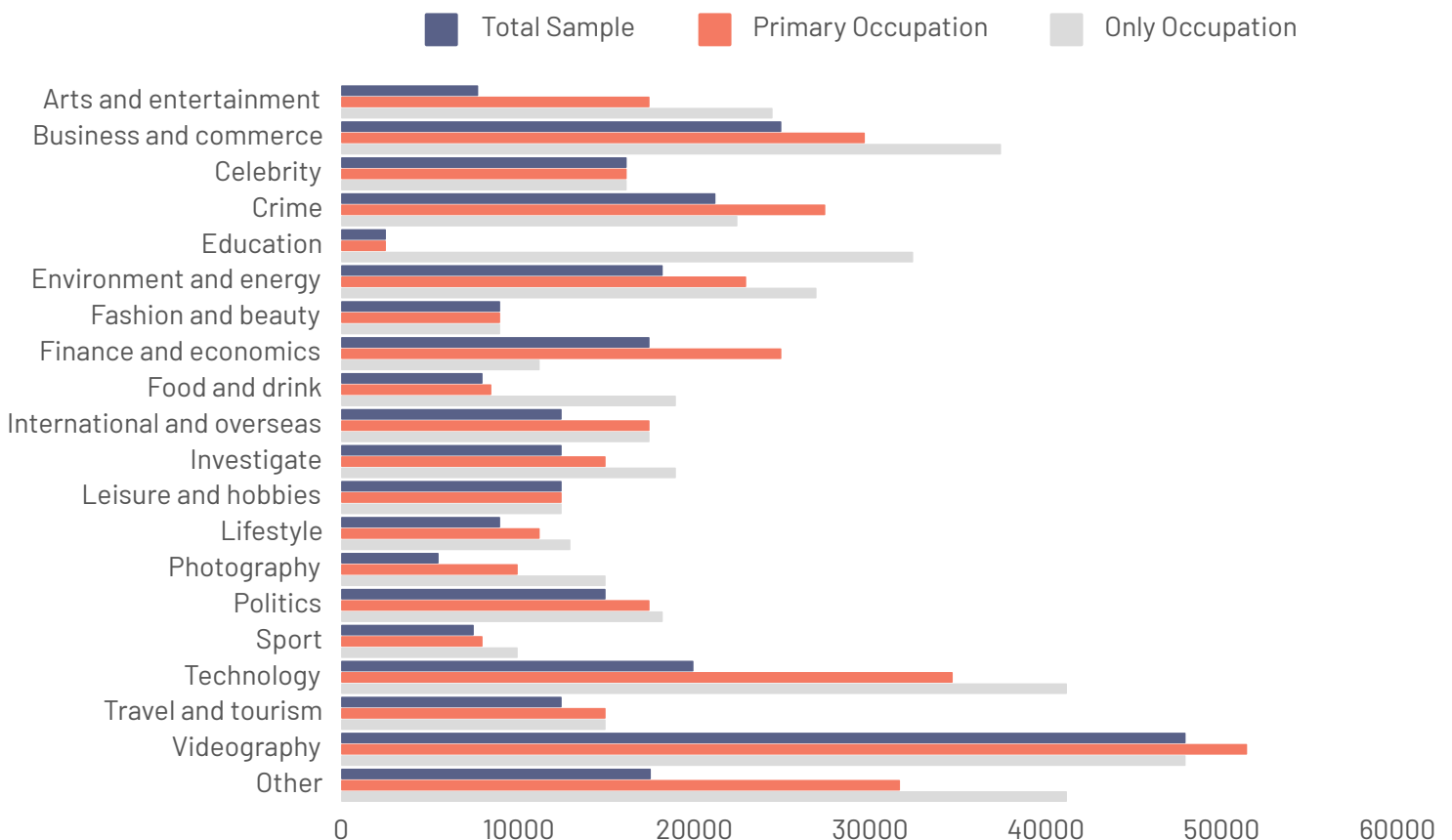


Figure 32: Typical (median) income of journalists by primary area of journalism across all samples



Main activities



It's a compromise between what I'd *love* to do (spend all my time pitching and writing for national/international media) and what pays my bills (trade magazines, commercial work, consultancy).

As with our assessment of the main areas in journalism, we likewise find that the most predominant activity is not the most profitable: journalists who spend most of their time writing earn less than those who spend their time editing (£17,500 compared with £22,500 respectively). Sophisticated multimedia development journalists can expect to earn the most of all categories (£27,500).



Figure 33: Typical (median) income of journalists by primary journalistic activity across all samples



Main outlets



I'm concerned that the ways in which I honed my trade over the years - writing for local magazines - will become increasingly difficult for future writers. The future of journalism in the UK will be in increasingly dire straits.

Journalists working mostly for international (£22,500) and 'other' (£28,750) outlets earn more than national (£17,500). Commensurate with the decline in availability and funding for local outlets, income from these is comparatively lower (£12,750). International outlets are likely to be mostly anglophone.

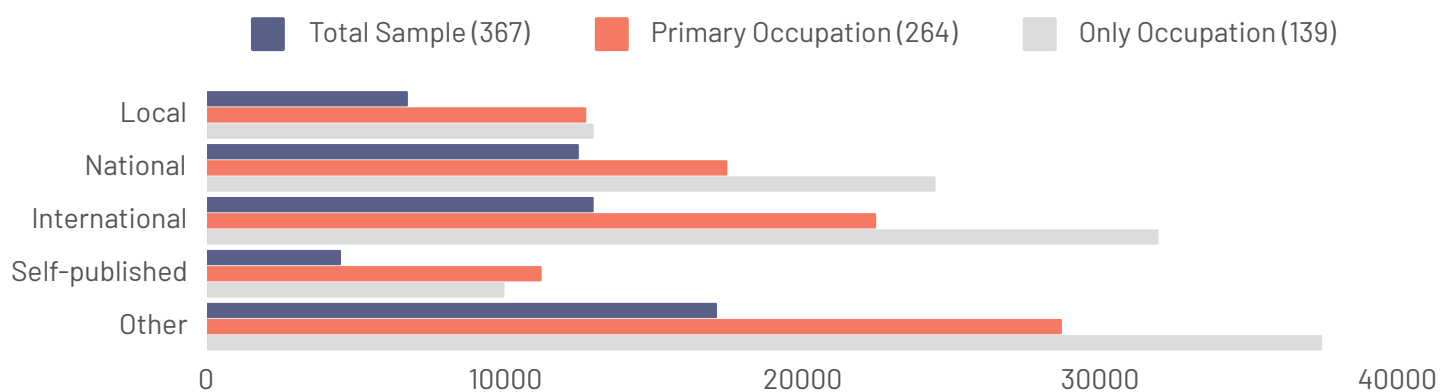


Figure 34: Typical (median) income of journalists by main outlets published in across all samples

Main formats



I think most tragically is that we live in an information age where what we print is effectively free—which means that there's so much digital noise being put out that it can feel impossible to be heard.



Journalists who use mostly online formats (£32,250) earn more than those who use mixed (£19,500). As we would expect with the decline of print only publications, offline formats account for the least earnings (£12,500).

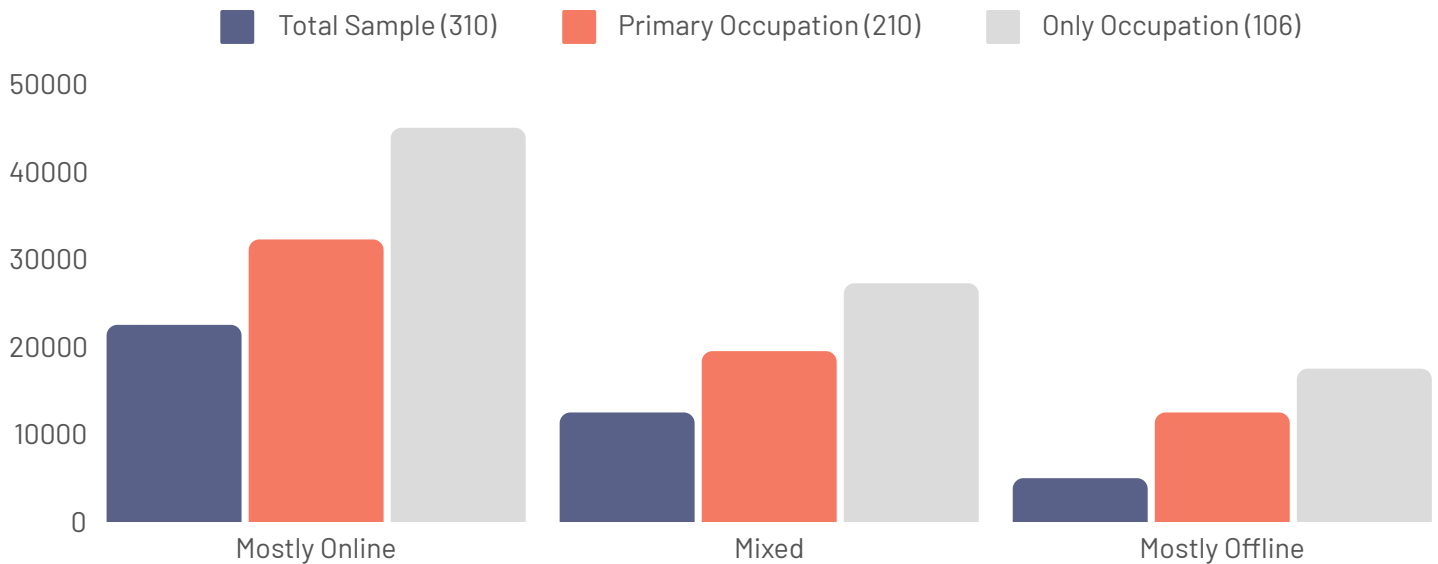


Figure 35: Typical (median) income of journalists by main format of publication across all samples

What do journalists say affects their earnings?



As AI grows more sophisticated, I grow more concerned that the journalism that we were trained to do, that we have spent years honing, could become extinct. I've had colleagues laugh about how my job will be extinct in a few years. They might be right.

Our survey gave journalists an opportunity to explain, in their own words, their own perception of the most significant matters impacting their earnings.



Most frequently, journalists assess the stagnation of 'rates' offered by news publishers, whether per job or per word, as not being commensurate with the degree of time and labour spent on their work, and in the context of rising costs of inflation and the cost of living. Journalists also note that changes to payment points – particularly payment on publication policies – are problematic both for increasing the risk borne by the journalist in the event their work is not used, and as disproportionately affecting those journalists covering controversial or hard-hitting topics, which are less likely to be published.



The democratisation of content creation has led to an expectation that content can be created for free.

The shift to online journalism, and corresponding 'rise of the citizen journalist', are also evident concerns. Journalists believe that the democratisation of content creation has led to an expectation that content can be created for free (or as close to free as possible), effectively devaluing their profession and their professional experience; this correlates with their views that overall rates offered by news publishers have failed to take account of their time and skill, as it is simply 'not as valuable' when news can be reported by 'everyone and anyone'.

Some journalists report concerns that their work is being used by other platforms without their permission or payment and are particularly concerned about the risks of AI and 'scraping' of journalistic content. Given the nature of 'factual' reporting, this likewise leads to a concern that generative AI could potentially displace human, journalistic labour, if sufficiently trained on these inputs.



Contracts and copyright

“ I have no rights, it seems.

Whilst in previous standardised surveys we treat contract and copyright as distinct categories, in this industry, the terms are used interchangeably and have a highly interrelated relationship. In theory, copyright gives journalists a legal mechanism through which they can claim ownership and a route to financial recompense for the exploitation of their works. However, and throughout the responses to the survey, there is a perception that this right means very little in practice where they are malleable by publication contracts, which are often tilted disproportionately in favour of the commissioning party (e.g., the news publisher).

Types of contracts

“ Contracts are an endangered species

Given that the nature of journalism is responsive, and commissioned ‘off-cuff’ for a quick response to immediate issues, we anticipated that few journalists would receive a custom contract, or alternatively as a result of an ongoing relationship with an output, have a general understanding about the working conditions offered by particular publishers.



And indeed, most journalists have signed alternative ‘informal’ contracts (65% of primary occupation journalists), which have included off-hand emails or WhatsApp messages from commissioners. 40% of primary occupation journalists have conducted work with no contract at all.

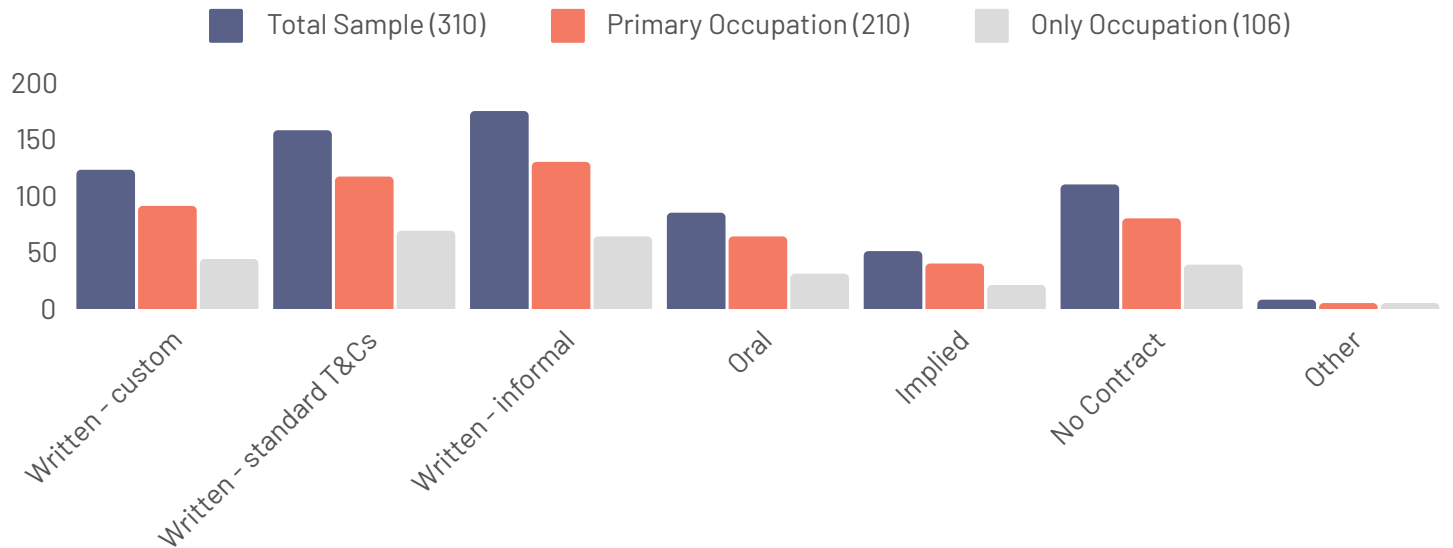


Figure 35: Observations of contract types signed by journalists across all samples

Given that contracts offer some form of stability for freelancers by formalising the commissioning process, it is unsurprising that those who have custom contracts earn the most (£22,500) compared with those who sign no contract at all (£17,323). We caution that there may be a cyclical relationship here between typical earnings and the ability to e.g., obtain potentially expensive legal advice – that is, if one earns more, one may be able to secure a custom contract, rather than vice-versa.

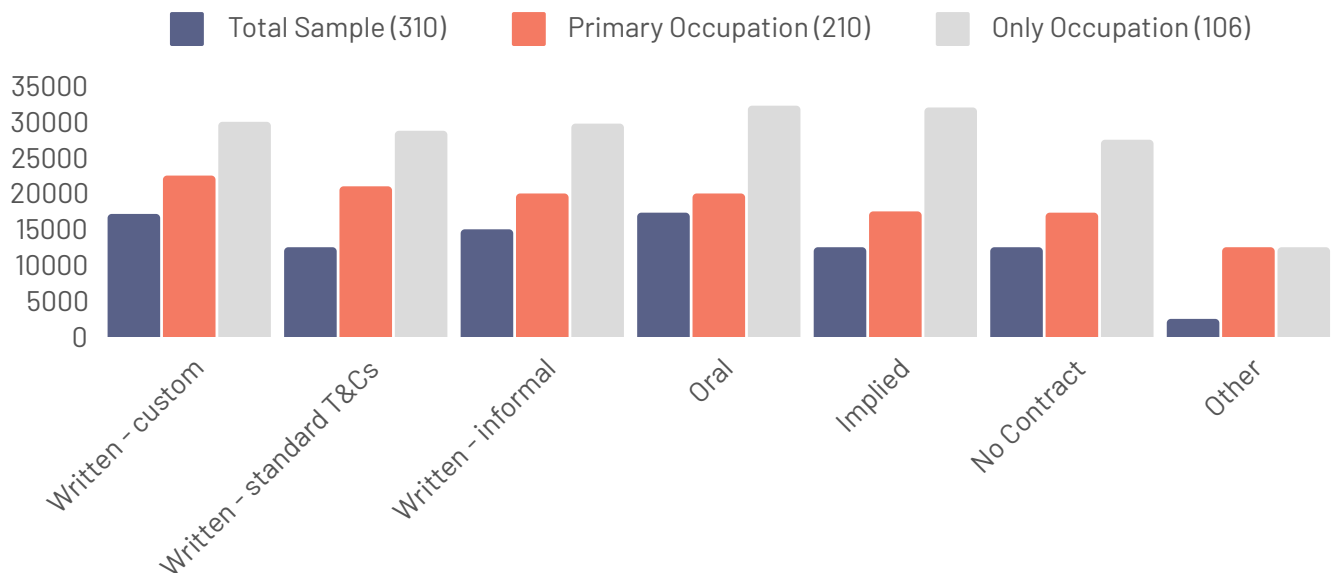


Figure 35: Typical (median) earnings by contract type across all samples



We also found indications that the format of contractual offering is sector specific. The frequency of 'no contract' is highest in arts and entertainment (19%), as are implied contracts (10%). Written custom contracts by contrast, are most frequent in business and commerce (23%), which is also a more affluent earnings source. Nonetheless, across areas of journalism, informal contracts appear to be a 'norm', making up approximately 25% of all kinds offered across all areas.

Negotiations



In staff jobs people get pay rises and promotions - or they change jobs and get an increased salary. As freelancers we just get paid the same rate. I think most freelancers are afraid to ask for more in case they aren't commissioned any more.

Most journalists have attempted to change or negotiate their contract (59%). The qualitative responses which give more detail on the attempted change indicate a wide variety of issues: payments and rates; duration of exclusivity clause; indemnification clauses; waivers of moral rights, and; changes from assignments of copyright to licensing.

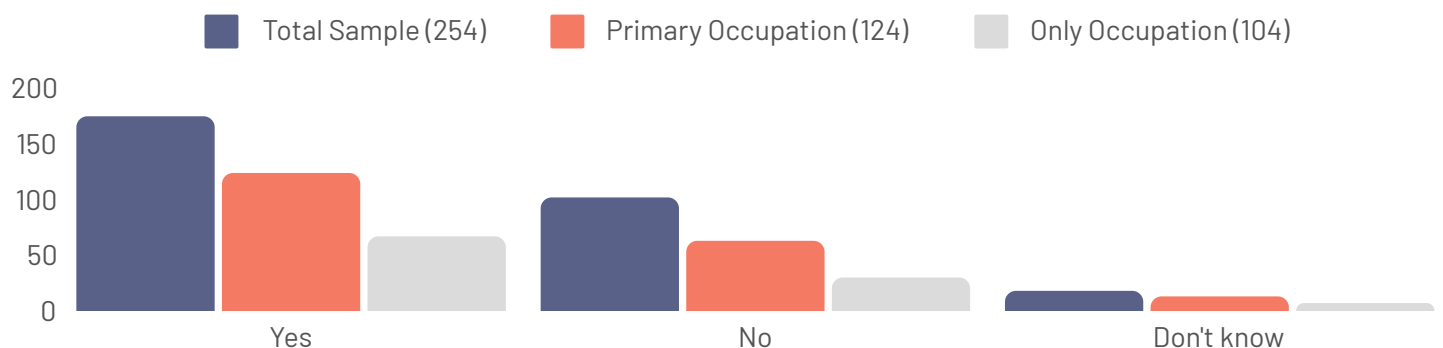


Figure 36: Frequency of negotiation attempts across all samples

Negotiations are most frequently attempted in finance and economics (86%) and technology (86%), whereas they are less frequently attempted in sport (45%) and arts and entertainment (51%).



Copyright ownership



The race for all rights, or copyright, is immensely frustrating.

In the UK, freelance journalists who work on commissioned projects own the copyright in their works by default, unless a contract specifies otherwise. We found that almost half of all primary occupation journalists had signed such an assignment clause (43%).

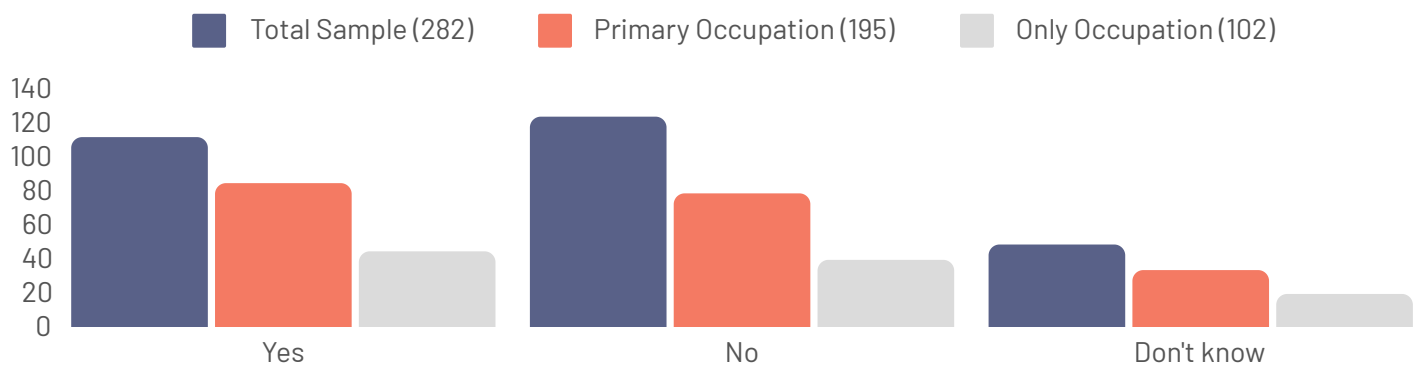


Figure 37: Observations of journalists who have or have not assigned their copyright across all samples

We found that trends in this area are highly sector specific, with assignment being very common for journalists in finance and economics (71%) and technology (79%), but very uncommon for journalists in celebrity (22%) and sports (27%) journalism.

Moral rights



Usually, people are happy to work just with a credit, which is sad.

Moral rights are included with the award of copyright and relate to the personal relationship an author has with their work. These can be important for how the work is presented and distributed, particularly online.



Moral rights in the UK include attribution (the right to be acknowledged as the author) and integrity (the right to object to derogatory treatment of a work). Both moral rights can also have an economic dimension if the author is associated with a work that jeopardises their reputation or earning ability (e.g., inappropriate credit lines making identification of the original author impossible). Notably, in the UK, the paternity right does not extend to newspapers, magazines, and other periodicals. Nonetheless it may still be applied as a community norm in this industry (e.g., being assured a credit or by-line for a contribution), or may affirmatively apply to other types of work which are journalistic, but not necessarily a periodical under the exclusion (e.g., a photograph).

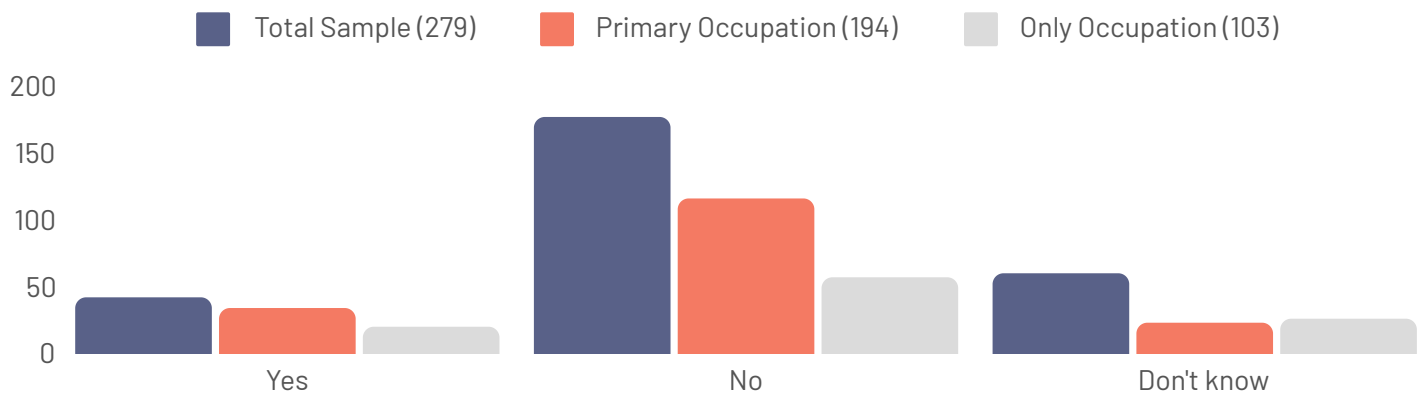


Figure 38: Observations of journalists who have or have not waived their moral rights across all samples

We find that only the minority of journalists waive their moral rights (18%), however a relatively high amount also 'don't know' (23%). This confirms suspicions raised in qualitative responses to the survey that indicate the exact rights conferred on journalists are 'opaque'.

Despite the capacity to affect earning potential, we find that those journalists who have waived their rights earn more than those who have not (£19,000 versus £15,000). However, we also find that trends to waive are highly sector specific, which may be more of an influential factor in overall earning potential. For example, moral rights waivers are fairly common in technology (50%) and business and commerce (48%), both high-earning categories in themselves, but much less common in sport (9%) and arts and entertainment (13%).

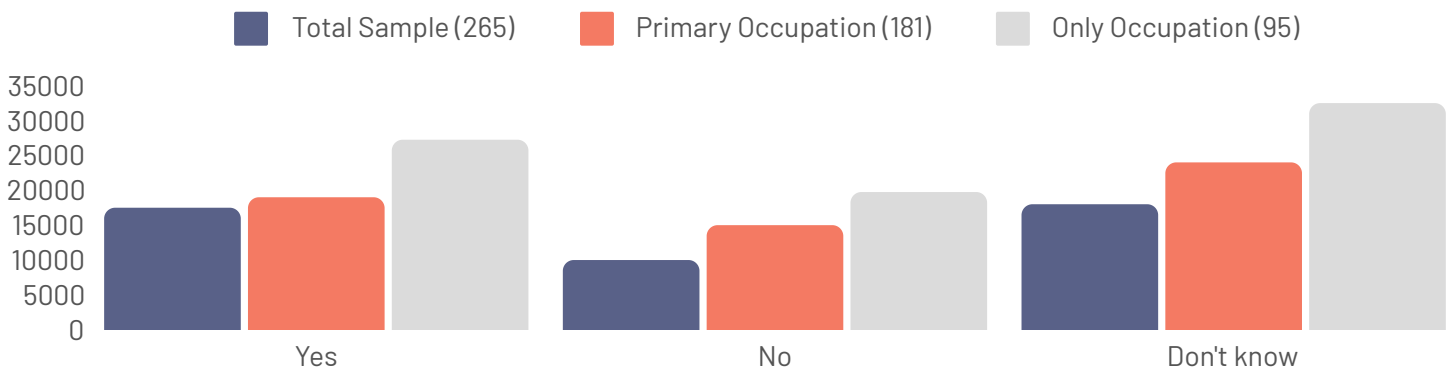


Figure 39: Typical (median) earnings of journalists who have or have not waived their moral rights across all samples

Re-using existing works



I have never had to consider copyright law, because I wouldn't use other people's work.

We asked journalists about their confidence in their knowledge of copyright, particularly in relation to their ability to use existing works, which we anticipated would be a frequent consideration in the industry (e.g., using a quote, or using an image), particularly given the salience of the copyright exception for using works for the purpose of reporting current events. And indeed, we find that most journalists (72%) feel confident that they know the conditions under which they can re-use existing works without permission or payment to their original authors.

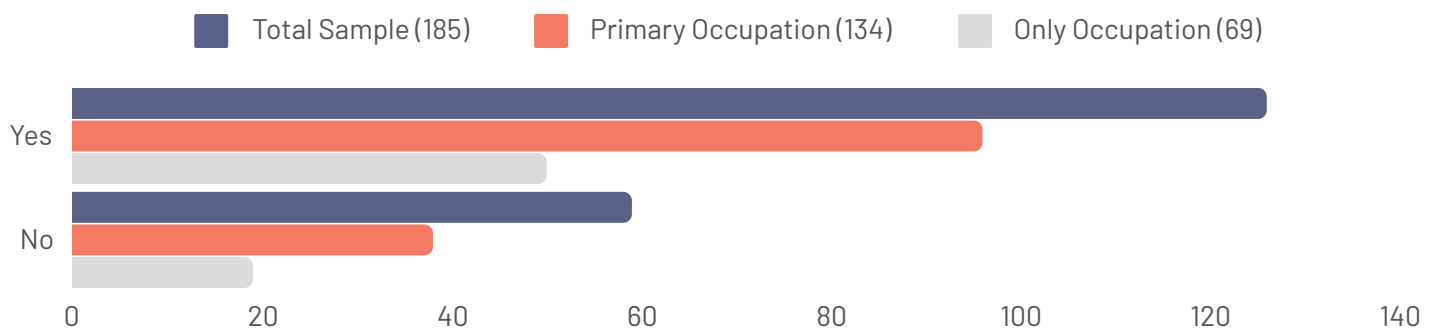


Figure 39: Observations of journalists who have or have not re-used existing works across all samples

In qualitative responses, we find that this confidence is mostly in relation to the use of openly licensed images under Creative Commons licences or the WikiCommons (and indeed, 100% of the photographers surveyed felt they were confident in their knowledge of copyright suggesting an interrelation between journalism, photography and copyright)



Other aspects of their knowledge is patchier and inconsistent – for example, some have a fairly good grasp of ‘public domain’ materials, but also (incorrectly) extend this to works made ‘publicly’ available on social media. There is muddier evidence still on the concept of potentially useful copyright exceptions, with a lack of clarity on ‘fair use’ and ‘transformative use’ (both US concepts). This evidence of inconsistent levels of knowledge of copyright potentially exposes freelancers to legal risks, particularly where (as the findings below suggest) the use of indemnification clauses are on the rise in commissioning contracts.

Exclusivity clauses



The standard clauses seem to require exclusive use of the text for all time.

Combining both elements of contract and copyright, exclusivity clauses are a time-barred permission for news publishers to have the sole right to publish and distribute journalistic content. We anticipated that, given the fast-paced and novel nature of news content, that these would be pervasive in the industry, and indeed find that almost half of journalists surveyed have signed an exclusivity clause (47%).



47%

Figure 39: Percentage of journalists who have signed an exclusivity clause across all samples

The longest period agreed to varies widely in qualitative responses, with the lowest reported as 6 months, whereas many others report ‘in perpetuity’ or ‘eternal’ exclusivity. Such clauses may have harmful effects on earning potential if they prevent a journalist from exploiting the content elsewhere with other outlets.



What do journalists worry about with contracts?



These are almost zero hour contracts that provide no stability for the future or families.

As with the broader topic of earnings generally, our survey gave journalists an opportunity to explain, in their own words, their own perception of the most worrying aspects of their freelancing contracts with news publishers.

The most striking finding from these responses echoes our quantitative findings about the format of contracts offered, which is to say that there often 'isn't one': many journalists report that any contract being offered is perceived as the exception rather than the rule in this industry. Many relationships are reported as being conducted 'in good faith' or based on previous working conditions offered.



The presence of a contract is not necessarily reassuring.

Nonetheless, journalists do not find that the presence of a contract is necessarily reassuring, finding that the trend towards non-negotiable, buy-out contracts offered in 'boilerplate' format is a more 'black and white' account of the power imbalance between them and the publisher. Whilst, for example, many journalists suggest that they are happy to agree to assign more rights in principle, they do not see the justification where rates are not also increased for a balanced 'trade-off'. In sum, journalists perceive publishers as 'exploiting' freelancers – particularly newer and younger freelancers looking to 'get a foot in the door' ('they know they've got us over a barrel').



Recommendations

Based on the key findings of this report, we offer a range of potential soft (non-legal) and hard (legal) interventions with a view to sustaining and improving the livelihoods of freelance journalists.

Soft (non-legal) interventions

Rights and contracts education. This report confirms a high level of uncertainty about the fragmented rights landscape for journalists, particularly in regards to rights assignment and waivers of moral rights, both of which may have important implications for routes to earnings. Existing digital resources (such as Copyright User UK) may assist in equipping journalists with the knowledge to leverage their work effectively.

Reducing barriers to access for marginalised demographic groups. This report confirms that specific demographic groups continue to be excluded from journalism, and particularly we highlight the risk that the profession risks becoming the exclusive remit of the 'privileged', excluding participation for workers from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Active, supportive advocacy may be needed at the early stages in a prospective journalists' career.



Hard (legal) interventions

Compulsory negotiation requirements between digital platforms and press publishers. This intervention was initially suggested in the UK's 2019 Cairncross review and similar 'bargaining codes' have since been employed in both Australia and Canada. In considering this intervention and with reference to the findings of this report, we emphasise that any such mechanism should apply equally to all rightsholders, including journalists as well as publishers.

Changes to copyright legislation. Strategies to improve the earnings of journalists forms a part of a broader conversation on unwaivable rights for fair and proportionate remuneration in respect of creative works, of which journalistic content forms part.[30] The establishment of clearer rights for the use of journalistic content for emerging secondary use markets should be considered in tandem with this, which may in turn enable more holistic collective bargaining and licensing (and thus, routes to payment).

Establishment of a freelance commissioner. The creation of a distinct quasi-governmental role to facilitate discussions between freelancers (broadly conceived) and the UK government has been raised by policymakers.[31] Given the shift towards freelancing in journalistic production, creating a central point for regular dialogues and reporting may assist with a more responsive approach to live issues (e.g., contract practices).

[30] https://pec.ac.uk/policy_briefing_entr/authors-earnings-in-the-uk/

[31] <https://hansard.parliament.uk/lords/2023-06-15/debates/DD5833AC-AFFF-443D-AA32-A365628E62BD/ArtsAndCreativeIndustriesFreelancersAndSelf-EmployedWorkers>



Resources

Authors' Licensing and Collecting Society

A British Collective Management Organisation (CMO) that works to ensure writers are fairly compensated for any of their works that are copied, broadcast or recorded.

Copyright User (UK and EU)

Online resources aimed at making UK copyright law accessible to creators, media professionals, entrepreneurs, students, and members of the public.

Journo Resources

A resource aimed at supporting freelance journalists to find jobs, advice, salaries and rates.

The National Council for the Training of Journalists

Professional body and awarding organisation in the UK.

The National Union of Journalists

Trade union in the UK for journalists.

The Society of Authors

Trade union in the UK for authors.



CREATe



Authors'
Licensing and
Collecting
Society

NUJ
NATIONAL UNION
OF
JOURNALISTS