

The LaunchPad Report

Research on the challenges facing emerging, next-generation journalists passionate about social justice journalism

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INTRODUCTION & OVERVIEW

At a time of great social upheaval in the United States, the public's need for journalism that exposes inequities, investigates systems of disenfranchisement, and centers communities that have been historically ignored or harmed by the media has never been greater. Unfortunately, the emerging generation of journalists who will create much of this sorely-needed coverage is at an increasingly high risk of being pushed out of the news and media industry as we know it today.

For decades, American newsrooms have been facing multiple existential threats to their business models, their reputations within the audiences and communities they serve, and their futures in the modern media landscape. These challenges, coupled with a history of internal structural inequity that favors white and male journalists, have resulted in an industry culture that undervalues young, aspiring and entry-level journalists, particularly those who come from working-class backgrounds, communities of color and other underrepresented groups, many of whom enter the profession with hopes of tackling social justice issues. Hereon in this report, we will use the term “emerging journalists” to refer to this specific group.

Today, more so than ever before, these emerging journalists are struggling to find meaningful employment and reach necessary benchmarks in the early stages of their careers. Fortunately, just as the nation has once again begun to reckon with the racial injustice at the core of law enforcement and other institutions, so too has the community of news and media professionals begun to reckon with the problematic norms, practices and values that exclude and discourage certain people from becoming professional journalists. This is not a new problem, but it is one that has recently been laid bare by the historic movement for change, justice and equity.

This problem is both personally devastating for the individuals who experience it and deeply concerning for the industry as a whole because the future of journalism relies on the professional success of its upcoming generation of journalists. Without the new perspectives, innovative thinking and open mindedness that they bring—not only to the stories they tell, but to the newsrooms and other professional spaces they occupy—the industry will stagnate and continue to struggle with decades-old problems. It will ultimately fail to adapt to the needs of modern audiences.

Renaissance Journalism has conducted a six-month inquiry to identify the many challenges emerging journalists are facing as they attempt to establish themselves within the industry and report on the social justice and equity issues of our time, including structural racism, systemic financial inequality, health and housing inequities, etc. We were particularly interested in identifying challenges that regularly become barriers to entry for these emerging journalists and eventually force them to turn to other industries to sustain themselves, thus robbing the news industry of another promising journalist. This research was inspired by our experiences working with many young reporters and storytellers who struggled—and in many cases, failed—to find meaningful employment in the years after graduating from college, despite their success in the classroom and demonstrated skills.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

From this six-month inquiry, we have learned:

1. Emerging journalists need adequate compensation to do good work, establish their careers, and survive.

Entry-level reporting roles—including long-term newsroom positions, as well as part-time or temporary arrangements like internships, fellowships or contract positions—often pay less than a livable wage. The vast majority of interviewees reported struggling to afford to pay their bills and basic expenses on an entry-level reporter’s salary. Many interviewees told us that they were working multiple jobs (often in fields other than news and media) in an effort to make ends meet while reporting professionally.

Additionally, industry norms often require emerging journalists to work for free or next-to-no-pay—at least for a time—in order to build a starting portfolio, which they will need in order to be considered for even entry-level newsroom positions. This period of work without meaningful pay can be a barrier to entry for those who are not financially able to weather it, especially journalists of color, first and second-generation American journalists, and journalists who come from underserved communities, who are less likely to have access to financial safety nets such as family wealth.

Several interviewees reported experiencing food or housing insecurity, and one disclosed that she had recently chosen to live in her car, so that she would “be able to afford to work” as a full-time freelance journalist. This state of economic insecurity is not sustainable for many emerging journalists and is the reason that many of them change career directions.

“I kept saying yes to every freelance project I could take, just making enough money to survive,” said an interviewee who recently graduated from UC Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism.

“I’ve been trying really hard here, because journalism is so sorely needed, but it’s really hard. It’s tearing me down. I don’t know how much more I can take before I’ll have to move,” said a journalist from Utah.

“It’s so normalized that journalists are asked to write and do work without being paid for their time...The biggest thing is that I’m undercompensated for my work, always. I think that’s a common thing in the industry: being overworked and underpaid,” said a freelance journalist who covers women’s issues.

2. Emerging journalists often don’t have access to supportive mentors or substantial professional networks they can call upon in times of need.

Many interviewees reported feeling that they did not have any professional connections that they could turn to for career advice, editorial support or encouragement. One freelance journalist we interviewed referred to this as a “guidance vacuum.” Emerging journalists are most likely to experience this challenge during the time between graduating from college, where many reported benefiting from the mentorship of professors and other faculty, and finding their first meaningful source of employment, where they would usually be placed in regular contact with an editor or other manager.

This lack of professional support can have a wide range of impacts on an emerging journalist’s career. For some of the journalists we interviewed, a lack of trusted mentorship resulted in a lack of knowledge around industry standards for subjects like wage expectations, contract negotiation, copyright ownership, etc. Others reported feeling alienated and without direction when they faced instances of racial bias or other forms of discrimination in the workplace, and felt they did not have even a single trusted colleague or superior to whom they could turn for guidance and understanding.

We suspect another consequence of this challenge is an unawareness of opportunities for career development and advancement. In the ever-shrinking news industry, one’s professional connections have become increasingly important in the pursuit of career advancement, including being recommended for new or better jobs, being invited to exclusive professional convenings, being considered for industry honors and awards, etc. Without trusted mentors and a robust professional network, emerging journalists are often overlooked for these opportunities and excluded from these professional spaces.

Additionally, many of the journalists we spoke with reported feeling isolated and ignored by other reporters with whom they hoped to connect with professionally. These feelings of isolation can be very discouraging for emerging journalists, particularly journalists of color and others who do not feel that the industry is representative or inclusive enough of their communities.

“Being a person of color in this small world, you need people you can lean on,” said a journalist who works at a public radio station in the San Francisco Bay Area.

“It’s this rudderless feeling. I don’t have the support of teachers anymore, and no long-term editors to choose from. I’m freelancing, but those aren’t the types of relationships that foster growth,” said a freelance journalist from California.

“And you often need to know the right people to actually hear about these jobs,” said a graduate from San Francisco State University’s Department of Journalism.

3. There is a dearth of opportunities for emerging journalists to pursue social justice and equity-focused stories.

Many of the journalists we spoke with said they aspire to report on social justice and equity issues, but that they are rarely given the chance, due to time constraints, newsroom expectations or other barriers. Typically, several interviewees told us, mid-career and veteran journalists are more likely than entry-level reporters to be “trusted” to cover social justice and equity issues. As one freelancer put it, “There’s a big divide in the way that young journalists are treated by publications. That has been really challenging.”

Several of the interviewees said they continue to pursue careers in journalism specifically because they identify with and come from communities that have historically been left behind or ignored by the media, and they are determined to highlight the issues and voices within those communities.

“There are communities that are underrepresented, they have so many unspoken voices, and it would be so great if someone could help them share their stories, and it would help people understand them better,” said a freelance reporter from California.

“When people have their own narratives stolen or hijacked, we want to be able to give their voice back to them,” said a journalist who covers the Latinx community in San Francisco.

“That’s what motivates me. To prove people wrong about my people,” said an aspiring journalist in Southern California.

4. The news industry’s tendency to undervalue certain journalists—particularly journalists of color, working-class journalists, etc.—can result in high levels of emotional distress, burnout, and even poor health outcomes for those who are affected.

The vast majority of our interviewees described an industry-wide culture of undervaluing (and even exploiting, in some cases) entry-level journalists and interns, particularly those who represent demographics that are considered minorities in the news industry. In practice, this undervaluing of certain employees can take many forms. A common example is emerging journalists being required to do menial work that is not in their job descriptions, such as getting coffee or lunch for their colleagues.

Additionally, many of the emerging journalists we spoke with reported having faced multiple instances of systemic bias—such as sexism, racism, etc.—which had, in many cases, caused them to feel undue stress at work or while looking for work. Several interviewees said this career-related stress had taken a toll on their mental and physical health, either leading to or exacerbating anxiety, depression and insomnia.

We believe this phenomenon regularly drives many promising emerging journalists away from the industry all together.

“There’s a big divide in the way that young journalists are treated by publications. That has been really challenging,” said an Oregon-based journalist.

“I feel like a lot of them [internships] are designed to bring people into the system as it exists already, and get their feet wet, and eventually become a part of that...But at worst, they are designed to recruit token POCs and then not hire them,” said a freelance reporter working in Oakland.

“There were times when I was dreading going to work, and I just felt like, ‘This isn’t how it’s supposed to be,’” said a news intern for a major Texas-based newspaper.

RESEARCH METHODS

Media and Research Coordinator Kaylee Fagan conducted 24 one-on-one interviews with journalists at various stages in their careers, most of whom had a demonstrable interest in reporting on issues of social justice and equity, such as immigration, the prison industrial complex, housing and health equity, among others. Rather than conduct a large-scale survey, our goal was to understand the lived experiences of the interviewees.

At the time of the interviews, roughly 80 percent of interviewees had been working professionally for less than five years. The remaining interviewees were a combination of experienced journalists, newsroom leaders or managers of entry-level journalists, and reporting interns. A small percentage of the interviewees were former journalists who were not actively pursuing work in the news industry.

In an effort to identify the greatest and most common challenges emerging journalists are facing, the interviews were conducted with the use of a standardized questionnaire. The questionnaire asked each interviewee to detail several aspects of their professional journey, including general work experience, reporting interests and, most importantly, the challenges they’ve faced as they’ve sought meaningful employment in the news industry.

Renaissance Journalism also hosted two small-group discussions with interviewees who volunteered to further contribute to the study. In these discussions, we asked the participants to expand on some of the challenges that were described in the interviews and to explore possible solutions.