



Article

# The Impact of Changing Work Practices in Journalism in Ireland

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**Abstract:** Journalists are working in an ever-changing environment (where precarity has become commonplace). Reporters are increasingly required to multi-task, as news has become ubiquitous. This includes writing and editing copy, posting content online and on social media, sourcing images, recording and editing audio and recording pieces to camera: the traditional television, radio and print reporter all rolled into one. Yet, additional duties are not matched by increased pay; in some instances resources have been cut, and management cite reduced advertising revenue as the main reason. This research examined the impact of those changes to work practices on journalists, the media industry, and on wider society in Ireland, where multi-tasking has become more prevalent in the past 10 to 15 years and the pressures faced by journalists have intensified in the aftermath of COVID-19. Twelve journalists working in the media in Ireland were interviewed as part of this research. Their perceptions on the main influences on their work practices were explored. The findings of this research argue that due to the relentless drive for profit maximization, the result is that insufficient time and resources are made available to run newsrooms adequately and this is particularly prevalent in the regional press. This means ‘desk’ journalism is prioritized over ‘field’ reporting, while the battle between accuracy and immediacy is placing journalists under immense pressure and this also affects the quality of content produced and disseminated. Also, there is insufficient focus by media organizations on time intensive journalism i.e., investigative journalism—which potentially impacts everyone’s lives—and this influences how ordinary citizens understand the world around them. This research argues that the ability of journalism to hold the powerful to account is diminishing. Journalism, in its current trajectory, does not fulfil its Fourth Estate or ‘watchdog’ function, and critically, this influences people’s understanding of society, as this research outlines.

**Keywords:** work practices; political economy; resources; investigative; ‘field’ reporting; journalism in Ireland



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## 1. Introduction

The news industry, internationally, is going through “dramatic upheaval and transformation” (Dickinson et al. 2013, p. 1), where job security has decreased, pay is relatively low and many newspapers have closed, downsized or reduced numbers of full-time permanent staff (Salamon 2023). Newspaper organizations have been “beset by the digital revolution and battered by the Great Recession” (Mathews 2022, p. 1250). Newspaper circulation has dropped, while newer news outlets, many of which present rolling news coverage and are available online free of charge, have become increasingly popular among consumers. In Ireland, weekly regional newspapers have been particularly affected as readers are turning to digital resources for their information and this has been particularly acute in the past 10 to 15 years. The shift to online is actually slower on a regional level than in the national media in Ireland, as there has been a reluctance to allocate resources to manage and produce content for online and social media. This is one factor in falling circulation rates in regional print publications (Burke-Kennedy 2019; Paul 2020; McMorrow 2020).

Klinenberg (2005) argues that in the era of digital production, “the regular news cycle has spun into an erratic and unending pattern that I characterize as a news cyclone” (p. 54). The shift from a regular cycle to a more constant flow of news has become more common;

it has repercussions for everyone working in the industry, not least those at the coalface, journalists.

Hok (2015) argues that multi-media journalism is essential now and in the future, as the days of a reporter covering an event and writing one edition for a newspaper are in the past. Lugo-Ocando (2015) examines how changing journalistic work practices have seen an increase in ‘news shapers’ (Soley 1992) providing opinions, often at the expense of any input from those directly affected by the event in question.

This means that journalists are now working in a more demanding environment than in the past and a significant issue in changing work practices in the industry is the lack of resources available to tackle multi-skilled approaches that have become central to the job. Multi-skilling essentially means additional work responsibilities for journalists who face bigger workloads and challenges in their everyday work (Klinenberg 2005; Singer 2011; Daum and Scherer 2018).

Recent research in Slovenia carried out by Lukan and Čehovin Zajc (2023) found that journalists felt under pressure to be constantly available. One journalist who took part in the research stated: ‘In journalism, you are available 24 h a day, on weekends, on holidays. Well, this is the basis of journalism, and if you do not agree to that, then you have nothing to do in journalism while another stated: “If you want to be a good journalist, you have to live in this profession 24 h a day”’ (Lukan and Čehovin Zajc 2023, p. 418).

But there are concerns that adequate resources are not available to address the increased workloads, leading to long working hours and burnout for journalists, many of whom—vastly experienced journalists—leave the industry for better pay and working conditions in other areas of employment (García de Torres et al. 2011; Slattery 2022).

This is more acutely felt in the wake of COVID-19, as concerns over precarity have intensified following the pandemic (Posetti et al. 2020; Rick and Hanitzsch 2023). Rick and Hanitzsch (2023) examined the impact of COVID-19 on working conditions of journalists in Germany and found that the pandemic contributed to the crisis in the industry getting worse than it had been previously. They also concluded that journalists working in regional media and freelance journalists were particularly impacted by increased workloads but did not receive any increase in pay. “A total of 61.5% [1000 journalists working in Germany took part in a quantitative survey] stated that their working conditions have deteriorated since the outbreak of the pandemic” (Rick and Hanitzsch 2023, p. 9).

Additionally, as advertising and circulation revenue drop, management cut costs and newsrooms are heavily impacted, often resulting in “shrinking” newsrooms (Simons 2017, para. 6). As resources become more limited, journalists are given fewer opportunities to engage in ‘field’ reporting and ‘desk’ journalism becomes more commonplace and this has become even more prevalent since COVID-19 (Rick and Hanitzsch 2023). This potentially affects the quality of content produced. The longer journalists spend in the newsroom, the more likely they are to consult with press releases and secondary sources including other media sources (Raeymaeckers et al. 2012).

## 2. Media Landscape in Ireland

The long-standing, traditional media organizations—including newspapers, broadcast outlets and television stations—in Ireland consists of state broadcaster *RTE*, a commercial television station *Virgin Media* and a wide range of independent national and regional newspapers and radio stations. Many newspapers and radio stations have been bought by media conglomerates. There are 10 media conglomerates in Ireland (see Supplement File S1) and between them they own 79 titles, which is approximately half of all traditional, long-standing media organizations in Ireland.

Some of the media conglomerates in Ireland focus wholly on national media companies, others include a blend of national and regional, while others concentrate solely on regional media organizations. They are Mediahuis—whose headquarters are in Belgium—which owns 22 national and regional print and online publications; Iconic Newspapers—based in Dublin, Ireland—which owns 20 regional newspapers; Celtic Media—based in

Meath, Ireland—which owns five regional print newspapers; *The Irish Times* Group—based in Dublin, Ireland—owns six national and regional print publications and two regional broadcast organizations; Bauer Media—a German multi-media conglomerate—owns six national and regional broadcast media organizations; Wireless Group—which owns radio stations in the UK and Ireland—owns six regional radio stations throughout Ireland; *Radio Kerry* Holdings—based in Kerry, Ireland—owns three regional radio stations; The *Connacht Tribune* Newspaper Group—located in Galway, Ireland—owns one newspaper and one local radio station in its geographic area; The Advertiser Newspaper Group—headquartered in Galway, Ireland—owns three regional newspapers and Topic Newspapers—located in the Midlands, Ireland—own four regional newspapers.

There has been a huge shift in the media landscape, as a variety of national and regional online publications have emerged over the past 20 years, with the result that print circulation has dropped, as media consumption habits have veered more towards online platforms. The changes have impacted print media more than broadcast. Since the emergence of independent local radio in Ireland in 1989 there have been few changes in this sector. Print publications that previously used one platform have diversified—to varying degrees: national media organizations have been more proactive than regional organizations—in the provision of online content.

As convergence in Irish newsrooms has become more widespread—where multiple forms of media i.e., print, audio and photography—are now a key consideration for journalists, Cawley (2008, p. 47) noted that “the ability to publish immediately brings pressure to publish frequently”. With changes in publication and increasing deadlines, it means that journalists’ work practices have shifted irrevocably in an environment described by Cawley (2008) as one where continuous “deadlines don’t allow for luxuries such as writer’s block” (p. 46).

Wheatley and O’Sullivan (2017, p. 979) argue, however, that while the case is made for full convergence in newsrooms, “maintaining a print-product distinction. . . is important to supporting a type of Journalism beyond speed-driven updates” and potentially eases pressure on journalists who, at times, feel they are under the “relentless pressure of the treadmill” (Connolly 2022, p. 146).

Print newspaper circulation in Ireland has been consistently falling in the past decade; on average there has been a decline of approximately 10% each year, according to the Audit Bureau of Circulation (ABC) which records circulation figures. The most recent circulation figures for national print publications available, published in April 2022, showed an overall reduction of 11% in circulation year-on-year (ILevel Media 2022). However, several newspapers opted out of having their figures audited and published by the ABC (Morahan 2019; Adworld 2020), so it is difficult to quantify the exact extent of the decrease. Revenue in newspapers from print advertising reduced by 75% between 2007 and 2019 and advertising spend on digital platforms is not even close to matching the previous figures for print (Hosford 2020).

One of the country’s largest media organizations, Independent News and Media—which was purchased by Mediahuis in 2019 (Collins 2021)—experienced a decrease in revenue from both newspaper sales and advertising sales in 2019 (Paul 2020). Advertising revenue dropped by 14.6%, while circulation fell by 2.5% (Paul 2020).

As regards broadcast, data on radio listenership is more positive on the whole for that section of the industry. The most recent Joint National Listenership Research (JNLR) report, published in February 2023, demonstrated that while the numbers of people listening to live radio remained high—78.3% of adults listen to radio every week day—there has been an increase in the numbers of people who stream music and listen to podcasts, particularly those in the younger demographic (Broadcasting Authority of Ireland 2023). It is clear that those working in the industry are impacted, and will continue to be, by changes in media consumption patterns. However, many of the traditional media organizations—particularly the national media—have developed their own podcasts and their offerings through this medium complements the traditional product i.e., newspaper. For example, the *Irish Daily*

*Star* newspaper regularly runs podcasts on ongoing court cases, which is in tandem with their print coverage.

### 3. Political Economy

The approach in this paper is guided by political economy (Mosco and Wasko 1988), which sees ownership structures, ideological orientations and work practices of media organizations as determining the ways in which media content is produced and shaped and how these have a significant impact on how journalism is undertaken (Deuze and Marjoribanks 2009; Cottle and Ashton 1999; Saltzis and Dickinson 2008; Devereux et al. 2012). This best informs this research, particularly given that many media organizations in Ireland have faced struggles to survive, amid economic concerns and changes in media consumer trends.

Political economy of the Media (PEM) examines issues related to ownership patterns and organizational structures of media organizations (Allen 2017). PEM emerged in the 1950s and 1960s and continued in the 1960s as research was centered around the political economy of communication (Wasko 2014). “PEM is fundamentally interested in studying communication and media as commodities produced by capitalist industries” (Wasko 2014, p. 260). Essentially, the PEM approach sees the ownership structures, ideological orientations and work practices of media organisations as determining of the ways in which media content is produced and shaped (Allen 2017).

This research applies the PEM approach which provides the lens through which we can develop a critical understanding of how media works. It helps us to understand the reasons why key decisions are made by management which ultimately have a profound impact on work practices for those working in the industry and on people’s understanding of society. As allocation of resources to newsrooms is a prevalent theme in this research, I discuss the link between media ownership and the allocation of resources to newsrooms and also the connection between media ownership and editorial independence and the influence this has on how journalists do their work.

The organization and financing of media are key considerations under the PEM approach, and these have implications “for the range and nature of media content, in particular the provision of news and public information” (Herzog and Scerbinina 2021, p. 4) and also the ways in which they are consumed (Hardy 2014). This, clearly, is an important point in helping to understand how media content is generated: it is not simply a case of journalists or reporters covering markings in the newsroom diary; it is more strategic.

In fact, Preston (2009, p. 94) highlights the emphasis, by private media organizations, on profit: “As for private groups, media are part of a global strategy developed to diversify their activities and make a profit”.

Meanwhile, Klinenberg (2005, p. 53) contends that “the news media was born as a commercial medium and has always been deeply entangled with corporate, profit-driven interests”, and Dunaway (2008) also argues that the drive for profit is very real in the industry.

### 4. Changes to Work Practices

In Ireland, similar to the pattern globally, many of the traditional, long-standing media organizations that were once available only as print publications are now available online and as a result there are substantial changes to the work practices of the producers of that content: those working in newsrooms. There are more media outlets now than in the past, but fewer daily print newspapers (Velliotis 2009). It leads to more choice for the consumer, but the changes have many consequences for those working in the industry.

Journalists are now required to be more flexible and multi-skilled (Deuze and Marjoribanks 2009; Saltzis and Dickinson 2008). They are writing multiple versions of stories for print and online editions of their publications and are working in an environment where accuracy is not always the main priority, as immediacy and getting a story published at pace have become a stronger focus (Fenton 2010). Swartz (2016) argued that the increased

priority given to immediacy resulted in inadequate time for reflection before content is published.

They are also generating audio content suitable for publication on the web and are regularly posting stories on various forms of social media, monitoring comments and responding to reactions to their stories.

Time pressures (Harcup 2004), lack of resources (Wheatley and O'Sullivan 2017), the rise of the internet (McCombs et al. 2011), the growing influence of bloggers (Tremayne 2007) and pressures to prioritize circulation over journalistic balance (Devereux et al. 2012) all play important roles in journalism in recent years. Many opportunities that arise are freelance, temporary, sub-contracted and underpaid positions (Cottle 2003). The proliferation of online news has impacted significantly on journalists' work practices; according to Cawley (2012), the emergence of online news in the mid-1990s initially saw resistance from journalists, but, over time, there has been acceptance of it. O'Sullivan (2005) found, from his research—which involved interviewing 15 journalists in Ireland—that while the development of news online did create increasing demands for practitioners, it did not impact on the core work of journalism.

Changes to work practices in journalism in Ireland were highlighted by Rafter et al. in their *Worlds of Journalism* study (country report for Ireland), which found that journalists in Ireland “pointed to a substantive deterioration of working conditions in the profession”, with a “large majority of the respondents” stating that their working hours had increased (Rafter et al. 2017, p. 4).

Previous research found that the practice of copying and pasting from press releases and journalists being confined to the ‘desk’ as opposed to being out in the ‘field’ were becoming commonplace in the media industry (Vasilendiuc and Gross 2012; Paulussen 2012; Baisnée and Marchetti 2006) and it is clear from my research that this practice will take over in the media in Ireland if current patterns continue.

Technological developments have also been of significance in journalists' work practices shifting. Edge (2019, p. 20) describes advances in technology as “labor-saving”. “New media technologies are advances in technology which have a direct bearing on the generation, location and consumption of mass media content. Examples include personal computers, mobile telephones, digital cameras, personal digital assistants (PDAs), MP3 players, iPods and computer networks, especially the Internet” (Breen 2007, cited in Devereux 2007, p. 67).

Witschge and Nygren's (2009) research—in the UK and Sweden—found that there was an overall positive attitude among journalists to digital technology, but there were concerns among journalists that no budgets were allocated for training and new resources. This, I argue, is a very real concern as journalists are often required to upskill at their own expense and in their own time, with limited support offered by their employers. This is particularly acute for those working in the industry for a lengthy period of time, many of whom have become accustomed to working in a very different system. Many of them grapple with the widespread changes they are required to adjust to on a daily basis. This often leads to stress in the workplace and can have a substantial impact on an entire newsroom (Witschge and Nygren 2009).

Hayes (2021) found, in her research on the Irish media, that resources for time intensive content were particularly scarce in the regional media and this was a significant issue for journalists working in that sector. In the local media, she found, “it was felt that fewer resources were allocated to more time-intensive and less commercially attractive markings such as local authority meetings and court sittings” (Hayes 2021, p. 11). In the US, Mathews (2022, p. 1251) found that local news was in “crisis” and the challenges associated with generating online revenue was a tremendous challenge in particular. The decline is so intense, according to Fischer (2023), also in the US, that analysts believe that by 2024, the US will have lost a third of local newspapers that were in existence in 2005.

Investigative journalism, which is more expensive and time intensive, has been impacted by changes to practice: more desk-based journalism and less ‘field’ reporting means,

in many instances, less investigative journalism. Investigative journalism has an important role to play in democracy (Lukan and Čehovin Zajc 2023); it is crucial in highlighting issues in the public interest and uncovering information that the public has a right to know and any reduction in resources for it is a major concern. The presence of investigative journalism, has, according to Houston (2010), “drastically diminished” (p. 45). Investigative journalism and long-term projects, which are more expensive and time intensive, are often sidelined due to high production costs or cuts to resources (Klinenberg 2005; Allan 2004; Costa e Silva 2015).

Thurman and Myllylahti (2009) found that journalists working in online newsrooms rarely had the opportunity to leave their desks and carry out ‘beat’ or ‘field’ reporting. Almost a decade later, Simons found a similar pattern had taken hold and that “many now work aggregating or producing digital content, never leaving their desks” (Simons 2017, para. 20). While news organizations had the ability to publish multiple updates on stories, they were heavily reliant on agency copy. Olsen (2018), whose research examined local journalism in Norway, agreed that in digital journalism, journalists were spending more time working in the newsroom and they were producing more news copy than in the past.

Van Hout and Van Leuven, focusing on the UK print industry in their research, found that ‘desk’ journalism was common and journalists were not getting out into the ‘field’ to cover stories. They examined more than 2200 newspaper stories and found that 70% of the articles published relied on “pre-packaged information” such as press releases or pre-prepared statements (Van Hout and Van Leuven 2017, p. 117). These claims are significant considering the views of former *New York Times* journalist Gay Talese, who outlined the importance of reporting first-hand rather than over-relying on writing stories from telephone conversations (see Talese, cited in Emmanuel and Ray 2017).

## 5. Precarious Working Conditions

Precarity and increased casualization has become a more predominant factor in the media industry in recent times. Increasingly, work has become uncertain, unpredictable and more prospects are temporary/short-term. This, essentially, is creating instability in the industry.

Precarization of work has come about as a result of profound changes in the media industry including a decrease in profits in newspapers, an increased focus on digital first and ultimately a shift in how journalism is produced (Cohen 2015). And while the emergence of digital technologies “can present exciting opportunities for journalists” (Cohen 2015, p. 100), it also presents difficulties for those working in the industry, who now are facing competition from the increasingly prevalent pattern of unpaid work. “This model of unpaid writing has become normalized across the digital media sphere, where growing numbers of websites develop a large network of unpaid contributors” (Cohen 2015, p. 106).

Precarity has become “a key characteristic of contemporary journalistic work” (Örnebring 2018, p. 109) and “the trend towards atypical employment has been particularly pronounced” in the media (Gollmitzer 2014, p. 827). Örnebring (2018) argues that this, in turn, impacts on how Journalists think about the industry and their work.

“In fact, many of the key concepts and heuristics that Journalists use to describe and make sense of their work are contingent on a high degree of contractual stability. A (semi)coherent professional identity and shared professional norms can only emerge if practitioners in general enjoy significant employment security and autonomy within resource-rich organisations”. (Örnebring 2018, pp. 109–10)

Deuze (2007) also contends that casualization of labor has resulted in poorer working conditions for journalists and has impacted on the quality of news content being produced, while Nielson (2018) argued that journalists in New Zealand were working in precarious conditions in under-resourced newsrooms; yet, the tasks they were expected to do were growing. They were being “asked to do more with less” (Nielson 2018, p. 537), for

example they were expected to increasingly engage with audiences and adapt to advances in technology.

In their research in Ireland, [Hayes and Silke \(2018\)](#) found that new entrants to freelance journalism were struggling to get paid for their work and were forced to work for free at times, which many did in the hope that it may translate to paid work. [Rick and Hanitzsch \(2023\)](#) concluded that freelance Journalists in particular faced increasing uncertainty due to the pandemic, while [Gollmitzer \(2023, p. 1024\)](#) argued that the growing precarity facing freelance journalists was such that many have to subsidize their income with other work—which they referred to as “money jobs”—where pay is higher. Realistically that is not sustainable in the long term and will ultimately lead to graduates opting for opportunities elsewhere where there is more stability and better pay and conditions.

## 6. Materials & Methods

This research is qualitative and is based on semi-structured in-depth interviews with 12 journalists. Seven of the participants work in the national media and five work in the regional media. Nine of the journalists work in print, while three work in broadcast journalism. The impact of the changes to work practices on journalists, the media industry and on wider society were the focus of this research.

A qualitative methodology was used; it is the most suitable data collection method for this research. Qualitative research aims to “hear all voices and perspectives” ([Creswell 2007, p. 179](#)); it focuses on “exploring the qualities of individual ‘texts’, interpreted broadly so as to include audience responses as explored in interviews, focus groups and so on” ([Branston and Stafford 2010, p. 414](#)). A thematic analysis of the data—an ongoing and systematic process ([Ritchie and Spencer 2002](#)) was undertaken; this begins with the identification and reporting of emerging patterns, the organization of data into explicit themes, leading to the development of emergent theoretical classifications and propositions ([Lincoln and Guba 1985](#)).

A purposive sampling strategy was employed, which is consistent with qualitative research. Purposive sampling is where the researcher “intentionally selects participants who are knowledgeable about the phenomenon being studied” ([Gill 2020, p. 580](#)) and is “designed to provide information-rich cases for in-depth study. This is because participants are those who have the required status or experience, or are known to possess special knowledge to provide the information researchers seek” ([Lopez and Whitehead 2013, p. 125](#)). A deductive approach was taken, where some preconceived themes were clear. It is a “top-down approach, where the researcher brings to the data a series of concepts, ideas, or topics that they use to code and interpret the data” ([Braun and Clarke 2012, p. 58](#)), based on existing knowledge of working in the industry and was applicable in this research.

Participants were carefully selected; they were all required to have at least 10 years’ experience working in the media. Some of the participants have worked in print and broadcast, while others have worked in either print or broadcast. It is important to include the input of those working in a variety of national and regional media organizations in the research; while each media organization differs the research findings indicate that resources have become more limited on a local or regional scale than nationally.

Interview guides were compiled which included questions which were asked of each participant (see sample questions in the Information Letter in Supplement File S2). I started by contacting media professionals known to me directly and in some cases they made recommendations for other potential participants who I, in turn, contacted and invited to take part in the research, a process known as snowball sampling ([Saunders et al. 2007](#); [Yingling and McClain 2015](#)). I wanted to ensure that the most suitable participants would be included in the sample i.e., that they had a wide range of experience in the industry over a sustained period of time. I was aware of the challenges associated with interviewing personal contacts or acquaintances and ensured all interviews were carried out in a professional manner.

All interviews were carried out face-to-face. All were recorded using a dictaphone. Consent was agreed with interviewees in advance of all recordings. All of the interviews were recorded and were transcribed verbatim immediately afterwards.

As there was a huge amount of data covering a range of themes within the overall topic, I decided to use data analysis software NVivo to help me organize the information. NVivo is used to analyze unstructured data obtained during qualitative and mixed methods research including interviews and focus groups. Codes—tags or labels for assigning units of meaning to the information compiled during a study—are created and the data are organized by theme or topic. Coding, according to [Strauss \(1987, p. 27\)](#), is “an essential procedure in this process”.

A table of the participants in this research is included in Supplement File S3.

## 7. Findings

This research evidences that lack of resources is resulting in more ‘desk’ journalism and less ‘field’ reporting, less focus on investigative journalism and this, in turn, is impacting on the quality of content produced. This affects journalists working in the industry, the industry and society, as it influences how ordinary citizens are informed about the world around them.

I focus on three key themes which emerged during the data analysis:

- Additional work, but no additional resources for newsrooms
- A shift away from ‘field’ reporting and more focus on ‘desk’ journalism
- Insufficient focus on investigative journalism

[Alejandro \(2010\)](#) argued that, in reality, while newsrooms have fewer resources than in the past, more events, including regular diary events and breaking news, have to be covered on increasing numbers of platforms.

The lack of resources available to those working in the industry emerged as a key concern in this research. Without exception, every participant expressed concern about this. Two of the main areas highlighted were journalists’ requirement to do additional work without any additional resources and the non-replacement of staff who had left newsrooms. Journalists argued that lack of resources impacted many elements of their jobs. One of the reasons cited for cuts to resources was reduced income from advertising and falling circulation of newspapers.

One participant, who currently works in national radio, having previously been employed in local radio, argued there were huge differences between the two organizations, in terms of resources. Resources, she argued, were readily available in the national radio station, but far less so in the local radio station.

*“You can’t go to court every week or you can’t go to every public meeting or every council meeting [in local radio]. There’s an event and you don’t have staff. That’s a resource issue at local level because you have a smaller team and a smaller budget. When you work in a national, you are better resourced”. (J2)*

There was agreement among eight of the journalists—particularly those working in the regional press—that additional staff were not employed to manage social media content and this placed them under increased pressure. None of the participants received any extra pay for additional work on social media.

The comments from participants highlight the pressure created by insufficient resources available to run newsrooms—at regional level in particular—and rather than focus on time-intensive journalism, participants stated that the priority is often on ensuring pages are filled, many of which include basic content. My findings support research in Romania which found that “copy and paste office journalists” and “Google” reporters ([Vasilendiuc and Gross 2012, p. 1](#)) were emerging. The focus on maximizing profits by media owners is central to the cuts in numbers of staff working in newsrooms, as has been highlighted in previous research ([Costa e Silva 2015](#); [Devereux 2013](#); [Mosco 2009](#); [Dunaway 2008](#); [Croteau and Hoynes 2007](#); [Klinenberg 2005](#); [Cohen 2002](#); [Walker 2021](#)).

Increased demands due to social media have also proved problematic for some sports journalists who said that while they are happy to regularly update social media during a sports fixture and record audio and video immediately afterwards, it takes additional resources to do this to a high standard, but these are not being made available. [Schultz and Sheffer \(2007\)](#), similarly, found that sports reporters preferred to focus on reporting on sports fixtures rather than concentrate on blogging, a task which was being asked of them by management.

Concerns were also expressed in relation to lack of resources for photography. Staff photography has been cut hugely in most regional newspapers in particular, to the extent that reliance on freelance photographers and journalists taking their own photographs has become commonplace. The problem is particularly acute in the regional print press. While overall, the national print press had adequate photography cover, similar to that which existed in the past, the comments from most of those working in the regional print press highlighted that photography budgets have been cut significantly.

One of the photographers who took part in this research said newspapers are increasingly accepting photographs from amateurs, a practice that is impacting on the work of himself and his colleagues. “They are looking for anything that is free” (J11).

- **A shift away from ‘field’ reporting and more focus on ‘desk’ journalism**

All of the journalists who participated in this research believed there was not enough time for ‘field’ work and all agreed that going out and covering events and meeting sources should be an essential part of the job.

J9 said that pressure to regularly file for online platforms means journalists are working more from the desk and not the ‘field’. Five of the journalists—both national and regional—argued that opportunities to leave their desks and do ‘field’ reporting were becoming more infrequent, as evidenced by the following excerpts:

*“I’m definitely doing less out and about [reporting]. It is so time consuming and you work so hard when you are out and about”.* (J2)

*“I’m stuck to the desk a little bit more. We don’t have the same resources on the ground as we once had. A lot of stuff is done over the ‘phone. It makes for quicker copy and you are still covering the ground. The personal touch is a big thing when a local reporter goes out to a community when there is a celebration of some sorts”.* (J9)

A regional press photographer said that from her recent experience, journalists have become so desk-bound that valuable sources gravitate towards photographers as they do not know the journalists and consequently that trust element, which is so vital in journalism, is impacted.

*“Everybody knows the photographer. Very few people know the journalists, because they just listen to them on the phone. People don’t know them”.* (J10)

While ‘field’ reporting is severely curtailed in many media organizations, this is not the case in all of them. Two of the participants, one a political reporter and the other a sports journalist, argued that the level of ‘field’ reporting has not decreased in their subject areas. J12, who specializes in politics, said that while he gets out covering his beat, others are not so fortunate.

*“When I cover politics, I have a Dáil office. Leinster House is my base. No, I’m not getting chained to my desk the way maybe other people are. All the new jobs in journalism seem to be digital journalism jobs and not so much the more traditional reporting. I think that is a big problem for journalism. Journalism is a people business. If you don’t get to meet people and talk to them and eye-ball them and they eye-ball you then it is hard to build trust and it’s hard to have any fun and sense of discovery. The office, the ‘phone are crucial but usually you need to have made a connection before that can work for you.”*

Additionally, live sport can not be covered effectively from a newsroom and J5 said he is still covering live events as much as in the past and continues to carry out interviews face-to-face rather than over the 'phone.

*“There is nothing beating meeting people and talking to the people. People have more respect for you and more trust, rather than ringing somebody up and throwing a few quick questions at them and gone. You might never meet them and the story is done. Building trust with people is very important. If you do that, people will contact you if there is something happening.”*

- **Insufficient focus on investigative journalism**

Of the participants in my research, just one journalist said that his work in investigative journalism was not cut back (J3). Seven of the journalists said they enjoy investigative journalism and would like to do it, but lack of time was an issue. Five others said they only got the opportunity to pursue investigative journalism in their own time, unpaid. This is a short-term solution and is not an option long-term.

Three print journalists—one national and two regional—agreed that ‘red tape’ and legal issues are a deterrent (J8, J6 and J7), while one of the regional print journalists who pursued Freedom of Information led investigative journalism in his own time felt that the work did not impact widely on audiences. “The prevailing wisdom now is whether people are actually reading these things” (J6). Another regional print journalist said that cost is a factor when decisions are taken on whether to pursue investigative journalism. “I think that there is a realization that investigative journalism is important but it’s expensive” (J6).

Two national journalists stated that while investigative journalism was encouraged by their employers, time was not allocated, with the result that they had to do it in their own time. “I have done investigative [work] but you often find you are doing some of it in your own time” (J1). “Some will say yes we want that investigated but could you spend your Saturday or Sunday at it? They are not inclined to give you time off” (J5).

## 8. Discussion

This research argues that the ability of journalism to hold the powerful to account is diminishing and critically, this influences how society is informed about issues of importance. This is as a result of the lack of resources being invested into quality journalism and more of a focus on journalists reporting from the ‘desk’ and less from the ‘field’. Investigative journalism is pivotal in holding powerful people to account, but this takes a huge commitment from media organizations. Unfortunately, amid a myriad of other challenges facing media organizations including reduced advertising revenue and falling circulation of print publications, time-intensive investigative journalism is all too often being pushed to the side on the priority list in media organizations. This, in turn, impacts on the content produced and weaker content has far less impact from a societal perspective.

The inclusion of PEM in this research is relevant as it focuses essentially on explaining how elites maintain and exert power in order to make sure that the system continues as is. Media plays a major role in this hegemony. As power becomes excessive, original content is weakened and as a result society is less informed. It highlights how, as argued by [Dunaway \(2008\)](#) and [Preston \(2009\)](#), the relentless pursuit of profit in the media industry is prevalent.

It also magnifies the link between media ownership and the allocation of resources in newsrooms, which is a key element of the findings of this research; this arose as a concern in all of the interviews with participants and subsequently in the analysis of the data gathered.

This research highlights a focus on ‘desk’ journalism, and less priority is given to news gathering from the ‘field’, building on [Vasilendiuc and Gross’ \(2012\)](#) and [Paulussen’s \(2012\)](#) research and also research carried out by [Van Hout and Van Leuven \(2017\)](#) and [Thurman and Myllylahti \(2009\)](#). This has a major negative impact on news content and ultimately on the industry and on society. All those who participated in my research expressed the view that there is not enough emphasis on ‘field’ work and all of them felt that the focus is often on filling pages, rather than prioritizing that the best quality content is sourced.

As journalists are allocated limited resources to do their work, are confined to the 'desk' and given fewer opportunities to report from the 'field', the result is that the range of content produced is narrowed. It means that, in reality, there is less compelling, original content and content that focuses on ordinary people's real stories and more reliance on sources including press releases from government and business sources. This, I argue, has a negative impact on journalism and ultimately on society.

It is vital that journalists get out into the 'field' building contacts, meeting and developing rapport with people, generating unique content and breaking stories, rather than be confined to the 'desk', working in "churnalism . . . [that is] repackaging of largely unchecked second-hand material" (Davies 2008, p. 60) or being required to "churn out 10 commodified stories a day without making a 'phone call" (Viner 2017, para. 42). However, as advertising and circulation revenue drop, management focuses on cutting costs and less 'field' reporting is a casualty of this.

When media owners focus on cutting costs, due to reduced income from advertising revenue and circulation, one of the first areas cut are investigative journalism and time and resource-intensive projects (Freedman 2010). In my research, just one journalist stated that his investigative journalism work had not been scaled back, while five others pursue investigative journalism in their own time and are not paid for it. Invariably, these projects reveal ground-breaking information and shine a light on topics that are in the public interest. Quality journalism is a priority, but this comes at a cost: time and resources. Realistically, it is not possible to generate investigative journalism in a small amount of time, whilst simultaneously generating breaking news, features and a variety of compelling content. Time needs to be set aside for investigative journalism. In terms of resources and time, it is more cost-effective to generate a 'celebrity' story that originated from social media or rewrite a press release than allocate several weeks of a journalist's time to investigate circumstances surrounding criminal activity or animal cruelty, but decisions to concentrate on the softer news, due to cost-saving, are made all too often.

Following Storm (2020), I argue—as a result of this research—that holding powerful people to account is essential in journalism and should not be used as a scapegoat when income is reduced. Svensson and Edström (2016, p. 11) clearly outline the difference: "Investigative journalism is expensive, while 'click journalism' is often cheap" and therein lies the problem: when costs are cut the cheaper option will be prioritized.

Witschge and Nygren (2009) also concluded that journalists were not getting opportunities to pursue investigative journalism and that instead they were confined to news desks, while Stetka and Örnebring (2013) also found that very little investigative journalism was done in nine countries in Europe, citing lack of resources, economic and legal considerations and potential libel among the main reasons. This, amid concerns over precarity in the industry in Ireland, is hugely damaging for journalism and ultimately wider society as it detracts from journalism's Fourth Estate function.

While it has been widely acknowledged that it has an important role to play in society (Smith 2008; Houston 2010; Storm 2020), unfortunately, in general, Irish regional media organizations do not invest much in investigative journalism. Lack of resources and time and concerns over potential legal issues are among the reasons for its lack of use. It is a casualty of cost-cutting and rationalization as profit is prioritized over quality, impactful Journalism.

Journalism has a surveillance function in society, as a 'watchdog' (Cancela et al. 2021) in the form of investigative journalism. Investigative journalism is time-intensive and adequate resources need to be made available for it. Such journalism reveals information which is of interest to the public, for example financial irregularities, criminal activity, issues with the running of health services or exclusive information in relation to the management of public finances or services. Given the intricate nature of many of the topics covered, it takes time to source material, gather information and ensure every single fact is verified. The dividends in terms of circulation and advertising revenue are difficult to quantify.

I argue that unless investigative journalism is treated as a priority by editorial teams—and not influenced by owners' decisions and those with commercial interests—then journalism will continue to weaken, the standards will continue to fall and citizens' understanding of society will be skewed as a result. As content becomes more focused on lifestyle journalism as opposed to hard-hitting and meaningful investigative journalism, how ordinary citizens understand the world and events around them is impacted.

I believe that many of those who entered the profession to report in an objective and fair way and particularly those interested in ground-breaking, investigative journalism, will leave the industry due to the lack of support for time-intensive news gathering, combined with lack of resources and long working hours, often with poor pay and conditions. This was raised by journalists in Ireland in [Rafter et al.'s \(2017\)](#) research and was also highlighted by [García de Torres et al. \(2011\)](#) who argued that better working conditions and remuneration in other careers is more attractive for many of those working in the media industry.

This has widespread repercussions for the industry and for society: as experienced staff leave, they take with them a wealth of experience which takes those who replace them time to build up.

The reluctance to invest in additional resources to embrace the multi-platform approach to good effect is a major influential factor in the changes to work practices, a concern that was raised previously in [Witschge and Nygren's \(2009\)](#) research. The lack of resources—in terms of journalists and photographers—was a concern to every participant in this research. Journalists were concerned that they were required to take on additional work but without additional resources, while staff who left newsrooms were, all too often, not being replaced. Many journalists, in their daily work, are not explicitly aware of commercial interests, but in reality the interests of media owners is central to the decision-making process in terms of allocation of resources for newsrooms. Concern about the lack of resources available for journalists to do their work arose consistently during this research.

The focus on maximizing profits is having a detrimental impact on journalists' ability to do their jobs as the limited resources—particularly in the regional media—means that, all too often, corners are cut, vital markings are not covered, while sufficient time and resources are not allocated to investigative journalism which should be a cornerstone of every newsroom's work.

## 9. Conclusions

Journalism in Ireland, following other countries, is evolving and the changes are having a huge impact on the work practices of journalists. Shifts in media consumption, changes in how news is presented and additional tasks to meet the requirements of the 24/7 news cycle are at the core of these changes. The relentless focus by media owners on profit maximization at a time when the industry is going through huge changes is a major concern. Resources are being cut in newsrooms despite the additional pressures faced by those working in them.

Not only does this impact on journalists working in the industry, but it also has repercussions for the industry as the Fourth Estate function is not fulfilled. Additionally, it has consequences for how the public is informed about events around them.

This research highlights significant concerns for journalists, the journalism industry and society, centered around three main themes. First, journalists are required to do additional work but with no additional resources; second, 'field' work is increasingly making way for 'desk' journalism, and third, sufficient time and resources are not being dedicated to investigative journalism.

When, for example, 'desk' journalism is prioritized over investigative journalism, then quality of content is impacted and this affects quality of content produced and impacts ultimately on ordinary people's understanding of events.

The findings evidence that we are living in an era where immediacy is, all too often, prioritized over accuracy “where speed and space translate into ‘speed it up and spread it thin’” (Fenton 2010, p. 7) and the focus on profit maximization is having devastating consequences for those working in the industry, the industry itself—which is becoming increasingly precarious—and for wider society. A strong message coming from the interviews with journalists who took part in this research was that a lack of resources is impacting negatively on their work practices. Most interviewees saw difficulty with a curtailment of ‘field’ reporting and more emphasis on ‘desk’ journalism and insufficient time for investigative journalism.

This research shows that journalists are required to do additional work more than ever, but without additional resources and this is particularly a point of contention in the regional press. Social media—which, in reality, is a key element of the media—is all too often being considered as an add-on and although journalists are not being paid or allocated time to work on social media content, they are still expected to do it. The focus on profit maximization is at the core of the changes to practice, as media owners prioritize profit over ensuring newsrooms are adequately resourced. The concerns have clearly intensified in the aftermath of COVID-19, where the issue of precarity, short-time work and increased workloads have become even more of a concern (Rick and Hanitzsch 2023; Posetti et al. 2020).

It is important to acknowledge that this research has limitations: it is not exhaustive and it was not possible to interview a wider range of journalists than twelve. Much consideration was given to the selection of participants for this research and every effort was made to ensure a reliable cross-section was included and all sections of the media were represented. A rigorous approach was adopted in drawing up the list of participants and one of the main criteria was that each interviewee would have substantial experience, at least 10 years, working in mainstream media in Ireland.

One particular limitation, I believe, was that just one of the seven journalists working in online media organizations who were invited to take part in the research agreed to it. Given the prevalence of online media in the current media landscape in Ireland, I believe that the input of others would have contributed immensely to the research.

Critical issues for future research include in-depth examination of the working conditions experienced by journalists—including an examination of whether short-term or long-term opportunities are being made available—amid growing concerns over precarity in the industry and the impact this has on journalists and the media industry. This would include asking, what is the link between working conditions and the quality of content produced? What, if any, impact does it have on the feasibility of investigative journalism and ‘field’ reporting?

Arising from the findings of this research, a piece of research, to include content analysis of specific stories in media organizations in Ireland, should be undertaken, to establish how the multi-skilled approach impacts on content, specifically on the quality of content and also on levels of investigative journalism which exist in the media in Ireland.

This research highlighted the stretch on resources in the regional press in particular and it was important to include the perspectives of those working in both national and regional media organizations. Further research would specifically analyze each media organization in Ireland—both national and regional—from a resource perspective. An audit of resources available in all newsrooms in Ireland would establish the levels of personnel available to meet the demands of the job in a 24/7 news cycle. Input from those at the center of newsrooms, editors and journalists, should be a key part of this process.

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