

# “It Was Journalism that Abandoned Me”: An Analysis of Journalism in Portugal

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**Abstract:** Over the last few decades, journalism in Portugal has undergone a series of changes in both its practice and its conditions. This reconfiguration has been reinforced by the noticeable rise in layoffs and fixed-term contracts, particularly after the implementation of an austerity program over the last few years. This has led many journalists to abandon their job, either voluntarily or otherwise. The present article aims to analyse these trends through the socio-professional trajectories of ex-journalists, seeking to understand what led to the end of their careers, what came after, and what is their current outlook on journalism.

**Keywords:** journalism, ex-journalists, work, precarity, unemployment.

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## 1. Introduction

Journalism in Portugal is going through a turbulent period, evident in the demise of print publications and the emergence of new digital media. In both cases, change entails a reconfiguration of work routines and employment policies. The aim of this article is, first of all, to analyse these transformations in light of the socio-professional trajectories of ex-journalists. Furthermore, studying journalism on the basis of the experiences of those who no longer practice it enables us to grasp what led to withdrawal from the profession, which in turn allows us to identify new areas of employment (or, indeed, unemployment) and their degree of proximity with the media universe.

The current labour relations morphology makes it difficult to offer a precise definition of the notion of ex-journalist. To limit the universe to those who, at some point, held a journalist ‘professional card’ could prove too restrictive. Therefore, the notion of ex-journalist, as it is used here, encompasses any person who, having practised journalism, does not do so currently, having found a different job or having looked for one in a distinct professional area.

The shift in the ways and conditions of doing journalism have led to the end of many journalists’ careers. In Portugal, this phenomenon results, first and foremost, from collective redundancies in the context of either bankruptcy or downsizing, which as a rule target journalists with more years of service and higher wages (Baptista 2012). Its incidence has increased over the last few years, due to the implementation of the austerity program by the so-called Troika<sup>1</sup> in 2011, as a response to the sovereign debt

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<sup>1</sup> A group comprising the International Monetary Fund, the European Financial Stabilization Mechanism and the European Central Bank.

crises. This has had a negative impact on a wide range of economic sectors, including the media (Quintanilha 2019; Silva 2015; Sousa and Santos 2014). Alongside redundancies, media companies have also started to resort, in an increasingly systematic manner, to fixed-term contracts. While formerly restricted to a predominantly young minority, recent studies indicate that these types of contracts have been extended to nearly half the journalists working in Portugal<sup>2</sup> (Miranda and Gama 2019; Cardoso and Mendonça 2017). These trends, international in their overall contours (Gollmitzer 2014; Deuze and Fortunatti 2010), have led many – both young and older journalists – to leave the profession voluntarily (Pacheco and Freitas 2014). This does not necessarily spring from a dissociation with the core values of journalism, but rather with the possibility, or rather, the impossibility, of holding on to them in the exercise of the profession, as well as with the income they are able to secure through it (Cohen, Hunter and O'Donnell 2019; Sherwood and O'Donnell 2018; Davidson and Meyers 2016). The research presented here is based on an autobiographical approach, seeking to articulate an analysis of the abandonment of journalism as a social process with a reflexivity that emerges from the temporal and spatial distance from a profession one has left behind.

## 2. Working Conditions in Journalism

The very definition of journalism has been one of the main objects of sociological debate since the publication of the first studies on the topic. This difficulty had been prophesied by Max Weber, who ascribed journalists “the fate of lacking a fixed social classification” (1919/1991, 96). The range of available concepts – such as ‘profession’ or ‘job’ – reflects, among other aspects, the changes and development of an occupation. While in the early days of journalism, as James Carey wrote, the journalist was “an independent interpreter of events”, the appearance and consolidation of mass media changed the nature of their role (1965, 32). There is, then, a tension between, on the one hand, the production of a form of knowledge with minimal external constraints and, on the other hand, the exercise of an activity that, historically, has followed the development trends of industrial capitalism, namely the ever-growing separation between workers and their product (Hardt and Brenner 1995). In this sense, journalism is a paradigmatic condition of the current forms of labour, first and foremost because it has been, since the beginning, a form of *immaterial* labour, devoted to the production of the “informational and cultural content of the commodity” (Lazzarato 1996, 132). The latter emerges from the mobilisation of knowledge and other elements of human cognition, both social and affective (Hardt and Negri 2000). Journalism includes these traits to the extent that it performs an activity that is a) intellectual, grounded on reflexivity or imagination; b) affective, implying, on the one hand, the investment of one’s self in work *qua* vocation, increasingly conflated with the profession’s field of action and, on the other, the production of emotions in the recipient (Siapera 2019); and c) social, since the journalist’s activity has as its reference points the practices of an *interpretative community* (Zelizer 1993). The proponents of this concept go as far as to defend that the social cooperation inherent in immaterial labour embodies an autonomy and a self-valorisation to which the company is forced to adapt, its control being limited to an external intervention (Hardt and Negri 2000).

While cooperation is indeed an intrinsic factor in these new forms of labour, in which journalism is included, it would be difficult to frame such cooperation as a pure expression of autonomy, cut off from hierarchical guidance and oversight. Historically,

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<sup>2</sup> The extension of temporary contracts runs parallel to a decrease in salaries, with over 50% of journalists earning less than 1,000 euros a month (Miranda and Gama 2019).

newsrooms have been a laboratory for technological innovation, but also a battleground in which different social interests clashed (Hardt and Brenner 1995). This conflict is not only grounded on work-related issues, such as salaries, but on the nature of work itself. The introduction of digital technologies in news production has profoundly reshaped journalism, but also the journalist. Initially this was celebrated as the dawn of a new information era, where citizens would be journalists and these, in turn, would enjoy better conditions, such as easier access to news sources or direct control over the editing process. Yet, as highlighted by critical political economic analysis (Hardy 2017), these benefits have been overshadowed by a business strategy whose response to fiercer competition has undermined the remaining features of the journalist's craft (Deuze and Fortunatti 2010). Although journalism is more than familiar with tight deadlines, the new digital framework has promoted 'race-against-the-clock' production routines. Writing has become a hasty and deskbound task, frequently based on imitation and/or adaptation of other news media (Boczkowski 2010), or of pieces provided by the public relations industry (Hardy 2017). At the same time, new job functions, such as editing or social media management, came into being, demanding not only more working hours, but new skills. These call out for a new kind of journalist, able to master several kinds of "languages", from conventional writing skills to the most sophisticated technical knowledge (Singer 2010). The on-the-job application of these skills is subject to real-time monitoring based on criteria such as page views and shares, through which the journalist's performance is evaluated (Garcia et al. 2018).

The growing precarity among journalists is an essential factor in the success of these changes, contributing to a growing proletarianisation. The latter, however, does not take on the form it did in Fordist factories, as instead the assembly line has given way to the project and/or short-term and goal-oriented work (Gill and Pratt 2008, 18), the completion of which may be decisive for keeping the job. Precarious contracts, low wages and even unpaid work through internships become, then, a means at the service of an activity one still believes in, in which one's hope of a promising future is invested, and in the name of which one makes the necessary sacrifices (McRobbie 2016; Corrigan 2015; Andersson and Wiik 2013; Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2011). This stance is the product, as well the producer, of inequalities among immaterial and/or knowledge workers (Mosco and McKercher 2008; Dyer-Witthford 1999). Both in editorial offices and away from them, one can point to various categories of the journalist class, according to the conceptual framework proposed by Davidson and Meyers (O'Donnell and Zion 2019; Davidson and Meyers 2015). The status that carries higher prestige is that of *professional journalist*, given the considerable degree of autonomy they enjoy in their activity. Symbolically, this kind of journalist is driven by a public ethos for which the professional community operates as a benchmark; and, materially, they have a firm and stable condition offered by the company as a member of the permanent staff, or by the market as a freelancer (Davidson and Meyers 2015, 203-204). Thus, the *professional journalist* enjoys a privileged status when compared to the *bureaucratic journalist*, whose decision power is limited by the constraints one finds in more hierarchical organisations (2015, 198); and to the *entrepreneurial journalist*, faced with a greater degree of risk and contingency in developing their projects (2015, 200). Despite certain limitations, the situation of the journalist that fits into the latter category is optional and should therefore be distinguished from that of the *unwillingly entrepreneurial*, who offer their services to a range of clients due to their inability to secure a more stable position, as an alternative to unemployment (2015, 201). Unemployment

is indeed included in the typological grid put forward by these authors, given the growing number of unemployed journalists who write in blogs, for instance, or carry out similar tasks in other types of organisations (2015, 205).

### 3. Methodology

The use of a biographical approach to research this topic allows us to understand the changing conditions of its protagonists throughout their careers in journalism as well as beyond it, alongside their current perception of their career path. From the study of socio-professional trajectories it becomes possible to point to *recurrences* among the various individual cases, as well as to the socio-structural relations that frame their lives, without pushing to the background the specificities of each individual case (Bertaux 2010). Thus, in parallel to social and historical time, this methodology seeks to analyse the *biographical time* that comes to the fore in each testimony, a non-linear temporality that deviates from a strict chronological order (2010, 78). Furthermore, the accounts offered include not only descriptions but also perceptions, assessments and even suppositions. It is the articulation between these various elements that enables us to gauge to what extent a particular event can be thought of as a moment of crisis or, in fact, a regularity.

The present research is based on semi-structured interviews with 28 ex-journalists, conducted between 2016 and 2017. The respondents were selected through snowball sampling. The large majority are women from the Lisbon area<sup>3</sup>, aged between 35 and 55, with a degree in Social Sciences and Humanities (Media and/or Journalism, in particular) who have practised print or radio journalism at some point.<sup>4</sup> The respondents' choice of profession, with some exceptions, strayed from their socio-professional origin, as most of them were the offspring of *technicians and semi-qualified workers*<sup>5</sup> (civil servants, non-managerial state company employees or small retailers or shopkeepers, for example). To ensure the anonymity of the respondents, their real names were replaced by pseudonyms and the titles of the publications they worked with were suppressed. The content analysis of the interviews was carried out through MaxQda software by means of thematic categories (Bardin 2009, 199) grouped into three major axes – journalism vocation and performance; employment conditions; unemployment and/or abandonment of journalism.

### 4. Broad Sketch of Journalism Trajectories

The reason that led the ex-journalists interviewed to pursue a career in journalism is one of the few elements they share. Amid elements such as the love of reading, the chance of “unearthing and sharing stories” (Mário), the desire to “lend a voice to the voiceless” (Mariana) or an interest in a particular field, such as sports or culture, most of the testimonies fail to mention any material or financial motive. Their priority, so their testimony tells us, lay, rather, in what Weber called the “passionate devotion to a ‘cause’ (*Sachte*)” (1919/1991, 115), the defining trait of a *vocation*.

Consensus among the interviewees is broken, however, when it comes to their entry into the profession: here we find the first signs of a gap between ex-journalists with

<sup>3</sup> One of the limitations of this study lies precisely in focusing its analysis on the country's capital, failing to address, for instance, labour conditions at a regional level.

<sup>4</sup> Print and radio journalists tend to share a more vulnerable labour situation when compared to those working in television (Miranda and Gama 2019, 170).

<sup>5</sup> Non-managerial mid-level technical workers, with secondary school or higher education certificates (Estanque and Mendes 1997).

more years on the job, with careers that started between the mid-70s (after the April 1974 revolution) and the mid-90s, and those who entered the editorial offices at a later stage, when the effects of digital media were starting to be felt. Among the first, internships were generally remunerated through fixed-term contracts or service contracts, which were common in the first years on the job. The prevalence of this kind of employment relationship did not, however, generate a sense of uncertainty, as expressed in the testimony of Telma, who worked for a weekly newspaper at the time:

I was self-employed, under a contract for services regime, but did not feel insecure, precisely because my continuation in the newspaper was never in doubt [...] I did not feel precariously employed [...] I worked just like the people on the permanent staff, it was identical, not the slightest difference, I just wasn't on the staff.

Telma would indeed sign a permanent contract later, as was the case with almost all of those who initiated their careers in journalism before the end of the 1990s. A large portion of them would go on to integrate into the editorial staff, a sign of career progression.

A preliminary analysis suggests that the relation between these ex-journalists and their profession displays all the defining traits of *professional journalism*. Besides a greater contract stability, their testimonies stress the friendly work environment and camaraderie among colleagues. Alongside a “very selfless atmosphere, where we all learned from each other”, as recalled by Mário, a radio broadcaster for several decades, there was also a “sense of enthusiasm, we were all happy going in to work”.

Their identification with the profession does not mean there were no conflicts with management. Some of the job changes were, precisely, a response to dissatisfaction with a director, a demotion or removal from previous functions, as was the case with Miguel, who was “put on the shelf” in public radio where he had been working for eight years, five of which were spent as an editor. This decision, which took place prior to the privatisation of the company, reflected the subjection of a kind of journalism that was “if you will, less spectacular (maybe), but more objective and more fact-based” (Miguel) to a new informational rationale dictated by commercialisation and *infotainment* (McChesney 2008; McManus 1994).

The expansion of this logic in Portugal can be linked to two major events: firstly, the de-nationalisation of the press and radio broadcasting that took place after the 1989 Constitutional revision, clearing the path for the creation of large media conglomerates (Silva 2015); and secondly, the phased development of online journalism in Portugal since the mid-nineties. Various testimonies point out the implications of creating digital editions, such as the need for speedier publication. The result, according to Telma, is “atrocious, because the conditions are not there for a better journalism”, which requires “a lot of resources, a lot of time, work, dedication, research”. Thus, given the trajectories of the older respondents, the general trend is that of a shift towards *bureaucratic journalism*, within which the chances of pursuing a vocation become ever more remote.

Among ex-journalists with fewer years on the job, these changes did not come about in the same way. Firstly, internships were, on the whole, unpaid, with a few exceptions funded by state institutions. The experience of working in more than one internship is also more common; a symptom of greater difficulty in finding a job and, as a result, of the necessity to keep ‘enriching’ the CV. Secondly, as can be seen from Table 1 at the end of this article, the accumulation of experiences in journalism and the

range of contract relations is wider. Although less so than in the case of older ex-journalists, the majority of younger ex-journalists did eventually reach a more stable work situation. The trajectories that led up to it, though, were more tortuous, judging by the number of fixed-term and service contracts. Overall, recourse to the first does not seem to have been determined by any kind of temporary need. There is no substantial difference, in that sense, between the kind of work that is framed by this fixed-term contract and the job descriptions of journalists on the permanent staff – if anything, the former can be described as an underhanded extension of the trial period. The service contracts, in turn, cover two types of labour relations: that of the *freelancer* – and one should stress that the ex-journalists under this regime did not quite fit into the ideal type of the *entrepreneurial journalist*, as they remained tied to a single client; and that of the salaried employee, who, despite prearranged function and wage, is officially working under the legal regime of the freelancer or service provider, and is thus excluded from the rights guaranteed by law.<sup>6</sup> Regardless of the different hues, this status is seldom a product of choice, given its uncertainty and low income (Mathisen 2019; Cohen 2015; Raito and Lahelma 2015; Gollmitzer 2014).

Finally, despite differences in their trajectories, the recognition of an *ethos* in the work performed throughout the years is less common among younger journalists. While their experience is far from homogeneous, varying according to factors such as thematic area, most testimonies mention difficulties in fulfilling this purpose. Besides the obstacles posed by digital journalism, scarcely distinguishable from those already mentioned, some testimonies are rather revealing in terms of the kind of work they were asked to do in specialist magazines or newspaper supplements. These kinds of publications are put together through invitation or news pieces and reportages commissioned by companies, a sign of the media's growing dependency on external investors. Although the assessment of this experience is not wholly negative – given the chance to, at least, be away from the desk or even travel – there is an awareness that, as phrased by Margarida, co-responsible for the edition of an automobile supplement of a weekly magazine, the content produced “is not journalism. It was enjoyable, I wrote some nice reportages, but it wasn't quite what I was looking for, I didn't feel like I was saving the world”.

The scenario, then, is that of greater distance from the ideal type of *professional journalism*. This distance is the result not only of the prevalence of precarious labour relations throughout their professional trajectories, but also, even among the journalists with permanent contracts, of the new parameters of the journalistic product. Hence, their relation to their profession situates them predominantly in the space between *bureaucratic journalism* and *unwillingly entrepreneurial*.

## 5. The “Wretched Day”: The Forceful End of Journalism

The end of the journalistic career is, to a great extent, brought about by processes of bankruptcy or company restructuring, which preferentially target workers with more years in the firm (Baptista 2012) and salaries above 1000 euros per month.<sup>7</sup> This, as previously mentioned, reflects changes in the media landscape, particularly after the

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<sup>6</sup> Among these, there is a difference, which is not always clear-cut, between journalists under ‘retainer’, who do not have a fixed schedule or place of work; and those under ‘false service for contract’, who fit all the material conditions that define an employee (assigned functions, work schedule, place of work) except that they have no contract.

<sup>7</sup> In the period when the interviews were conducted, minimum wage in Portugal rose from 618 euros to 649 euros a month.

2011 imposition of an austerity program. Although the latter did not target media companies specifically, it shaped a social and economic scenario which, inescapably, produced effects in this area. Besides diminishing advertising revenues, due to a crisis in the marketing industry, the circulation of the main national newspapers declined substantially (Sousa and Santos 2014). The restructuring processes that were subsequently put in place were not only responsible for the unforeseen end of journalistic careers but also for generating a higher degree of scepticism towards the future among those who survived these measures.

Among the respondents who were made redundant, there is a clear prevalence of older ex-journalists, some of whom had editorial positions, as was the case with Pedro, a journalist in a sports publication for a period of over twenty years. The first signs of what the future held appeared in 2008, with a first collective layoff, which later resulted in a severance agreement, that included, specifically, what he calls the “editorial desk’s black sheep”.

These measures, as he sees it, were of a preventive nature. The company was acting in anticipation of the context of a worldwide economic and financial crisis that loomed on the horizon. The reduction in personnel had direct consequences on the work to be performed from that point onwards, as, alongside the wage freeze, the workload “was now shared among the ones that remained”.

A change of director in 2013 would, temporarily, roll back this change:

This process came to an end because [the director] thought that a sports newspaper with over seventy years of history had to hold on to its memory; that it was important to keep the journalists that had been there the longest, so they could pass on some of their knowledge to the younger ones; he tried to sign all the service providers in the section into the permanent staff... and he did, for a few of them. And he tried to instil a more journalistic approach to how we addressed sports matters.

His time as a director was, however, rather short-lived, and the former director was reappointed after a year. Although the reason presented for this change was a drop in sales figures, Pedro thinks that it came about “because he did not go along with the layoff process that the administration wanted to pursue and so [...] he left”. Pedro’s close ties to the first director led to his dismissal as an editor. From then onwards, “I realised at once the scenario that was being played out. Three years down the line, I was invited to terminate my contract because of my high salary”.

If, in this particular case, redundancy was by no means a surprise, other testimonies reveal that for some it was rather startling. A journalist since 1987, Laura was laid off in the beginning of 2009, alongside dozens of colleagues from various media outlets belonging to the same entrepreneurial group. Initially, the decision came as a surprise, given her solid career and the various “war trophies” (Laura) she had picked up along the way. In her testimony, she interprets the decision as a result of her refusal to publish a retraction of a news piece on tourism, the content of which had led a company to threaten to pull all advertising from the newspaper. Even though she could have left at once, she decided to keep on working for the months remaining until the end of the contract, “because I always thought of myself as a journalist, and nothing else”.

During that period, Laura made a point of dressing in black every day, “because I was grieving for my job”, a form of symbolic protest that is reminiscent of what James Scott calls *hidden transcripts*, that is to say, subliminal criticisms through oblique signals with no explicit political charge (1990). Laura also joined a strike staged against

the companies in the media group responsible for the collective layoffs. In the end, “I walked out holding a huge bouquet of flowers, orchids, which my boss gave to me and, while everyone in my section clapped, I walked out into the unknown, with a lump in my throat, just as I have now”.

The rupture that this event represents in the biographies of those who go through it means that various moments in the layoff process are deeply imprinted in their memory (Zion et al. 2016; Gabriel, Gray and Goregaokar 2013). Laura’s exit from the editorial office on her last day is one such moment. Small acts and occurrences which would usually fade into oblivion become the objects of detailed description, not because of any intrinsic relevance, but, as in the case of Elisa, because they are tied to the announcement of her layoff: the call she did not pick up “because I was getting myself ready”; the voice-mail message from the editor, calling her to a meeting; the arrival at the newspaper and the image of “three or four of my colleagues coming out a meeting room with teary eyes”.

The feelings stirred by her recollection of the process are, nonetheless, conflicting. While, on the one hand, it is hard to let go of “that wretched day at the [publication title], both for those who stayed and those who left; watching fifty people putting their things into cardboard boxes and walking out the door”; on the other hand, there is an equally vivid memory of the day when “across all age differences, there was this great sense of solidarity”, which manifested itself in the organisation of a strike:

that week, the strike took place just a short while after the announcement of the collective layoff [...] and there was a meeting of the interns, who had everything to lose, because they were probably the next in line to integrate the newspaper work force, because that’s how it goes, as they’re cheaper, more hopeful, but they made this gesture, deciding ‘we will not put our shoulder to the wheel, we will not make this edition, because it’s their turn now, but we’re next’.

Like Laura, Elisa’s inclusion in the group of approximately fifty workers who were to be laid off – journalists, graphic designers or human resources personnel – caught her by surprise, even though signs had started to appear for a year or so – “I don’t know if I was a bad journalist or just plain naïve” – namely the termination of the contracts of some older journalists, as well as an 8% pay cut.

The following days were spent working in the editorial office, “not quite all there, but there anyway, though chatting a lot and spending a lot of time in the coffee room”. One of the main conversation topics revolved around the criteria used to select the journalists that were to be laid off. Her inclusion in that list, she speculated, was due to the fact that, at the time, she was at the top of the pay scale of the online edition, with a salary of 1,200 euros per month.

Included in that same group, Filipa, a journalist in that daily newspaper throughout her career of over twenty years, highlights the lack of transparency in the process, which she only became acquainted with through a news piece in another newspaper:

a collective dismissal is not an easy thing, it is quite traumatizing for those who go through it and for the colleagues who remain [...], and there was a great deal of inhumanity on the part of the directors throughout the whole process. No precise information was ever given, and people we had worked alongside and trusted were now quite hostile to us [...] and didn’t confront us directly about the problems the newspaper was facing, and simply didn’t communicate what was going on.



Although a portion of the dismissals took place at a time when media companies were not facing losses yet, most testimonies hold the economic and financial crisis responsible. Ultimately, as mentioned by Pedro, these measures had a preventive nature, due to the impact of financialisation on Portuguese media groups, particularly with regard to the dependence on credit and capital investment (Silva 2015). Still, newspaper directors and administrations were held accountable for the way in which the process was conducted. Leafing through the various testimonies, one can identify a kind of *moral economy*<sup>8</sup> of redundancy, that is to say, a series of values and principles that should govern the process (Thompson 1971/2008): its unavoidable and exceptional nature, to be preceded by other kinds of measures, such as salary cuts across the board or among the highest earners; or the need to outline the underlying criteria and to communicate clearly with those who face redundancy.

Although it always entails a change in the socio-professional trajectory, the way people relate to the loss of their job is determined by the greater or lesser linearity of the said trajectory. The cases analysed so far tend to fit into the following categories: bound by a permanent contract, which contributes to the expectation that the job is there for the long run; a job description that comes close to the *professional journalism* type; or continuity in a single editorial office, within which social relations go beyond the work sphere, as described by Elisa:

I think people there played for the shirt, were committed, were devoted to their work at [publication name] and took pleasure in it, the atmosphere was always friendly, in spite of all the hardships.

The loss of a job has a significance that goes well beyond strictly material or financial matters, since alongside the loss of an income is the loss of a community and a vocation, something that is also experienced in other national sectors (Cohen, Hunter and O'Donnell 2019; Reinardy and Zion 2019; Raito and Lahelma 2015). These traits are ultimately a symptom of a lengthy path, or narrative arc, in which trust and loyalty are nurtured, but have since been made anachronistic and dysfunctional by new forms of labour management (Sennet 1998, 37).

Among the journalists who never came close to the status of *professional journalist*, whether because their trajectory was defined by precarity and intermittence, lacking that sense of having a (professional) *home* or a *shirt* to play for, to borrow Elisa's phrase; or because they were a long way off from their initial expectations, the end of their journalistic career seems to have been met with resignation rather than shock. Throughout her 12 years in journalism, Vanessa went through various employment situations – from unpaid internships to permanent contracts, with contracts for services and fixed-term contracts along the way – as well as, in the end, unemployment. In her last years as a journalist she worked in the editorial offices of two print publications, where she was responsible for covering reality shows. In both cases, her job forced her to work hours beyond the legally stipulated schedule, without ever having received overtime pay, and never earning more than 950 euros/month. About her last work experience, she says that “the competition between the few people that worked in the editorial office poisoned the atmosphere for everyone”. After she was told her fixed-

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<sup>8</sup> *Moral economy*, among other aspects of a more practical and tangible nature, such as uprisings and physical confrontations, can be expressed through petitions and “Rebellious phrases [...] usually (one suspects) to chill the blood of the rich with their theatrical effect” (Thompson 1971/2008, 103-4). It is important to underline that the use of Thompson's arguments presupposes the historical displacement of his concepts into the present.

term contract would not be renewed, and even though she was offered similar employment elsewhere, she decided to go another route:

I hated leaving journalism, it is still very much an open wound that will never heal, but I had been dissatisfied with the area I worked in for a very long time, with television and reality shows... It just wasn't something I wanted to keep on doing.

While in the life stories previously analysed termination meant the end of a career, in the case of Vanessa and other younger journalists precarity stood in the way of ever achieving a fulfilling career. This, in turn, created the conditions for the abandonment of journalism to be perceived as an ever-present possibility that, sooner or later, would turn into a reality.

## 6. “Not Twenty-Something Anymore”: Abandoning Journalism

The end of a career in journalism, however, is not always the result of a third-party choice, and indeed almost half of the ex-journalists interviewed chose to put an end to their activity, rather than being pushed out.

At the time when they came to this decision, most of the respondents had a stable employment relation, with permanent contracts. This does not mean, though, that there was no sense of uncertainty, as the future seemed far from promising. In Mariana's case, the acceptance of a voluntary severance package at the radio station she had worked at since 1989, initially as a clerk in the editorial office and later on the permanent staff as a nightshift editor, was the endpoint of a relation that, in her own words, fits the narrative of “dating, marriage and divorce”.

The “bloodletting of redundancies”, in its various stages, led to a “gradual deterioration”:

Imagine that you are in an editorial office and that you know that there's a colleague of yours that is drawing up a list of people he thinks are dispensable, right? And he will then make a suggestion to the boss... So, I mean, I think this is so shocking [...] The lack of solidarity, in a nutshell. Of class solidarity. [...] That was a tremendous shock. I never imagined it could get to that point.

The severance package, her newly-acquired passion for Anthropology awakened through a Master's degree, and the belief that “a few years down the line the economic conditions would only get worse”, dictated the end of her relationship with journalism.

Scepticism over the future of the profession is, in most interviews, tied to a dissatisfaction with how it's currently practiced. Ana worked for five years in the same Lisbon weekly newspaper, an experience which, as she describes it, was rewarding for the first few years, “because when I started [...] the newspaper was in good financial health”, a factor that may account for her having gained a place on the permanent staff after a year and a half.

Her specialisation in the culture area, which “was not under that much pressure”, granted her a considerable degree of autonomy, only countered by the usual limitations of journalistic work. The substantial debt accumulated by the company would, however, revert this scenario. Cuts in the number of staff journalists, as a result of various collective layoff processes, placed an enormous burden on a small editorial team. Besides her previous routine, she started writing pieces for the weekly magazine accompanying the newspaper, as well as for the online edition. From 2013, according to her,

the newspaper directors imposed a minimum output of two news pieces a day for all journalists in this section, which led to a growing sense of frustration:

they went so far as to tell me ‘Type up a Press Release, will you?’ ‘I don’t do that sort of thing. That’s not journalism’. [...] ‘Would you translate this news piece from *The Guardian*?’. ‘I’m not a translator. I don’t have a degree in translation’. Because some people have scruples. I won’t do that, I just won’t.

At the same time, journalists had to take successive cuts in their salaries which, in her case, meant a 7.5% reduction. Although her salary went back up to its previous level two years later, the worsening of the company’s financial situation led to wage arrears and, ultimately, to the company’s bankruptcy and the formation of a new company with a smaller editorial office. Although she was offered a new contract, Ana turned down the offer. More than a result of the new terms, her decision was the fruit of a reflection on the profession itself:

So, what I had decided was: as soon as the [newspaper title] closed, I would leave journalism. [...] It was not merely a matter of salary cuts [...]. It was... I like what I do but not the end result. [...] Platitudes, that’s all I ever write. Because I have no time to think. Journalism is a job that requires time to think. You need time and you need distance. [...] You have to, you need at least a day to gain some distance from it, to analyse it critically.

More than the constant racing against the clock, the new production rhythm generated by the intersection between new digital technologies and reduced editorial offices create a conflict between different conceptions of time which, in turn, constitute the expression of distinct ways of practising the profession, as well as of conflicting value systems: those held by the journalist and those imposed by the market.

Miguel attempted to withdraw from this fray, and to find a way to manage and reconcile its exigencies. With decades of journalistic experience across various media, and after six months of unemployment, he found a job at a small radio station, which mainly broadcasts music. Its “very small” staff meant he had to perform a wide variety of functions (from editing to broadcasting or copywriting) and, therefore, to a schedule that stretched beyond the terms of his contract:

Man, I would go in at 5am and only leave around 7, 8 pm. Because I had to... since the means were scarce, I would stay and try to do whatever I needed to get me through the next day, gather information that I would be satisfied with, man. [...] A whole lot of work went into it, a lot of preparation work, scheduling, making appointments.

The conditions were there for his career in journalism to come to an end. The reasons for that, he points out, were not so much tied to wage-related matters, but rather with a recognition of the impossibility of doing journalism in a way that would *satisfy him*, given the existing conditions:

I’m 51, 52 years old now. It’s tough getting up at 4.30am when you’re my age. You’re not twenty-something anymore, as I was back then. [...] I couldn’t deal with putting my face out there, so to speak – my name, in fact, and I think I have a name worth defending. Maybe nowadays nobody knows me, but for a while...

Age, the lack of means and no real long-term prospects were seen as obstacles in the way of the kind of work that would live up to the standards his professional career had previously set. It was in the name of this legacy, of a name in the journalistic world that he deemed “worth defending”, that he finally decided to leave it.

Even among ex-journalists who did not have a permanent contract, a dissatisfaction with the kind of journalism they were doing eased their choice of taking up a different occupation. In the few years she practised journalism, Susana worked in various print media outlets and went through various modalities of precarious work: unpaid internship, informal “under-the-counter” work, as she phrases it, and, finally, contracts for services as a freelancer in a daily newspaper, following a collective layoff.

Although she points to “low wages and precarity” as the main reasons for having left journalism, she also underlines the lack of time and autonomy as factors that contributed to her decision:

The thing is, I love writing, that part of it was not the issue; but there was the fact that I didn’t have time to go as deep into the subjects as I’d like to, I couldn’t pick the topics I’d like to work on and everything was subordinated to a superficial, short-term logic, favouring sensationalism and a quick turnout.

Across distinct work conditions and types of contracts, leaving journalism seems, for these respondents, to result from the chasm between how they perceived their vocation and its actual everyday practise. Among the older respondents, the impending threat of collective layoff and/or the multiplication of functions made it virtually impossible, as they saw it, to continue or to honour their legacy as journalists. For the younger ones, in turn, it was the recognition of the impossibility of building such a legacy in the current climate that made it easier to leave.

## **7. “So As Not to Die From Missing It”: After Journalism**

The socio-professional situation of ex-journalists varied according to the context of their break with the profession. Among those who lost their jobs in the context of a collective layoff or because their contracts were not renewed, one finds for the most part a downward mobility, in terms of both remuneration and status. While in some cases unemployment was a recent experience at the time of the interviews, others had faced long-term unemployment, despite their best efforts. Five years after being laid off, Filipa still responds to job advertisings for journalists “when I think it’s worth the effort, but I rarely hear anything back”. The only job offers she received, she says, were unwaged ones, and under “truly preposterous terms, such as having to produce an endless number of contents and only getting paid after having reached a given sum”.

Also unemployed for a number of years, Gabriela was forced to find work elsewhere once she stopped getting commissioned pieces from publications. At first, she says, working as a freelance journalist was “enough to get by”, although it meant a heavier workload, as she “worked from home, with two children, a husband, and then there was this sense that, as a woman, and staying at home, one has to see to lunch and dinner and the like”. In the mid-90s, “all the taps started to run dry”, and this chapter in her career came to an end in 2009. After a period of five years abroad, after which she returned to Portugal for personal reasons, Gabriela applied to several jobs. She worked at a call centre for a short period, but after three months, she says, “They kicked me out, they didn’t want me there [...], I didn’t fit in, maybe they were miffed by what I chatted about, who knows, I was leaving anyway, I couldn’t take it any longer”.

Other ex-journalists, usually younger, also sought employment in this sector, often through temporary work agencies. In several instances, when an internship came to an end or a contract was not renewed, Sara resorted to the call centre as an alternative to unemployment, to the point where it is difficult for her to trace a clear journalistic trajectory. Still, she remained attached to her perceived real vocation as a journalist, which her job at the call centre did not in the least fulfil. At the time of the interview, after having left the magazine where she worked informally for 200 euros a month, “so little I’m embarrassed even to admit it”, she was working at an audit firm, under a contract of unspecified duration, with a monthly salary of 700 euros, monitoring and assessing the quality of the call-centre services of other companies. Although she describes her work routine as low-key, she admitted to being disheartened, and was on medical leave at the time of the interview, due to work-related anxiety. Her diagnosis of her own state of health is tied, inescapably, to her relationship with journalism, which she has growing doubts about:

I’d like to return to journalism, but I’m not well, psychologically, and I think that’s because of all of this, because this year, for the first time, I seriously considered abandoning journalism altogether, and doing another degree. [...] I’ve reached a point where I really have to make a decision because my life needs to change course.

Although they are few and far between, we can point to a few success cases, where the respondents were able to escape a scenario of unemployment or precarity. At the time of the interview, Margarida was working under a permanent contract in the area of digital marketing for a multinational consultancy firm, earning a monthly salary of 1,800 euros, with benefits (car, health insurance and company stock, among others). Her current position is the result of a career change, which she pursued when her contract with a television network was not renewed:

When I was fired from [company name] I already had a plan B [...]; I thought: ‘I’ve had enough of this, I can’t take it any longer, I earn so little and work so much’, I was working in rotational shifts, I often worked until 2am, so ‘that’s it, I’ve had enough!’.

Her plan was to earn an MBA in Management, with a specialisation in digital marketing, which she did abroad. Alongside her new job, she teaches corporate communication studies in various education and training institutions. When asked as to what extent her current work was motivated by a desire to maintain a relationship with journalism, her answer is categorical: “No, not at all. If anything, I’d like to save people from journalism. I want to let them know that there’s a world beyond it”.

Among those who put an end to their journalistic career on their own initiative, their new jobs tend to remain close to the field of journalism, namely in communication agencies and services and, to a lesser degree, in academic research, which is in keeping with both national and international trends (Sherwood and O’Donnell 2018; Cardoso and Mendonça 2017; Zion et al. 2016; Davidson and Meyers 2016). Unemployment is virtually non-existent among this group, since abandoning journalism tends to involve a degree of planning, and as a rule they were able to invest the *social capital* accumulated over the years in the career change. Among the ex-journalists who started working in communications and public relations, the network of contacts developed during their former careers tends to play a key role. Often their functions reflect their specialty areas within the field of journalism. Currently employed in the public

relations department of a company, Ana points out that the articles she writes nowadays continue to appear in newspapers: “I sometimes joke around and say: ‘I used to write for [publication title], now I write for all the national media’, because the texts I produce in press releases are printed word for word, it’s copy-paste pure and simple”.

Other testimonies stress the greater freedom of expression, even if within the constraints inherent in any commercial activity. Vasco decided to create a publishing house after having rescinded his contract with a weekly publication, which gives him the opportunity of not having to

deal with someone changing my text, or placing me in an awkward position, since I’m the one making the decisions now. [...] I’m up against some of the same difficulties, I’m always on the verge of bankruptcy, but it’s my problem and I can handle it without all the other external interference. [...] I work longer hours, earn less and have more worries, but no regrets.

Giving up on journalism for academic research also springs from the pursuit of a vocation yet to be fulfilled. Isabel, a former freelance reporter for a Lisbon daily newspaper and, at the time of the interview, a part-time lecturer in a polytechnic institute, underlines the opportunity to do “continuous and in-depth research on a topic”. Still, this path is not devoid of risks, judging by the level of precarity among those who exchanged the editorial office for the university, a symptom of the lack of public investment in the fields of research and development and of the massive use of research grants or short-term contracts in the management of the academic labour force.

While, as pointed out earlier, unanimity around the issues that presided over the abandonment of journalism was fractured according to distinct career trajectories in journalism, there is a wide consensus in terms of the possibility of returning to the latter.

The unlikelihood of ever practising journalism again is not due to a repudiation of the activity or of its underlying principles, since among the ex-journalists, and particularly among those with longer careers, identification with the profession remains (Reinardy and Zion 2019). Any feelings of injustice and resentment are caused, rather, as we can see from the testimony of Alice, by a lasting attachment to it:

I was deeply hurt and grief-stricken, to be honest. I look at that period of my life as something that is best forgotten. [...] Because I truly enjoyed what I did, I loved it. And that’s what made it so hard. More than the money.

To add to the sense of grief, there is a negative assessment of the current scenario in the journalism world, of its opportunities and prospects:

It’s just atrocious. It’s atrocious what you earn these days [...] So, are there jobs out there? There are. There are some jobs, but they’re of this sort. And that sort of job doesn’t appeal to me.

In short, it is not journalism itself that is rejected, but rather the conditions in which it is practised and the product that these conditions allow to be created. The reasons that stand in the way of ex-journalists returning to their former occupation are, essentially, the ones that pushed them away from it in the first place: precarious contracts, low salaries and/or the absence of identification with how the profession is practised nowadays. This scenario makes it easier to leave behind an occupation that was lost, in fact, not only when they became unemployed, but while still working as journalists, as a result of its alienating routine (Cohen, Hunter and O’Donnell 2019; Sherwood and

O'Donnell 2018; Nikunen 2014). Towards the end of his interview, Vasco interpellates the author:

What happens is...there is a question you haven't asked but which I often ask myself, which is: 'Why did you abandon journalism?' [...] Ah! But I didn't abandon it, it was journalism that abandoned me. As Nietzsche said: 'Where there is nothing left for you to love, continue on your way'. Afterwards I didn't give it much thought. A reckless decision? It wasn't. I was just going through the motions, I was withering away and after I left, after a while, I went back to see some friends. 'So, do you miss the [radio station name]?' The fact is I missed the [radio station name] when I was still there, and that's why I left, so as not to die from missing it so much.

## 8. Conclusion

The socio-professional trajectories analysed here reveal, first and foremost, a process of reconfiguration in the world of journalism. Alongside the assignment of new kinds of tasks, which increases the workload, the overall trend is that such work is to be done at the desk through copying, translating or adapting, racing against the clock, and subject to a constant process of quantitative assessment of its readership (Witschge and Nygren 2009; Waldenström, Wiik and Andersson 2018; Garcia et al. 2018). The steady increase in the number of journalists under temporary contracts makes it difficult to offer any kind of resistance to the process. Precarity is not uncommon in this area, as attested by the trajectories of ex-journalists over 40 years old. Fixed-term contracts and even contract-for-service regimes were regularly used as the legal framework for the first jobs. However, integration into the permanent staff usually occurred after a short period.

As we move down the age of the ex-journalists interviewed, not only is the time before the first permanent contract extended, over a period during which the socio-professional condition fits the 'portfolio work' model (Deuze 2007), but in fact it often never comes to be. The choice of journalism, if one is to judge by these interviews, is grounded on the desire to practice not only a profession, but a *vocation*, associated with a set of immaterial qualities which the subjects perceive as intrinsic to their sense of self (Lazzarato 1996). This reflects an ideological representation of journalism as the stronghold of a series of ideal-type values (objectivity, public service, autonomy, immediacy, ethics), which may be deemed as naïve (Deuze 2007), and a far cry from daily production routines. Perceiving creative work as indistinguishable from leisure, due to its aesthetic and/or symbolic-expressive production or to its contribution to social justice or equality, fosters its irregular and uncertain project-based conditions (Banks and Hesmondhalgh 2009). The management of labour relations depends on this affinity, as well as on the belief in a self-fulfilling and promising future, in the name of which they sacrifice themselves, within a model of self-exploitation (McRobbie 2016; Corrigan 2015; Gill 2011). Thus, once older professionals are made redundant, *governing through precarity* (Lorey 2015) guarantees a qualified and driven labour force who, faced with the unforeseeable, are concerned with proving themselves and willing to work for a low fee, or even no fee at all. If there is self-valorisation, it falls on the side of capital rather than of the worker (Caffentzis 2003, 129).

There are limits, nonetheless. Defining journalism as work cannot disregard its substance, how it fits into a symbolic and communicational sphere. Even if, in the words of James W. Carey, the emergence and consolidation of mass media has turned the journalist into "a broker in symbols who mediated between audiences and institutions"

(1965, 32), their activity is nonetheless “a creative and imaginative work, a symbolic strategy” (1965, 36). In this sense, professionalism is a “double-edged sword” (Soloski 1999, 99). On the one hand, the search for a journalistic vocation, an affective relation to work, or the belief in a professional ethos, may operate as technologies for workers’ mobilisation, self-responsibility and meritocracy, individualising both their success and failure (Banks and Hesmondhalgh 2009; Aldridge and Evetts 2003). On the other hand, it can also imply the commitment to a cause, providing “an independent power base that can be used against management” (Soloski 1999, 100). The subordination of journalism to increasingly narrow editorial criteria (Witschge and Nygren 2009; Deuze 2007) and the chance that the continuous technological development in this area will make this *creative and imaginative work* obsolete (Nikunen 2014; Örnebring 2010) widens the gap between *professional journalism* and journalism as it is practised, which falls somewhere between the *bureaucratic* and the *unwillingly entrepreneurial* types (Davidson and Meyers 2015). As in the industrial sector, we find in this tertiary activity what Sandro Mezzadra calls an “organizational and ‘biographical’ rigidity” (2004, 324). Escaping from organisations, as Hirschman defends, may well be the worker or consumer’s last remaining response to the “deterioration of the quality of the product or service provided” (1970, 4).

In light of this principle, according to which journalism is perceived more as aesthetic work and less as commodity, one may well leave unanswered the question: who is responsible for the abandonment of journalism: journalists or media companies?



Ex-journalists, age	Jobs in journalism (years/media/work contract/management position)											Present job area, work contract
Mário, 63	72/D1/NS	89-91/ R1/PC	91-94/ R2/PC/ DR	94-05/ R1/PC	06-08/R3/FI							Unemployed
Miguel, 64	79-81/ M1/PC	82-83/W/FL	83/R1/IN	84/M2/NS/D	84-86/R1/FI	85-86/ W2/PC	87-92/ R1/PC/ DR(87-91)	92-98/ R2/PC/DR (NS)	98-03/ M3/PC/DR	03-05/ M4/PC/ DR	06/R3/PC/ DR	Communication/PR, PC
Gabriela, 55	80/D1/IN	81/W1/INF	82/W1/PC	83-85/ M1/PC	86-87/R/PC	88-89/ M2/PC	90-99/ M3/PC	00-08/FL	09-14/ FN/NS			Unemployed
Francisca, 54	85/R1/IN	86/D1/IR	87/D1/FC	87/D1/PC	88-91/ M1/PC	91-92/ M2/PC	92-94/ M3/PC	95-97/ M4/PC	97-98/ M5/PC/DR	99/M5/FI/ DR		Academy, FC
Laura, 55	87-88/D1/FI	89/D2/FC	90-09/ D2/PC									Craftwork, Business
Mariana, 53	87/W1/FL	88/D1/FC	88-89/FL	90-04/ R1/PC/DR (96-04)								Unemployed
Pedro, 51	88-89/ D1/FC (IR)	90-94/ D2/PC/D (91-94)	95-16/ D3/PC/D (99-14)									Unemployed, Benefit
Filipa, 53	89/D1/FC (IR)	90-12/ D1/PC										Unemployed
Telma, 49	90/D1/IR	91-95/W1/FI	96/MN1/PC	96-97/W1/FI	98-05/ W1/PC	06-16/ W2/PC/DR (06-15)						Communication/PR, PC
Nuno, 45	91/R1/NS	92-93/ M1/NS	94-97/D1/FI	98-00/ D1/PC	01-02/ DN1/PC/DR	03-09/ D1/PC/ DR	09-10/ D2/PC/ DR	10-11/ T/PC/DR				Communication/PR, PC
Alice, 40	94-95/ W1/IN	95-96/W1/FI	96-03/ W1/PC	03-12/ D1/PC/ DR								Communication/PR, NFC
Elisa, 41	94/D1/IR(FI)	95-98/D2/FI	98/DN1/FI	99/D3/FI	99-12/ D3/PC							Academy, Research Grant
Paulo, 42	95-99/W1/FI	00/NA1/FI	01-02/D1/FI	04-05/D1/FI	06-07/ MN1/FI							Translation, FL
Simão, 44	97/D1/IN	98/D2/FI	98-01/ D2/PC									Translation, FL
Carolina, 40	97-98/W1/FI	99/M1/FC	00-06/ W2/PC									Public Adm., PC
Andreia, 42	98-99/R1/IN	00/D1/IN	01-02/D2/IN	02-03/D2/FI	04/M1/FC	05-06/FL	07-17/ D3/PC/D (10-17)					Communication/PR, FL

Margarida, 38	99/NA1/FI	00/M1/FI	03/WN1/FI	03-04/ M2/FC	04-08/ M2/PC	08-09/ M3/FC	09/T1/FC	10/T1/FC				Marketing, PC
José, 43	99- 00/WN1/FI											Teaching, NS
Rita, 36	00/R1/IN	00-01/ W1/IR	01/W1/FC	01-03/ M1/FC	03-04/ M2/FC	05-06/ D1/FC	06-16/ D1/PC					Unemployed, Benefit
Vanessa, 38	00/NA1/IN	01/D1/IN	01-02/ DN1/FI	02-03/ D2/FC	03-10/ D2/PC	10-13/ M1/FC						Publishing, PC
Lara, 38	00/R1/IR	01/NA1/PC	03/D1/FI	03-04/ NA2/NS	03-07/ W1/PC							Call-Centre, NFC
Ana, 37	01/D1/IN	01/D2/IR	03/D2/FI	03-04/ M1/FC	04-05/ M2/FC	05-06/ M3/PC	06-07/D3/FL	07-10/ D4/FC/DR	10-11/W1/FI	11-15/ W1/PC		Communication/PR, PC
Luisa, 38	01-02/M1/IR	02-03/ M1/FC	04/M2/FI	04-06/ M2/FC	06-12/ M2/PC							Communication/PR, PC
Ricardo, 36	01-04/W/FI	05 FL	05- 06/DN1/FI									Hospitality, Business
Vasco, 40	02/M1/FI	02-03/ M2/NS	04-05/ M3/FC	05-06/ M3/PC	06-12/ W1/PC							Publishing, Business
Isabel, 37	07/ FW1/INF/D	08/D1/IN	08-10/D2/FL	10-11/ FW2/INF/D	15/ FD1/PC/D							Academy, FC
Susana, 31	07/D1/IN	07-08/ D2/INF	08-09/D1/FL									Banking, PC
Sara, 27	10/R1/IN	11/R2/FI	11/R3/INF	13-14/R4/IN	15/D1/FL	15/M1/INF	15/M1/FC	15-16/ DN1/FI	16-17/ DN2/INF			Call-Centre, NFC

Table 1: Ex-journalists' socio-professional trajectories

Key: Years (72, 73...17); M (Magazine), D (Daily Newspaper), W (Weekly Newspaper), MN (Monthly Newspaper), R (Radio), DN (Digital Newspaper), T (TV), NA (News Agency), FD (Foreign Diary), FW (Foreign Weekly), PC (Permanent Contract), FC (Fixed-Term Contract), NFC (Non-Fixed-Term Contract), FL (Freelancer), FSE (Formally Self-Employed/Contract for Services), IN (Intern Non-Remunerated), IR (Intern Remunerated), INF (Informal Labour), NS (Non Specified), DR (Direction).

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