INTERNATIONAL LABOUR OFFICE: *CONDITIONS OF WORK AND LIFE OF JOURNALISTS*

EXCERPTS FROM AN INTERNATIONAL SURVEY, 1925/26

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Abstract

This article contains excerpts from a 1925/26 survey by the International Labour Office in Geneva, published in 1928, and involving journalistic organisations in 33 countries in Europe and the Americas. As a historical document the results of the survey anticipate and reinforce the development of a professional model of journalism – they call for adequate financial compensation, job security, and personal welfare for the individual journalist. As such the survey illustrates the plight of the rank and file after World War I in several countries.

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Introduction

The study of journalists and their work belongs to a narrow field of sociology and history that has never been exposed to the public in ways that other aspects of media performance have with their rich, if not sensational narratives. This compilation of findings related to the circumstances of journalism in a post-World War I atmosphere is a reminder of the widespread plight of journalists as "brain" workers since the industrialization of the press. As such it is also a historical document that anticipates and reinforces the development of a professional model of journalism and offers insights into the social and economic determinants of a professional class as it is rising from its proletarian roots. More specifically, the demands of a professional class are focused on sufficient financial compensation, job security, and personal welfare for the individual journalist.

Journalists have consistently played a major role in the creation of everyday realities, beginning with mass circulation newspaper accounts since the late 19th century and continuing with a variety of genres across print and broadcast media that constitute the contemporary world as people know it. They represent the intellectual workforce that creates and delivers news and information in forms or styles that reflect their understanding of professionalism and the role of journalism in modern society.

Previous accounts of journalists have frequently focused on famous editors, or publishers, and their accomplishments, in the form of biographies that provide insights into the routines of daily journalism. However, these accounts produce a history of journalism that remains a top-down narrative celebrating ownership or institutional existence rather than the essential contributions of journalists as newsworkers. This survey, at least implicitly, recognizes the worth of journalistic contributions to society, the personal sacrifice of individual journalists, and the need for significant changes in the conditions of employment.

The plight of the rank and file becomes a subject of social scientific inquiries in the mid-1920s, when the first international survey of journalists was conducted through the efforts of the International Labour Office to shed light on the work of journalists in several countries. The result is a unique document in the history of journalistic labour relations, with specific information about the professional life of journalists and their dependence on discouraging if not oppressive circumstances of employment.

The following excerpts are from this 1925/26 survey, conducted by the International Labour Office in Geneva and published in 1928. It addresses the principal journalistic organizations in 33 countries in Europe and the Americas, across cultures and ideological barriers. The 219-page document is divided into six parts (The Profession, The Status of the Journalist, Termination of Services and Settlement of Disputes, Working Conditions, The Labour Market, and Provident Institutions) and includes two appendices containing the questionnaire used for the study.

The report reflects the conditions of journalism after World War I against a background of an emerging media culture with the rise of broadcasting, the success of picture magazines, and the triumph of the movies. The press is on the defensive as a major source of information and entertainment, introducing changes (such as the Americanization of the European press) with the help of journalists, who create a modern image of the newspaper.

At the same time, questions regarding the status of journalists and their professional and existential future had become labour issues in many countries; the survey reflects the urgency of problems related to compensation and the protection of the workplace, in particular, and credits the rise of collective bargaining and the strength of professional organizations – or unions – with major changes in the journalist's life and work.

By focusing on these issues, the survey creates a collective image of journalism at the beginning of the twentieth century that is reminiscent of much earlier times; it also reinforces earlier, often anecdotal accounts of the dismal conditions in the workplace at the beginning of the twentieth century as it exposes the neglect of the welfare of journalists as workers.

As a historical document, this survey is a first attempt to focus on the most blatant abuses of power regarding the treatment of individual journalists as intellectual workers. In addition, the report offers a comparative analysis of journalistic practices in a number of countries and provides an image of journalism as a neglected, problem-ridden profession in need of organization and reform.

Generations later, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, questions ranging from compensation to workplace security (or tenure) suggest the continuation of a struggle – and not only in developing countries – for improved working conditions and the rights of journalists as intellectual workers. The latter involve issues of professional autonomy, including freedom of expression, in a world of growing media conglomerates and diminishing opportunities for diverse representations of reality.

The concerns of contemporary journalists have shifted and now focus on the very nature of the profession at a time when definitions of journalism are changing under the impact of economic interests. The new journalism of the twenty-first century is defined by the information gathering and distribution function of journalism rather than by identification with the public interest in the broadest sense of the word. Thus, journalists experience yet another period of social or political instability or insecurity as employment becomes difficult and professional demands shift to respond to a service (print media) or entertainment (television) model of journalism.

The 1925/26 survey succeeds in identifying major areas of professional concern that have continued to occupy the profession for all of the twentieth century, from economic security to professional training. With shifting definitions of journalism, however, the profession faces a more fundamental problem as its own survival depends indisputably on the survival of democracy.

The following excerpts focus on the major observations that typically precede comments on the specific conditions of work in particular countries.

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The Profession

"For some decades a progressive transformation of the methods governing the establishment and management of a newspaper have been going on. Industrial methods have penetrated into all branches of journalism. A great periodical is a considerable undertaking today; like a mine or a foundry; it is owned by a limited company. At its head there is a paid manager who is responsible to a board of directors. The undertaking which he directs is an enormous machine which is perpetually working and which shifts of workers must continuously furnish with the material it devours. It is in fact easier to stop a weaving loom than the printing presses of a newspaper."…

"A new phenomenon is looming in the newspaper world and tends to accentuate this character of capitalistic enterprise: it is a process of concentration, the formation of vast trusts aiming at controlling all or a part of the press. In the United States these methods, which have been applied for some time, are beginning to convert certain companies, and hence certain men (who secure the control for themselves) into 'newspaper kings,' just as there are 'steel kings' and 'automobile kings' … The industrial character of such undertakings is clear; thought is regarded merely as a commodity which must, according to the locality, assume the form the most likely to ensure its sale … This, it may be said by the way, is not necessarily and in itself an evil from the point of view of the journalist, since such trusts on a purely commercial basis willingly leave each new paper acquired to follow its own tendencies, whereas those trusts which may be called 'trusts of opinion' modify the policy of the papers they acquire it is contrary to their own, and thus force many members of their staffs to resign and look for other employment … Be it as it may, the journalist of our day is dependent on a vast organisation of a more or less industrial type, and this is the power which determines the working and living conditions of journalists." …

"Journalists have thus found themselves face to face simultaneously with difficulties proceeding from two main orders of facts: on one side, the change in the methods of running the paper; on the other side, the economic upheaval of the post-war period, which affected all categories of workers and which had very serious effects on journalists. Hence two grave crises, the one material, the other moral."

"The moral crisis has its origins in the economic catastrophe of the last fifteen years, which resulted in what may be called a depreciation of intellectual work, and in the adoption of industrial methods by the Press which threatened to reduce thought to a mere ingredient in the commercial prosperity of the undertaking. The journalist, however, sets store by his intellectual status. He has opinions inseparable from his professional activity; he wants liberty to express them. This liberty, which he has won in times gone by and defended at the cost of long efforts against hostile public authorities, he will not see menaced nowadays by the new organisation of the Press. He has set to work to protect it by means some of which are purely moral, such as the right of signature … and others economic, such as compensation in case of resignation for reasons of conscience." …

"The material crisis is serious. Provoked or aggravated to an equal extent by the transformation of the Press and the economic upheavals following on the war, it revealed an evil from which journalism has suffered since its beginnings, but which was becoming more and more threatening as the profession developed – incoherence, arbitrariness, the absence of a code which would define rights and duties, and would introduce a little order, and at the same time a little justice, in the conditions in which this great modern profession is unfolding." …

"The new structure of the newspaper has build up before the intellectual collaborators an impersonal power which opposes a blind resistance to their individual efforts, and this at

the very moment when the economic crisis, the transformations of the modern world (those for example, due to the appearance of wireless telephony, which will not be without influence on the profession of the journalist), and the internal changes in journalistic work, such as the introduction of specialists, have created new problems the solution of which is an absolute necessity for the intellectual workers of the Press." …

The Status of the Journalist

"The engagement, the work, the cessation of employment of a journalist, and in a general way the aggregate of relationships existing between the employee of a paper and its publisher may be determined by four different methods: (1) by simple verbal agreement; (2) by individual written contract; (3) by collective agreement; (4) by law."

"Generally speaking, it is in the order in which they are enumerated that those four methods have occurred chronologically; in fact, the history of journalism shows that after having been governed by the system of verbal agreement, the work of the journalist was subjected to that of the individual written contract, which finally gave place to the system of collective agreements and legislation." …

"The verbal agreement which existed almost everywhere at the dawn of journalism survives at the present time in certain countries, either owing to attachment to certain customs, or because journalism in these countries has held to old forms and has not been affected by the industrialisation of the great modern newspaper, or, again, because even if it has been affected by this industrialisation it has maintained old systems of employment owing to the inaction and the impotence of journalists." …

"The individual written contract has the advantage of giving to its signatories a security which the verbal agreement does not furnish. It serves as the basis for the settlement of disputes which may arise between employer and employee, and furnishes each of them with at least the possibility of appealing to the provisions – sometimes very vague ones it is true – of the Civil Code concerning the hiring of labour." …

"Journalists have so well realized the inconveniences of these systems of individual contracts, oral and written, that they have boldly followed in the footsteps of the manual workers and have sought to obtain the establishment of collective agreements capable of giving them all the advantages of a general and uniform determination of the conditions of work." …

"The collective agreement, in the eyes of journalists, constitutes an immense progress from the individual contract, oral or written. It may be said that the principal aim of their professional organisation which formerly, as has been said, was to provide mutual aid, is now to obtain, maintain, and improve collective agreements."

"It is certain that the collective agreement affords great advantages. In the first place it determines a uniform regulation of working conditions, thus guaranteeing the maximum of equity and making possible the simplification of conditions of engagement., as well as enabling greater stability in the management of the newspaper to be achieved. If it only possessed the advantage of codifying and unifying existing customs, its worth would not be open to doubt. But that is not its only value; the conclusion of the collective agreement and its maintenance imply the existence of firmly constituted professional organisations. To secure a collective agreement the professional organisation had to be possessed of vitality, and to be endowed with energy such that it could obtain, as a rule, not only a unification of the working conditions, but also their improvement." …

"Lastly, the law sometimes lends the journalist the aid of its sanctions. Legislation may concern the journalists in several ways. Sometimes there are general laws to which both

manual and brain workers are subject … Sometimes there are laws more limited in their scope, applying, for example, only to non-manual workers or a part of them, the 'employees' … Sometimes journalists are expressly and specially referred to."

"As journalists endeavour to obtain collective agreements, so do they endeavour to secure the passing of laws covering their particular status. They rightly think that general laws, or those, more restricted, which relate to the large class of private employees, cannot fully meet their case. The conditions of journalistic work are so exceptional, they are different in so many ways from those of manual work, from those of 'employees,' and even from those of other intellectual professions, that it would be impossible to arrive at a reasonable and efficacious regime for journalists except by means of special laws." …

Working Conditions

"When an examination is made of working conditions in any profession whatsoever, one of the first questions which arises is that of hours of work. How much time should the worker devote to his task? How much may he reserve for his leisure and his rest? Is there a danger of overwork in the profession which he practices? Do work, leisure, and rest harmonize in such a way as to ensure the individual's physical and intellectual development, the satisfaction of his artistic tastes, and his need for recreation and recuperation? Or does the calling dangerously encroach on the other requirements of life?" …

"The main reason … is that intellectual work, by reason of its indefinite nature, and, as it were, its dispersion, does not lend itself to precise measurement. Intellectual activity is at every moment bound up with the life of an individual to such an extent, and professional pre-occupations have such a tendency to reappear at every instant of intellectual activity, that it is impossible to say precisely at what moment an intellectual worker begins to produce what his profession requires of him and at what moment he stops." …

"We do not wish to depict the intellectual worker as a person whose untamed spirit, rebelling against all discipline, works in its own way, launches out unexpectedly and respects neither time nor place. To be sure, the intellectual worker has his moments of deliberate concentration, and he has his desk, where the most tangible part of his task is performed. But surrounding these moments of intense and disciplined work, which may vary with the individual, there is an ill-defined zone in which it cannot be said that he has finished with his professional work but in which, on the other hand, purely professional activity cannot be recognised with certainty." …

"The time that each journalist devotes to his work cannot be accounted for, as conditions vary with the post and with the person, and his work is generally done partly in the editorial offices, partly outside (in the town, at courts, etc.) and partly at home. We are compelled to confine the computation of hours to the only controllable periods with clearly drawn limits – those which the journalist spends in the offices of the paper." …

"What has just been said with regard to hours of work must, however, be borne in mind, and if the journalist's working day as expressed by figures given here sometimes seems rather short, it must not be forgotten that it only represents for most grades (with the exception of sub-editors as few grades whose continued presence is a necessity for the paper) a part of the time which they devote to their profession. Finally, it must be recalled that these hours are for the most part hours of the night." …

Night Work

"Many newspapers, perhaps the majority, appear in the morning, which means that their staffs must work mainly at night. In numerous editorial offices the bulk of the work is done by artificial light. The journalists who belong to these papers are thus exposed to all the drawbacks of night work: danger to health, disturbance of family life, etc. When they are employed on papers which appear in several editions, some in the morning and others in the evening, there is a temptation to lay day and night tasks upon them which are apt to be beyond their strength, unless the undertaking is large enough to be able to organise some kind of rotation as do the big news agencies which work without interruption night and day, and resort to the system of three shifts of eight hours each." …

Weekly Rest

"Weekly rest, which has taken firm root, and which has been sanctioned by law in most professions, is still an open question in journalism in several countries. There was a time when the modern conception of the daily newspaper seemed to make journalism a profession apart, to which established usages in the matter of rest could not be applied. Journalists have had to fight a long time to get the necessity of a weekly rest day admitted … It is not without trouble that the daily papers which do not possess a large staff organise a system of shifts that allows a part of this staff to take its days of rest. Specialisation, which is the rule in the modern Press, increases these difficulties still more, and hardly anywhere but in the countries in which custom or law prohibit the publication of papers one day a week can one be sure that the weekly rest is observed in all editorial offices." …

Annual Leave

"Of all the intellectual professions, very few are as exhausting as journalism. Such information as is available on the subject, scanty as it is, suffices to indicate what the establishment of good statistics of morbidity and mortality in journalism and their comparison with the statistics of other professions would disclose. A journalist must have a constitution of iron. The time of his work, which is done in great part at night, the conditions in which the work is done, and among those conditions especially the rush imposed by the high speed of newspaper work, are all causes of fatigue. We know to what extent the journalist is threatened by premature old age ... The night shifts, the intensity of the work, and various other causes may very easily undermine his energy even at that age [of forty]." …

"After the limitation of the hours of work, the regulation of the methods of night work, and the institution and the strict observance of weekly rest, the obtainment of adequate holidays is a question of vital importance for the journalist. No one has more need than he of bodily and mental rest from time to time. It is only on this condition that he can satisfy the requirements of an arduous calling and avoid overwork which threatens to make him old before his time."

"The judicious determination of the hours of work and rest, vitally important for him at the present time, will become more and more necessary in the future, as the industrial character of the newspaper becomes more marked, compelling the labour of the mind to follow the movement of the machine and to adopt the processes of intensive production." …

Salaries

"It is in the domain of salaries that the difficulty of journalism in many countries has experienced, and is still experiencing, made itself more felt. For a long time all the efforts of

the journalists' organisations had to be employed in remedying this situation, and in many countries it is still the principal, if not the only, subject of the preoccupations of the members of the profession."

"It is very difficult to obtain precise information with regard to the salaries of journalists in the various countries. As with regard to hours of work, so with regard to salaries, the greatest diversity reigns. Everything depends on the nature of the post and the aptitudes of the journalist; salaries varying by 100 per cent, can frequently be found in the same class of work. To the difficulties of distinguishing the categories of posts, of comparing functions which are often widely different as regards the task imposed, the hours of work and the responsibilities incurred, is added the purely material difficulty of obtaining information relating to the amount of individual salaries." …

"It is evident that, in addition to the expenditure on clothes which journalists must often incur on account of the profession itself (which obliges them to maintain a certain standard of appearance), the purchase of books and periodicals required for the purpose of keeping au courant with events, threatens to become a heavy charge. Happily some undertakings do not hesitate to allow large sums for the constitution of libraries, which are also supplied by means of free and exchange copies. Further, the association of journalists endeavour to constitute libraries for the use of their members."

"These few advantages do not alter the fact that salaries are so low in certain countries that journalists are sometimes obliged to engage in accessory occupations, or even to consider journalism as a spare-time profession which only serves to complete the larger income that they derive from other sources. There are many, too, who are compelled to work for several papers, none of which pays them a living wage. This situation is not without serious disadvantages as much from the point of view of the labour market, as from the point of view of retiring pensions where these are in question." …

Provident Institutions

"To the anxiety which the possibility of an abrupt termination of employment may cause among journalists must be added the apprehensions created by the possibility of an illness or an accident which would reduce them and their families to distress, or to say the least, would put them in a very difficult position. The salary of an ordinary journalist seldom allows him to save enough to provide for his future. He is, like so many other workers, at the mercy of a chance event that would deprive him temporarily or permanently of his ability to work … Yet the fact that he is a professional worker does not save him from being defenceless against the risks which confront other workers, and his salary, little higher than the maximum named in the insurance laws, barely suffices to keep him alive and to meet his professional expenses. The profession compels him, in fact, to keep up appearances to a certain extent, and to buy books and periodicals so that he may be constantly well informed as regards current events." …

Conclusions

"One cannot but be impressed by the striving to standardise and systematise the profession. The movement towards a definite status, towards permanent conditions, is general; the desire for stability and regulation is universal. These developments present different aspects in different localities; here and there they reveal themselves in the creation of co-ordinating organs and special judicial bodies and in a codification, steadily becoming more rigid, of what was once a congeries of ill-defined customs."

"One of the most salient features of this progressive organisation of the profession, this advance towards a clearly defined status, is the activity displayed by journalists united in increasingly disciplined and cohering organisations. Grouped, to begin with, in purely friendly associations, they imparted a more and more accentuated trade union character to their organisations as the industrialisation of the newspaper developed, and the economic difficulties besetting them grew serious. They were among the first of the brain workers to see the advantages of professional organisation as a means of protection, and to employ it deliberately. They have thus given the lie to the assertion that the professional classes are instinctively hostile to all forms of professional solidarity and to all organised effort. Here we see brain workers – and journalists are unquestionably brain workers, for they are covered by any definition which may be given to the term – who have succeeded in constituting highly combative associations, thanks to which they have achieved striking gains in various quarters."…

"Journalists in different countries, however, did not all react in the same way when confronted with these difficulties. Some, as we have seen, deliberately copied the example of the manual workers, and unhesitatingly applied their methods as soon as they realised the advantages to be obtained by this policy. Others, seeing in their individualism, and their antipathy to all kinds of organisation, one of the characteristics of the brain worker's status, and bent, above all, on maintaining what they considered to be the hall-mark of a class of society, refused to employ methods that were looked upon as alien to the profession. It may be said that for them the trade union activities of the manual workers, far from serving as a model, were an obstacle to the adoption of defensive principles in professional matters." …

"In recent time journalists have built up associations organised on purely trade union lines, and far from deploring this policy as one entailing the abandonment of some of the characteristics peculiar to their professional status, they are obviously proud of the system of agreements thereby attained and the successes won by their efforts, as well as the example of solidarity that they have given." …

"If at this stage we examine the provinces in which the efforts of journalists have been made, the points to which they have been directed, and the results obtained, we find that there are three classes of problems; these we shall briefly survey."

"The first class has to do with salaries." …

"The salary problem was thus in the forefront of the journalist's cares, and his first efforts were towards a collective solution which would leave as little room as possible to arbitrary proceedings. In many countries the establishment of a minimum salary was secured; the harmony between the entire scale of salaries and the cost of living was restored, and the editorial staffs of many newspapers were rescued from a lamentable situation. Here and there journalists have succeeded in safeguarding the advantages gained by the introduction of the sliding scale (whereby salaries vary with the cost of living), or at least by securing the right of submitting urgent and unforeseen matters to a permanent body."

"The second class of problems, without exception, springs from the general anxiety with regard to security of tenure."

"To co-ordinate and systematise the profession by regulating, recruiting, by introducing rules governing dismissal, by delimiting carefully the grades of newspaper workers, each with its rights and duties clearly defined, and by combating the dangerous competition of amateur journalists; to make war on unemployment; to organise insurance; to guarantee a just and sure settlement of disputes – these are all tasks aiming at satisfying the crying need for security in a profession in which the cares of the morrow have so long predominated, and in many places still do." …

"The third group of problems to which journalists have devoted their attention relates to working conditions."…

"The worker must be protected from the fatigue caused by overwork, and from the harmful exploitation of his faculties, a small part of which, to say the least, he is entitled to devote to interests outside the profession. Working conditions, including hours of work, night work, weekly rest, and holidays, have been described in the course of our survey. It must suffice to recall that, in spite of the elusiveness of the questions of hours of work and night work in journalism, they have been dealt with in one or two countries by collective agreements; that the problem of weekly rest, the solution of which was rendered difficult by the modern notion of a daily paper, has been solved in many countries by legislation; and that the problem of holidays, the easiest to solve from the technical point of view, has received fairly liberal treatment in most of the existing collective agreements, and in one special law." …

"It is obvious that young men will not be tempted to enter a profession, doubtless full of allurements, but incapable of furnishing a decent livelihood. Answer may be made that the law of supply and demand may come into play at this moment, and that as the number of recruits falls salaries will naturally rise. This process, which occurs in other professions, would be but imperfectly realised in journalism, where the working of the law is disturbed by the large numbers of people who derive advantages from practicing journalism without being obliged to earn their living by it … If skilled workers are indispensable merely for the supervision of moving machinery, for the running of a paper it is, a fortiori, essential to have a staff whose mental qualities will make its reputation. The needs of the Press clamour louder and louder for the constitution of a corps of experienced specialists, and this can only exist by the payment of adequate salaries and by the institution of various safeguards tending, not to exclude all outside contributors, but to eliminate production of inferior quality by fixing rates of pay so high that the paper automatically rejects all unqualified amateurs."…

"Not to speak of humanitarian reasons, which require that a worker who throws his whole being into an undertaking shall receive a salary that enables him to live decently, it is to the advantage of the Press that a paper should not neglect those who are the life and soul, but should rather equip itself with a staff capable of ensuring its upward progress." …

"The question of recruitment, for example, which involves that of professional training, is certainly not sufficiently advanced. Journalists are not in agreement on the subject; if they are unanimous in desiring a certain standardisation of recruitment and professional training, they differ as to the means of attaining the end."

"The constitution of a more or less protected profession, the criteria for discriminating between the professional grades (more especially between the inside and outside staffs), the attitude to be adopted towards amateur journalists; in brief, the entire complex of factors affecting the composition, the internal organisation of the profession, and its relation to other callings, these are also questions which do not appear to have reached a stage of development fit for treatment by general measures at the present time." …

"To sum up: at the present time there are two kinds of problems which the evolution of journalism raises, and which stand in need of solution by reason of its progressive transformation into a more clearly defined profession; there are general problems common to all workers, manual and intellectual, and there are problems peculiar to the profession. All are, in differing degrees, suitable for international treatment; some in the distant future, others, two or three in number, at the present time."