

RESEARCH ARTICLE



Acutely Precarious? Detecting Objective Precarity in Journalism

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ABSTRACT

Journalism often gets described as a profession of precarity. However, there is a lack of quantitative research on the topic, since the question remains open, how many journalists actually work under precarious conditions. This paper offers a systematic empirical approach to the phenomenon of precarity by identifying the objective precarious in journalism. Looking at three key parameters of precarity research on the substantial level, contractual level and legal-institutional level, the study can be seen as the first attempt to measure precarity in journalism. Based on the analysis of previous research on precarity in journalism and a literature review of the sociology of work, an operationalization of precarity in journalistic employment was developed and applied to a sample of an online survey of professional journalists in Germany (n=861). The intensity of precarity was measured in three groups, classifying a quarter of the respondents as acutely precarious. Findings demonstrate that journalists' precarious status is related to factors like age, gender, employment relationship and media type.

KEYWORDS

Precarity; atypical work; journalistic labor; freelance journalism; pandemic

Introduction

Journalists increasingly produce news under precarious working conditions: freelance journalists struggle to make an income from journalism (e.g., Cohen 2015; Libert, Le Cam, and Domingo 2022) and newsrooms constantly announce layoffs (Julie, Bell, and Brown 2020; Radcliffe 2020). Van't Hof and Deuze (2022, 190) even speak of an „omnipresence of precarity “in journalism. Surely, Covid-19 hit a media industry already in crisis (Dawson et al. 2021), leading to the fact that the journalistic profession is increasingly characterized by insecurity. This not only affects journalists in their private lives but could also be seen as a threat to democracy since insecure working conditions may also have an impact on the quality of reporting. The necessity to focus research on precarious work in journalism, therefore, arises from the role of journalism in democracy but also from the aim to make journalistic working conditions transparent. Since labor precarity in journalism should be evaluated as a threat to democracy (Márquez-Ramírez, Amado, and Waisbord 2022), action against precarious

conditions needs to be taken to sustain the quality of a “knowledge-producing institution” (Ekström and Westlund 2019). Previous studies already suggest that poor working conditions and time pressure in journalism can negatively impact research depth and source verification (Norbäck 2019; Márquez-Ramírez, Amado, and Waisbord 2022). Also, a decreasing thoroughness in favor of speed has been observed in newsrooms (Gollmitzer 2014). Regarding freelance journalists, the fact that in times of precarity, many of them have to cross-finance their jobs with work in Public Relations forces them to stretch their ethical boundaries (Ladendorf 2013; Mathisen 2019). All these findings make clear that precarious working conditions can have an effect on how journalists produce news. This would imply that precarity may guide journalistic reporting that is “the production of knowledge” (Ekström 2002, 261).

In these terms, it is necessary to find out in which aspects of journalistic work precarity manifests itself and how many journalists work under precarious conditions. Detecting precarious work and collecting information about precarious workers may help set up concrete measures against the precarization of the profession. With this in mind, the following two research questions will be addressed:

RQ1: How can we capture precarious work in journalism?

RQ2: Who are the precarious workers in journalism?

This study is based on a sample of German journalists and aims to capture precarity by operationalizing precarious work and identifying as well as describing precarious workers. So far, research studying precarity in journalism mainly applied qualitative methods by interviewing precarious journalists (e.g., Bintang et al. 2021; Geldens and Marjoribanks 2015; Gollmitzer 2014; Guo and Fang 2022). Surveys rarely come into usage (e.g., Antunovic, Grzeslo, and Hoag 2019; Cohen, Hunter, and O’Donnell 2019), making quantitative findings on precarity in journalism scarce. The fact that most previous research is qualitative in nature is also related to the circumstance that many findings are based on the subjective assessment of precarity (e.g., Örnebring 2018; Patrick and Elks 2015). Even if these insights enrich research, there is a need for an investigation that captures precarious workers and explores the objective conditions under which journalists work. Consequently, this study can be seen as pioneering by proposing a quantitative approach to measuring precarity in journalism, also addressing the articulated need in the sociology research of exploring precarity quantitatively (Alberti et al. 2018).

The following part will define the concept of precarity and provides a review of empirical studies on precarity in journalism. After this, the proposed operationalization and related aspects like the coding process and variables will be presented. After introducing the fieldwork and sample of the study, findings will be presented and discussed.

Literature Review: Precarious Work in Journalism

Precarity is a state characterized by uncertainty, instability and fragility (Bourdieu 1998; Kalleberg 2009; Rodgers 1989). It can be described as a deviation from a protected employment relationship’s “normal” social condition (Brinkmann et al. 2006; Kraemer 2006). Precarious employment is increasingly standing in the focus of

journalism research, also on a global scale. One might assume journalists are not as vulnerable as other workers in the “emerging class of the precariat”(Standing 2011) since they can rely on academic education and training. Nevertheless, as Standing (2011, 59) puts it, “everybody, actually” enters the precariat. In line with this statement, Örnebring (2018, 109) writes: “Precarity is thus a key characteristic of contemporary journalistic work.” Scholars from Italy (e.g., Morini, Carls, and Armano 2014), Ireland (e.g., Hayes and Silke 2019), Sweden (e.g., Norbäck 2019), Turkey (e.g., Badran and Smets 2021), Indonesia (e.g., Bintang et al. 2021), Canada (e.g., Cohen 2017), Australia (e.g., O’Donnell and Josephi 2021; Patrick and Elks 2015), China (e.g., Guo and Fang 2022; Pun, Chen, and Jin 2022) and Nigeria (e.g., Matthews and Onyemaobi 2020) studied precarious working conditions of their home journalists. But what makes the journalistic profession a precarious one? Studies are describing the working conditions of journalists as precarious by addressing many different aspects of media work. These include, for example, limited organizational support for freelancers (e.g., Antunovic, Grzeslo, and Hoag 2019), overwork (e.g., Guo and Fang 2022; Mathisen and Knudsen 2022), harassment to journalists (e.g., Matthews and Onyemaobi 2020; Middleweek 2022), a lack of training opportunities (e.g., Patrick and Elks 2015) and the threat of job loss (e.g., Geldens and Marjoribanks 2015; Patrick and Elks 2015).

However, besides those precarious characteristics of the journalistic profession, it is striking that most empirical studies refer to the material precarity of journalists, asking about their income (e.g., Antunovic, Grzeslo, and Hoag 2019, Gollmitzer 2014, Guo and Fang 2022, Norbäck 2019, O’Donnell and Josephi 2021). In fact, the income situation of workers is an indicator of precarity, which also dominates in the sociology of work as shown in a review of literature (Brinkmann et al. 2006; Candeias 2008; Dörre, Kraemer, and Speidel 2006; Keller and Seifert 2006; Kraemer 2006; Rodgers 1989; Tophoven and Tisch 2016). Income gets identified as one of three recurring indicators which are most commonly used to describe work as precarious. In these terms, on the *substantial level* (dimension 1), work is defined as precarious if its (low) income does not allow it to make a living (Brinkmann et al. 2006). Precarity research declares an income as precarious if the earnings are less than two thirds of the median earnings (Brehmer and Seifert 2007; Promberger et al. 2018). Since in 2020, the median income net per month in Germany was calculated as 2084 euros (Statista 2023), two-thirds would be 1.387,94 euros, rounded to 1.388 euros. Therefore, the income threshold for this study is 1388 euros to differentiate between working arrangements with or without precarious potential. If journalists have an earning under this threshold, we would declare this a precarious income situation because it could mean being at risk of poverty. Indeed, the low wage threshold in Germany means earning less than 60% of the median earnings of all employment relationships of the total population.

In a representative study by Lauerer, Dingerkus, and Steindl (2019), the average income for journalists in Germany was 2900 euros, while the study by Hanitzsch and Rick (2021), with over 40% freelance journalists, calculated an average of 2340 euros in 2020. Previous studies already indicate that making a living from journalistic income becomes increasingly difficult, especially for freelance journalists (Hanitzsch and Rick 2021; Mathisen and Knudsen 2022; Örnebring 2018). Often, journalists are forced to substitute their income with non-journalistic activities such

as work in the Public Relations (Josephi et al. 2019; Mathisen and Knudsen 2022; Örnebring 2018).

The second frequently mentioned indicator of precarity in the sociology of work is the employment situation of workers. The *contractual level* (dimension 2) describes precarity in terms of employment (in)stability (Rodgers 1989). A lack of employment stability is mainly found in atypical forms of employment, such as self-employment, fixed-term (temporary) contracts and part-time work. Atypical employment is not necessarily precarious; however, atypical employment has a great potential for precarity (Brinkmann et al. 2006; Keller and Seifert 2006). In journalism, recent studies demonstrate that atypical employment is becoming typical: “Employment limited in time” (Maeres 2022, 4), such as fixed-term contracts, is a widespread working arrangement (Garcia, Matos, and Da Silva 2021). According to a survey by the European Federation of Journalists (EFJ (European Federation of Journalists) 2015), over half of the surveyed online journalists do not have a full-time employment contract. Cohen (2012, 148) is speaking in this context of “labour casualization” which can lead to freelancers getting exploited.

On the *legal-institutional level* (dimension 3), the focus lies on the social protection of workers and their entitlement to social benefits (Rodgers 1989). On this dimension, precarity is described in terms of entitlement to social benefits, such as pension insurance or unemployment insurance. Especially freelancers face high market risks with regard to security on a legal-institutional level, also in journalism (Gollmitzer 2014). In Germany, freelancers have to take care of their social insurances at their own expense, making social security a major concern (Gollmitzer 2019). Benefits like pension rewards and social insurance, including unemployment insurance, often remain reserved for employees, also in journalism (Badran and Smets 2021; Cushion 2007; Örnebring 2018).

Recent studies from the last two years show that the pandemic intensified an already existing precariat in journalism (Libert, Le Cam, and Domingo 2022; Perreault and Perreault 2021; Rick and Hanitzsch 2023). Especially the economic situation of freelance journalists deteriorated in the last years, making some of them fear losing their jobs (e.g., Libert, Le Cam, and Domingo 2022). In general, the literature review shows that freelancers, in particular, are standing in the focus of precarity research in journalism (e.g., Antunovic, Grzeslo, and Hoag 2019; Cohen 2017; Gollmitzer 2014; Norbäck 2019), leaving employed journalists understudied. Other studies focus on a specific group of journalists like young journalists (e.g., Gollmitzer 2021; Guo and Fang 2022; Pun, Chen, and Jin 2022) or female journalists (e.g., Bintang et al. 2021). Some studies also explicitly refer to specific types of journalists or the working conditions of different media types. Dwyer (2019), for example, focused on precarity in the TV sector, while Wadud (2022) explored the working situation of climate journalists. Studies that explicitly refer to the working conditions of online journalists are rare; however, evidence from the literature suggests that online journalists are particularly affected by precarity due to the low payment compared to other media types (Lauerer, Dingerkus, and Steindl 2019). To sum up, journalists of different backgrounds are rarely studied together. This is why this study will simultaneously investigate the working conditions of journalists of different employment situations and sociodemographic backgrounds.

Measuring Precarity in Journalism

Measuring precarity is described as a challenge (Alberti et al. 2018). Studies from economic, management, and occupational research propose some first ideas on measuring precarity. For example, the “Multidimensional Approach to Measuring Precarious Employment” (García-Pérez, Prieto-Alaiz, and Simón 2017) works with a variable, which summarizes the total number of precariousness dimensions or disadvantages of a job. “The Employment Precariousness Scale” (EPRES) of Amable, Benach, and González (2001) and Amable (2006) presents a so-called “EPRES score”, ranging from 0 (not precarious) to 4 (most precarious). Most of those attempts include some measurement of wage (e.g., Srakar et al. 2020); however, all studies focus on different aspects of precarity. Also, most of those operationalizations include relatively complex statistical calculations, which are not the focus in a first empirical description in this study. In addition, the mentioned operationalizations seem difficult to adapt to the working context of journalism, a profession characterized by freelancing (Gollmitzer 2014, 2019). However, especially the EPRES (Amable 2006; Amable, Benach, and González 2001) and its idea to measure precarity on a scale served as an orientation in this study. Precarity was measured in three stages; the status of acute precarity, latent precarity, and non-precarity. While acute precarity intends to describe a working situation already characterized by precarity, latent or dormant precarity depicts a status in which workers are at risk of getting into a precarious situation. The three groups and their characteristics will be described in the following paragraphs.

The coding process (see Figure 1) started by classifying all cases with an income under 1388 euros as acutely precarious. The same approach was taken for freelancers who indicated that they did not receive any social benefits. Of the remaining cases, all those cases were classified as latent precarious if they indicated a fixed-term contract or other types of forced atypical employment. The definition of “forced atypical employment” will follow in the description of the used variables. All remaining cases were declared as being non-precarious. They have an income above the defined threshold and are characterized by standard employment with a permanent contract and voluntary atypical employment.

Table 1 shows the variables used in the online survey related to the three precarity dimensions. The monthly income of journalists (after taxes) was inquired with an

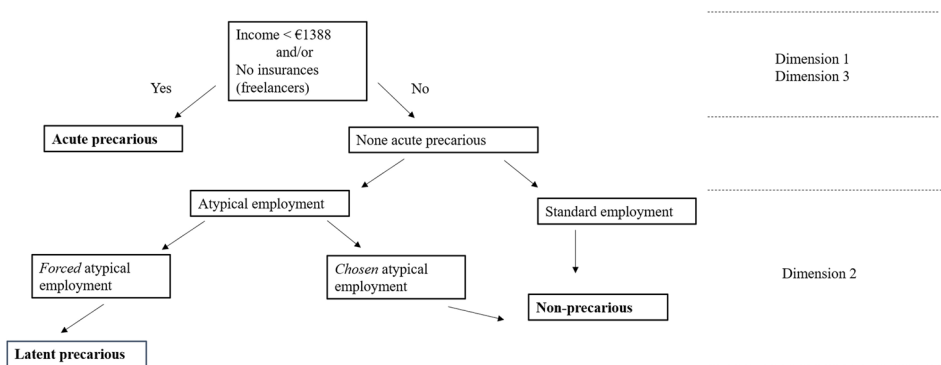


Figure 1. Illustration of the coding process.

Table 1. Variables.

Precarity dimensions	Variables	Survey Questions	Options
Substantial level	Income in Euros per month after taxes	"How much is your monthly income from journalism after taxes? (In "non-Corona times")."	_____ Euros
Contractual level	Employment relationship and its voluntariness	"How would you describe your current employment in journalism?" "Would you like to have a permanent position?" "What is the main reason for your part-time employment?"	Fulltime position permanent or fixed-term. Part-time position permanent or fixed-term. Freelancing or Flat-rate freelancing "Yes" coded as involuntary "I could not find a fulltime position" coded as involuntary
Legal-institutional level	Social benefits	"Please indicate whether you are entitled to pension and unemployment insurance through your employer, through the Künstlersozialkasse ⁴ or others."	Pension insurance and/or unemployment insurance. None of those.

open question, asking for the income from journalistic activities (in non-pandemic times). On the legal-institutional level, journalists were asked to indicate whether they are entitled to pension insurance and unemployment insurance. The employment relationship of journalists (contractual level) was interrogated by a nominal question, where the respondents could choose between (a) freelancing, (b) flat-rate freelancing, (c) full-time employment (permanent or fixed-term) and (d) part-time employment (permanent or fixed-term). With the aim to gather information about the voluntariness of the employment situation, all journalists finding themselves in a freelancing or flat-rate freelancer position were asked whether they would like to work in a full-time employed position. Journalists working part-time were asked to explain the reason for this type of employment. If they chose the statement "I could not find a full-time position", this relationship was declared involuntary. It is important to mention that the question of the voluntariness of atypical work brings a small subjective moment in the investigation. The ascription of voluntariness may be imprecise, which should be taken into account. Nevertheless, the question allows us to obtain more information about the type of (atypical) employment in order not to label all atypical employees directly as precarious. Previous studies have shown that many journalists are freelancers by choice and are satisfied with this situation (Massey and Elmore 2011; Meyen and Springer 2009). Since, usually, fixed-term contracts do not get deliberately chosen by workers (Destatis (Statistisches Bundesamt)), 2022), they were automatically classified as involuntary in this study.

Methodology

Drawing on a survey from the sociology of work (Amable 2006), the following aspects¹ were queried besides the key variables presented in Table 1, in order to receive additional information about the potential precarious situation of journalists: To find out whether journalistic income allows journalists to cover their living expenses (see

Brinkmann et al. 2006) and accumulate financial savings, the survey included the following two questions: “How often does your income from journalism (excluding supplemental income) allow you to cover your entire living expenses?”. “How often does your income from journalism (excluding supplemental income) allow you to cover unforeseen expenses?”. Since literature shows that secondary employment and financial support of third parties often goes hand in hand with precarity (Deuze and Witschge 2020), moonlighting activity was another aspect captured with the survey (“Do you currently work in other fields besides journalism?”) as well as financial support (“Which types of financial support do you receive?”). Besides these central parameters of precarity, the survey consisted of questions addressing the sociodemographic characteristics of journalists such as age, gender and educational status. In addition to this, journalists were asked to give information on the professional context they are working in such as media type and its reach as well as the position within the newsroom.

The study is embedded in a funded research project on precarity in (German) journalism, which investigates the working conditions of journalists of different employment conditions². Within the project, an online survey was designed with the tool “Soscisurvey”. Since every second journalist in Germany is a member of at least one professional association (Steindl, Lauerer, and Hanitzsch 2017) and freelance journalists often are difficult to reach within the newsrooms, the project relied on the recruitment of participants *via* journalism associations. This decision implies the limitation that the study may exclude journalists who are not member in one of the associations. Since one might assume that it is particularly the most precarious journalists who cannot afford a membership, this aspect must be considered when interpreting the findings.

The survey link was distributed via online channels (social media, mailing lists) of the biggest journalism associations in Germany (among others: German Federation of Journalists, DJV, and the German journalists union, dju in verdi) and remained in the field from October to December 2020. The study targeted professional journalists who work in the news media as their primary occupation and therefore excluded participants working in journalism as a second job. In this study, working in journalism as a primary occupation means earning more than 50% of the income from journalistic activities or spending more than half of the working hours on journalistic work (Weischenberg, Malik, and Scholl 2006).

The survey raised much interest in the occupational field, and the dataset counted a total of 983 cases. Cases with no income information were deleted from the sample since the income situation of journalists represents an important indicator for precarity (see Figure 1). The final dataset for this study counted 861 valid cases. About 40% of the sample are female (37.7%) and the journalists are, on average, 48.14 years old. The largest part of the sample is freelance journalists (42.5%), while 33.7% have a full-time position and 7.4% a part-time position. 16.4% of the respondents work as flat-rate freelancers, which means they have the status of a freelancer but earn a fixed sum each month. The high proportion of freelance journalists of this sample compared to other studies in Germany (Lauerer, Dingerkus, and Steindl 2019) may result from the recruitment *via* journalism associations and should be kept in mind when interpreting the findings. Most surveyed journalists work for daily newspapers (38.2%), what reflects the fact that journalism in Germany is a

print-based occupation (Steindl, Lauerer, and Hanitzsch 2019). 14.5% of the respondents are online journalists, working for an online outlet stand-alone or an online outlet of an offline outlet. The average income for journalists was calculated as 2337 euros, being lower than studies have shown in 2014/2015 (Lauerer, Dingerkus, and Steindl 2019). This deviation may occur due to the different proportion of freelancers in the samples.

Results

As shown in Table 2, over half of the respondents work in a non-precarious working situation (54.5%) and 45.4% in an (acute or latent) precarious working situation.

About a quarter of all journalists work acutely precarious, meaning they earn less than 1388 euros per month from journalism and/or cannot rely on a pension- and unemployment insurance. The results also show that in general, 73.4% of all respondents were classified as atypical based on the definition of the study, meaning not working in a standard employment of a full-time permanent position. Not all atypical journalists were also classified as precarious, however, the majority was: 59% of all atypically working journalists can be considered as (acutely or latent) precarious, $\chi^2(1, N=861) = 174.4, p = <.001$.

Calculated as a binary variable (female/male), the data reveals a significant effect between the gender of journalists and their precarious status (see Table 3).

These findings may be related to the fact that significantly more women (11.4%) than men (4.7%) in the sample work part-time, $\chi^2(6, N=860) = 20.7, p=0.002$, and women ($M=2057,58$; $SD = 1014,103$) also earn on average less ($t(855) = 2020,83$; $<.001$) than their male colleagues ($M=2509,70$; $SD = 1323,406$).

The results of a Fisher's exact test ($p<.01$) also indicate a significant association between the media type journalists work for and their precarious status³. The three precarious groups and their characteristics will be discussed in more detail in the following.

Table 2. Precarious types.

Types	Frequency	Percentage	Average income	Average age
Non-precarious	469	54.5	€2832 _a	49.3 years _b
Latent precarious	156	18.1	€2345 _b	42.2 years _a
Acute precarious	236	27.4	€1328 _c	49.7 years _b
Total	861	100		

Note: Groups with different subscripts (a, b, c) differ highly significant ($<.001$) by Games-Howell post hoc test. Regarding the average income, there is a significant difference between all three groups. Regarding the average age, there is a significant difference between the latent precarious and the two other groups.

Table 3. Precarious status and gender.

	Female journalists ($n=324$)	Male journalists ($n=533$)	Total ($N=857$)
Non-precarious	49.1	58.0	54.5
Latent precarious	20.4	16.7	18.1
Acute precarious	30.6	25.3	27.4

Note: Results indicated in percent. $\chi^2(2, N=857) = 6.4, p=0.04$, with effect size Cramér's $V=0.09$.

The Non-Precarious

In the group of the non-precarious, we find mainly journalists working full-time in journalism, $\chi^2(6, N=861) = 111.0, p = <.001$: 72.4% of all full-time employed journalists were classified as non-precarious, which should not come as a surprise since a full-time position often comes aligned with a relatively good income and security. With 2842 euros, the average income of the non-precarious is higher than the average income of the whole sample. However, nearly 20% (19.3%) of the non-precarious have a second job beside journalism. These are primarily freelancers and flat-rate freelancers, $\chi^2(3, N=467) = 43.0, p = <.001$.

Results show a small, but significant association between the age and precarious status of journalists, $\chi^2(6, N=857) = 48.0, p = <.001$ (see [Table 2](#)). The group of the non-precarious primarily consists of journalists in the age group 50 and older (56.3%). While about 30% of those under the age of 30 were classified as non-precarious (29.9%), nearly 60% of those over the age of 50 were (58.3%). This may be related to the fact that with professional experience, the chance of obtaining a higher position with a permanent contract increases, which may have an impact on employment conditions. Indeed, over 80% of all editors-in-chief work non-precariously.

With regard to the educational status of the journalists and their potentially precarious situation, no significant effect was found, $\chi^2(12, N=861) = 21.3, p=0.06$.

The Latent Precarious

The group of the latent precarious is defined by an income that is slightly above the average income of the whole sample, but it is also characterized by forced atypical employment. A total of 29.8% of flat-rate freelancers and 31.3% of part-time workers belong to the group of the latent precarious as well as some journalists who have a full-time position but with a fixed-term contract (15.5%). The forced atypical employment makes those journalists vulnerable to insecurity, regardless of their income. Their precarious status can not (yet) be described as acute, but due to their employment situation, they could easily get pushed into it. At the same time, the status of the latent precarious can also change into being non-precarious, for example, if a fixed-term contract gets extended into a permanent contract.

With 42.2 years (SD = 12.95), the latent precarious are on average the youngest journalists in the sample (see [Table 2](#)). A total of 41.6% of all respondents under the age of 30 work latently precarious in journalism. This finding fits the characteristic of temporary, fixed-term employment in latent precarity (see above).

The Acute Precarious

A total of 8.7% of the respondents were classified as acutely precarious because they indicated neither unemployment nor pension insurance. 20.8% of the sample is earning less than 1388 euros, which makes them acutely precarious.

The precarity status of journalists in this study is significantly related to their employment relationship, $\chi^2(6, N=861) = 111.0, p <.001$. This may not seem surprising

since the employment situation represents one of the determining dimensions of the precarity measurement in the analysis (see [Figure 1](#)). Nevertheless, it is worth taking a closer look at the employment situation and the precarity status of journalists. 43.3% of all freelance journalists belong to the group of the acute precarious, while of the full-time employed journalists, only 12.1% earn less than 1388 euros and therefore are part of the acute precarious.

The acute precarious earn on average 1328 euros per month ($SD = 815.05$). The question of how often journalists can make a living from their income from journalism was answered by 88.9% of the acutely precarious with “never” and by 66.7% with “almost never”. In addition, over 70% of the acute precarious indicated “never” having financial savings for bigger unexpected costs. The fact that these journalists are living on the poverty line seems evident and raises the question of how they manage to make ends meet. Nearly two out of five acutely precarious journalists (37.7%) stated to have a second (non-journalistic) job and a quarter of them (25.0%) get financial support from their partners.

Of each age group, about a quarter are acutely precariously employed. However, it should be noted that 70.1% of all respondents under the age of 30 ($n=77$) work (latently or acutely) precarious, $\chi^2(3, N=857) = 25.3, p < .001$. As mentioned above, temporary contracts of young professionals may be one reason for this; another reason could be the low salary trainees in Germany usually earn (see also [Gollmitzer 2021](#)). Nevertheless, as shown in [Table 2](#), the acute precarious are on average the oldest ($SD = 13.86$). A one-way ANOVA revealed that there was a statistically significant difference in the mean age of the three groups ($F(2, 854)=20.98; <.001$). As shown in [Table 2](#), the Games-Howell post-hoc test indicates that the latent precarious are significantly different in their mean age from the two other groups.

With regard to gender, a total of 30.6% of all female journalists work acutely precarious and 25.3% of their male colleagues, $\chi^2(2, N=857) = 6.4, p = 0.04$ (see [Table 3](#)). Also, nearly half of the journalists who work for freesheets are working acutely precarious, while the percentage for TV is less than 20%. A comparatively large number of acute precarious journalists work for online media, 32.5% of them in total. In other words, more than half of all online journalists (53.8%) work under precarious conditions, acutely or latently. This finding may be related to the fact that 52.1% of all online journalists work as freelancers, making digital news production an insecure working place. The precarious status of journalists in this sample does not significantly depend on the reach of the media they work for (local/national/international), $\chi^2(9, N=808) = 9.0, p = 0.04$.

Discussion: Broadening Our Understanding of Precarity in Journalism

Precarity as the New Normal?

Findings partially support previous research that found precarity in journalism has become the new normal (see [Örnebring 2018](#)). Although most journalists of this sample are not affected by precarity, those who are, suffer from low income and a lack of social protection. The result of a quarter of the sample being acutely precarious might appear high for a “highly developed media market” like Germany

(Josephi et al. 2019, 96). Gollmitzer (2022, 181), too, is describing the German model of regulating insecure labor as “more substantial, more robust” when comparing it to the one of Canada. However, statistics indicate that the German labor market is becoming increasingly insecure (Brady and Biegert 2017). The latest data shows that a total of 12.3% of the working population in Germany was precariously employed while 62% were described as working in a zone of security (Stuth et al. 2018). Referring to this statistic, one might conclude that the journalistic profession is particularly precarious in Germany.

The Precarians of Journalism

The data points to journalists who are most vulnerable to precarity: Freelance journalists, young journalists and female journalists. Firstly, the study follows the assumption that not all atypical employment is necessarily precarious (Kraemer 2006; Rodgers 1989). However, the atypical journalists of this sample are more likely to be precariously employed than those with no atypical contract. Related to this, the research points to a growing gap between employed and freelance journalists. The results support the findings of former surveys that freelance journalism can be described as a precarious occupation since freelancers struggle to make a living from journalistic income (e.g., Mathisen and Knudsen 2022). Secondly, the fact that the group of the latent precarious is on average younger than the two other groups sheds light on the insecure situation younger journalists are in. Media houses should prevent those relatively young professionals from slipping into a (acute) precarious situation. Permanent contracts could be a form of appreciation towards young professionals and would reduce latent precarity. Thirdly, the data showed that female journalists in the sample are more often affected by precarity than their male colleagues. This finding goes align with precarity research in general (Dörre 2007) and supports studies pointing to inequalities in the working conditions of female and male journalists (Steiner and Chadha 2022; Walters, Warren, and Dobbie 2006). If women in journalism are more likely exposed to precarity than men, this could lead to an exodus of female journalists, leading to a lack of diversity in newsrooms. The observed gender pay gap of the study points to an inequality which is of international concern (e.g., Kochhar 2023) and means that women in journalism get discriminated on the material level. It would not be surprising if this pushes them to change to a different profession (Percival 2019).

Perceptions of Precarity

The investigation raises the question of whether the surveyed journalists perceive their working situation the same way it was objectively measured. Matching objective precarity data with subjective perceptions would be an important step to pursue in future studies since also Kalleberg (2009, 9) considers the “growth in perceived job insecurity” as one key indicator of precarity. In this sample, a total of 42.7% affirmed the question, “Would you describe your work situation as precarious?” (see also Hanitzsch and Rick 2021). Of this group, which we could call the “subjective precarious”, 65.5% were also classified as precarious in the investigation and 34.2% were

not. In other words, of the 45.5%, who were classified as objectively precarious, the majority (61.7%) stated also to perceive their working situation as precarious. This shows that the self-assessment of the journalists corresponds largely to the calculation of the study along the defined precarity criteria: For 67.9% of the respondents, the subjective perception of precarity matches the objective calculation, while for a total of 32.1%, a contradiction can be observed. On the one hand, this predominant consistency can be considered supportive of the proposed operationalization; on the other hand, it shows that journalists and scholars share a similar understanding of the terms “precarity” and “precarious”. However, the fact that nearly a quarter (26.9%) of all *non*-precarious journalists of the sample stated to perceive their working conditions as precarious and 38.3% of all precarious journalists said they do *not* perceive their working situation as such makes clear that objective and subjective precarity do not always coincide. In order to find out what makes the objectively *non*-precarious perceive their situation as precarious and what makes the objectively precarious *not* perceive their situation as precarious, one could deduct follow-up qualitative studies. One assumption would be that different factors of security or insecurity in journalists’ personal lives influence how they perceive their working situation. Previous studies suggest that great family responsibility, for instance, gets perceived as a precarity risk (Gollmitzer 2014), while younger journalists might evaluate a precarious working situation as “normal” in their career (Örnebring 2018). Besides speaking to journalists themselves, qualitative approaches could be useful for examining the impact of precarity on journalistic epistemology for example by analyzing journalistic content.

The question arises why precarious journalists stay in journalism. In these terms, one might argue that the results of the study support the assumption that passion for work can compensate precarity (e.g., Deuze and Witschge 2020): Journalists accept precarious conditions because they love working in journalism. Still, further research should focus on the professional and organizational commitment of journalists.

Precarity and Epistemological Shifts

The fact that journalists are exposed to material, contractual and legal precarious conditions should prompt us to rethink our understanding of the profession. In these terms, the investigation contextualizes epistemological shifts by discussing changing organizational conditions of journalists. The precarization of the media industry may have implications for the epistemologies of journalism production, since we cannot exclude that (acute) precarity and the risk of potential poverty associated with it may impact the working routines of journalists. Previous studies have already proven that journalists have to make sacrifices in their work due to a precarious employment situation (Koltermann and Grittmann 2022). The consequences of precarity in journalism were not the focus of this research, and neither were possible solutions for the challenging trends. However, the results of this study should be seen as an incentive to investigate the relationship between precarity and journalistic epistemology. Precarious working conditions might shape journalistic epistemic practices and there is a growing need to explore the relationship between precarious work and the content journalists produce (Cohen 2017). Precarious working conditions might influence the research routines of

journalists, the quality of information and the objectivity of news coverage if dependencies arise through external influences. In other words, quantity may win over quality if freelance journalists have to produce a mass of articles in order to make sufficient income (e.g., Hayes and Silke 2019). Last but not least, precarious working conditions may also undermine public trust in journalism which is seen as an essential parameter of journalistic epistemologies (Ekström 2002). If precarious working conditions lead to a loss in quality, doubts about media may arise or get intensified. In these terms, precarity would have an impact on the “public acceptance” of knowledge (Ekström 2002, 261) produced by journalists and the reputation of media in general. Another consequence of precarity in journalism could be a shrinking profession since journalists may change careers to escape precarious working conditions (Norbäck 2019). If journalists exit their profession, this could lead to a “brain drain” in the media industry (Russ-Mohl 2015). A shrinking profession can also be expected if journalism gets less attractive for young professionals or if they decide not to go into journalism at all (Nölleke, Maares, and Hanusch 2022).

Possible Strategies against Precarious Work

Media houses should concentrate on implementing strategies to reduce precarity in order to keep journalists in journalism. Since the study has shown that young journalists are exposed to precarious conditions, one could argue that precarity is becoming a generational matter. Indeed, there are voices questioning permanent contracts for young journalists in the future (Lauerer, Dingerkus, and Steindl 2019, Löhr 2013). Decision makers in journalism have to take the responsibility over the future career perspectives of the next generation by guaranteeing them secure working conditions. At the same time, the data indicates to precarity being gender-specific. This result should lead decision makers to improve the working conditions of female journalists, be it through equal payment or more support in family care. When discussing precarity in freelancing journalism, collective bargaining could be one way of addressing the income precarity of freelance journalists (Gollmitzer 2019).

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to measure and capture precarity in journalism (RQ1) in order to identify and describe precarious workers of the profession (RQ2). The investigation offers an operationalization of precarity based on a coding process which focused on three indicators of precarity; the income of journalists, their employment situation and social protection through insurances. Journalists with an income under 1388 euros or who had neither pension nor unemployment insurance were classified as acutely precarious, while journalists working atypically on an involuntary basis were classified as latent precarious. Employed journalists with a permanent contract, an income above 1388 euros and voluntary atypical journalists with an income above the threshold were classified as non-precarious.

Findings show that about a quarter of all respondents works acutely precarious in journalism. The journalistic precariat mainly defines itself through freelancing since

the working situation of over 40% of all freelance journalists was classified as acutely precarious. In addition, the analysis demonstrates that precarity in journalism is unequally distributed, as the precarious status of journalists is related to the media type they work for, but also to their employment relationship, age and gender. While the acutely precarious have difficulties making a living from journalism, the non-precarious profit by standard employment and the material and legal benefits that come with it. The latent precarious find themselves uncertain about their future employment due to forced freelancing or forced temporary work.

However, some caution should be exercised before generalizing the results of this study to the entire population of journalists in Germany or globally. The sample selection and non-probability sample of the study implies limitations like noncoverage and self-selection bias which could lead to an under- or overrepresentation of precarious (or non-precarious) journalists. The study was not based on a representative sample, so the analysis should be applied to further samples, possibly also for international comparison. Last but not least, the study only represents a snapshot of one particular time during the pandemic, which might have influenced the results. A longitudinal study could examine the extent to which precarity in journalism is related to current crises.

The presented operationalization of precarity in journalism also has its constraints. The fact that the proposed coding process only considers three dimensions of precarity can be seen as one weakness. Therefore, future studies should include more dimensions of precarity, like for example plannability (e.g., Candeias 2008; Dörre, Kraemer, and Speidel 2006) and the appreciation of work (e.g., Brinkmann et al. 2006; Candeias 2008). This would allow a broader and less material perspective on the working conditions of journalists. One challenge of measuring precarity lies in its multidimensional character (Srakar et al. 2020). Therefore, scholars must carefully consider which precarity aspects to include in their study. Nevertheless, one potential of the presented operationalization lies in its simple implementation since the coding process does not involve complex statistical analyses. It is applicable for journalists of different employment conditions, closing the research gap also to examine the working conditions of employed journalists for precarity. Also, after adjusting the income threshold to the proper country of a study, the operationalization can be applied to samples of different countries. Furthermore, the operationalization allows a differentiated perspective on the topic by considering the intensity of precarity with three types.

The study makes an essential contribution to making precarity in journalism measurable for the first time. The empirical approach can be valuable for scholars trying to capture precarity in journalism on a multidimensional basis, aiming to look at precarity with a gradual perspective. By doing so, the paper allows an objective perspective on the journalistic precariat and should motivate media houses to address indicators and sources of precarity.

Notes

1. The measurements of the following variables are included in the [Appendix](#).
2. At the time of the research approval of the project, no ethical approval was required. The survey was conducted completely anonymous and no identification of individual journalists is possible.

3. Note: Due to small cell frequencies, Fisher's exact test was used.
4. The "Künstlersozialkasse" is a health insurance scheme in Germany that allows artists like journalists to be part of the social security system. It treats freelancing artists like employees and pays approximately half of their health insurance and pension fees they would normally pay.

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Appendix

Table A1. Measures.

Variables	Survey Questions	Options
Age	"How old are you? "	_____years
Gender	"What is your gender?"	Female Male Diverse
Educational background	"What is the highest level of education you have completed? "	Not completed high school Completed high school Bachelor's degree or equivalent Master's degree or equivalent Doctorate
Media type	"How would you describe the background of your main employer, or the main outlet you work for? "	Daily newspaper Weekly newspaper Freesheet Magazine Television Radio News agency Online outlet (stand-alone) Online outlet (of offline outlet)
Reach of media	"What is the reach of the media you work for?"	Local Regional National Transnational
Position	"What is your current position within the newsroom? "	Editor in chief Desk head/assignment editor Editor Photojournalist Producer Reporter Anchorman Author Trainee Other: _____
Covering living expenses	"How often does your income from journalism (excluding supplemental income) allow you to cover your entire living expenses? "	Always Often Rarely Almost never Never
Financial savings	"How often does your income from journalism (excluding supplemental income) allow you to cover unforeseen expenses? "	Always Often Rarely Almost never Never
Moonlighting activity	"Do you currently work in other fields besides journalism? "	Yes/No
Financial support	"Which types of financial support do you receive?"	Scholarship State benefits (e.g., parental allowance) Financial support from partner Financial support from other family members Other: _____ None