IAMCR
AIECS
AIERI

The Political Economy of Communication
11(2), 43–57
© The Author 2024/2025
http://www.polecom.org

The Double-edged Sword of Digital Technologies: Exploring Precarious Work and Life in Serbia's Local Newsrooms

Igor Išpanović, University of Belgrade, Serbia

Key words: journalism, precarity, digital technologies, local media, illiberal democracy

Abstract:

Digital technologies and platforms have fundamentally transformed journalism and the media industry. Their position within the routines and everyday life of newsrooms has provided tools for the reinvention of the craft, but also overburdened journalists whose working conditions are becoming increasingly precarious. Such is the case for those working in local media outlets in Serbia, a post-socialist country in a state of permanent transition, where the political and the economic are continually entangled. Because of a media privatization process, local newsrooms shrunk or completely shut down. How journalists' precarious work interacts with precarious life, and vice versa, has rarely been explored, especially in regard to the influence of technology. Thus, the aim of this article is two-fold. Firstly, it expands the notion of precarious work to include the ontology of journalistic practices in countries such as Serbia. Secondly, I empirically map the points at which the digital intersects with precarious work in given political and economic conditions. The research is based on ten semi-structured, in-depth interviews with journalists working in Serbian local media. As the findings show, the pressures they experience go beyond the market, since the financial certainty is often a political outcome rooted within the polarizing Serbian landscape. In such an environment, digital exacerbates and expands the economic and the political perils of doing local journalism.

Technological tools are an enabling and disruptive force within the labour and everyday life of media workers (Örnebring, 2010). Such has occured with the intensification and widespread use of new technologies and digital platforms for the production, distribution and consumption of news. Although their accessibility and affordability in certain cases cannot be overlooked, they have also overburdened already depleted newsrooms. Journalists are asked to do fieldwork, produce and edit content for both the analogue and the digital, get involved in the distribution of the articles and video features, interact with audiences and monitor social media feeds, etc. Furthermore, these tools are not only used by journalists, but also on them, as they are pressured to meet daily quotas or

or achieve high numbers of views, likes and clicks. Finally, new technologies have contributed to journalists' increasing exposure to hate speech, surveillance and violence, especially in polarized societies and illiberal regimes.

However, many of these changes and pressures "are not inherent to digital technologies", but are an outcome of transforming production processes and management strategies within the broader political-economic context (Cohen, 2018: 572). Technologization of the working environment, as well as the individualization and flexibilization of the labour market, combine to cut capitalists' expenses, control labour and increase production levels. These phenomena didn't occur simultaneously worldwide, but since the 1980s, they have cut journalists' jobs, decreased workers' autonomy and affected control of the work process. The uncertain labour market has come to be experienced as precarity (Millar, 2014).

In journalism studies, precarity has often been approached from this political-economic perspective. Here, I contribute an ontological understanding of precarity. This aligns with Kathleen Millar's (2017: 5) engagement with the concept, as it enables the analysis of precarity as a "specific labor regime and political–economic structure" and as a configuration of subjectivities and lived experiences.

Digital technologies and platforms can be seen as a tool for surveillance and harassment of journalists. This is evident in the case of journalists working in local media outlets in Serbia, an illiberal democracy characterized by the politicization of markets and societal polarization.

From precarious work to precarity as an ontological regime

Precarity can be thought of as a labour, class and human condition. The first two categories are brought together by political-economic tendencies, rooted in the transition from Fordist to the post-Fordist capitalist development. Its key feature is flexibility, whether in terms of production process, capital accumulation or regulation (Jessop, 2005). In this context, the growth of a service-oriented economy was facilitated by the proliferation of new information and communication technologies. Thereby the prototypical neoliberal worker emerged—a flexible, always available and unattached subject, who could perform their job anytime and anywhere (Cohen, 2015). Stepping out from conventional working arrangements, the promise was that the changes would allow the individual to take back control of their labour and gain freedom in choosing what, when and how to employ it. This quickly turned sour.

The standard employment model, a staple of the Keynesian welfare state, had provided workers with the expectation of long-term, full-time jobs, stable income and protection of workplace rights (Chadha and Steiner, 2021). However, under neoliberalism the risks and responsibilities of securing these conditions shifted from employers to workers. This is epitomized by the practice of atypical employment, whereby individuals are hired on short-term, temporary or service contracts, and by the rise in new part-time jobs and gig-work (Kalleberg and Vallas, 2018). Due to the non-permanent nature of these employment relations, workers are constantly at risk of losing their job, and uncertain about finding one. Consequently, atypical work rarely offers income, "health benefits, maternity leave or other benefits" associated with standard employment (Gollmitzer, 2014: 827). Thus, workers are primed for (self-)exploitation, as the processes of flexibilization and individualization mask systemic insecurities through the illusion of personal choice (Sybert, 2023).

Guy Standing (2011) saw labour insecurity as only one aspect of precarity. In his view, the recent market transformations had resulted in the creation of a novel class, which he called 'the

precariat', a neologism accounting for the heterogenous group of individuals, from clandestine, undocumented workers to intellectuals in academia, who lost (or never had) certain labour protections. As such, precarity cuts through class structure to form multiple socioeconomic groups. However, experiences of precarity vary across historical periods, geographical locations and social positions. Trying to bring the heterogenous individuals together under one umbrella can be dubious (Millar, 2017). Furthermore, Eloisa Betti (2018) argues that stability and security of standardized employment was only a moment in the history of capitalism, localized in Western Europe and North America during the brief era of the Keynesian welfare state. Additionally, Ronaldo Munck (2013) points out that the precariat cannot be considered a new class, as class relations haven't been radically changed, a necessary requirement for the generation of a novel social formation.

Political-economic understanding of precarity has informed journalism studies over the last decade (Gollmitzer, 2014; Cohen, 2015; Örnebring, 2018; Hayes, 2021; Hayes and O'Sullivan, 2023). At first, this erosion in working conditions was attributed to the proliferation of new digital tools and platforms, lessening advertising revenue and the emergence of different kinds of media content outside journalistic institutions and organizations (Chadha and Steiner, 2021). In these circumstances, media businesses cut their expenses by offering gig-work or short-term contracts, while reducing the number of permanently employed staff, even to the point of closing newsrooms. Willingly or not, more and more journalists found themselves in various forms of casualized and atypical employment, based on "short-term rolling contracts, subcontracted work, casual work, temporary work, and freelance work" (Rick and Hanitzsch, 2023: 202). Caught in a race to the bottom, the increase of non-permanently or unemployed journalists on the labour market dropped the price of journalistic work, as they also faced the challenges of "automation, outsourcing, deskilling" (Chadha and Steiner, 2021). Simultaneously, Gollmitzer (2014) suggests that those thought of as 'typical' journalists are increasingly occupied by administrative and managerial tasks, contributing to work overload and exhaustion. For this reason, Richard Stupart (2021) doubts whether innovation and flexibility can compensate for the loss of financial, technical and personal security. All of this diminishes the capacity of journalists to perform their democratic role and hold those in power accountable. Associated stress and burnout can influence journalists to leave the profession (Matthews and Onyemaobi, 2020; Badram and Smets, 2021; Mireya Márquez-Ramírez et al., 2021).

Because precarious work spills over into other aspects of one's lifeworld, it is also necessary to conceptualize precarity as a human condition. This perspective is inspired by Judith Butler (2006; 2010), who makes a distinction between *precariousness* and *precarity*. The first is understood as an ontological state, a fundamental dependency inscribed into our existence—to be sustained, (human) life always relies on others, pure will to live isn't enough. On the other hand, *precarity* is the political reproduction of this existential vulnerability through which certain groups are disproportionately more exposed to the risk of illness, poverty, starvation or death (Butler, 2010). This approach to precarity can be particularly useful in examining journalists harsh working conditions and socially antagonistic environments, such as those in authoritarian regimes. The governments and ruling parties in these countries often target journalists and use precarity as a disciplinary tool through "severe judicial, economic, and administrative sanctions" (Aydin, 2022: 678). In other words, journalists' well-being and, sometimes, life are at risk because of the work they do, which makes the relation between work and life indivisible.

Political Economy of (Local) Media in Serbia

In 2015, more than two thirds of journalists in Serbia were in a worringly precarious position (Mihailović, 2015). In 2016, the average journalists' salary was still below the country's average (Kulić, 2020). In 2021, almost half of journalists in northern Vojvodina region had more than one job (Milić et al, 2021). Many were willing to accept unsteady and difficult working conditions to keep their jobs at whatever salary, working hours or contracts they were offered (Mihailović, 2015). A typical journalist in Serbia can be described as:

> …a person who carries significant responsibility and potential but is underestimated in society, inadequately compensated, and does not live with dignity. They have low self-confidence due to the conditions they live in.… They might not have a family, live as a tenant or with their parents, be single, earn an average salary in Serbia, and live in fear of job loss.… They work a lot, without fixed working hours, earning little or having irregular income, with an unsettled status, lacking health insurance, having compromised health, under stress, worried about their future, exposed to pressures, and with no time for family.… They don't see a perspective for their career. (Milivojević, 2011: 29)

These conditions became exacerbated for journalists working in local media outlets following the completion of a major privatization process in 2015. As a post-socialist state, Serbia committed to liberalizing the sector by withdrawing from media ownership and control (Krstić, 2023). However, the speed and simultaneity of privatization, deregulation and globalization politicized the economy and facilitated the growth of informal institutions. This continues to shape the living and working conditions of journalists today (Bandelj, 2016). Numerous "local and regional media outlets were privatized under shady circumstances" (Krstić, 2023: 10). Their new owners had ties with the political elite, without any relevant experience in running and managing outlets. Some owners only "appeared as buyers in order to take over the real estate of the media company, but not the business itself, which led to fatal consequences for the media" (Jevtović and Bajić, 2019: 1036). These backdoor purchases eventually brought about the shutdown of many regional and local media, leaving communities without information services.

Due to the fragility of the local media market, news outlets depended heavily on state and local government subsidies. The main mechanism for receiving public funds is project co-financing. Similarly to the privatization process, the allocation of money in this way is deemed unfair, biased and non-transparent, "and under strong influence of the state and the relevant ministry who favored media close to the regime" (Krstić, 2023: 11). Critical voices claimed that this process simply continued the state's control of the media by making them financially dependent on public money and the advertising agencies (which were often close to the government) (Jevtović and Bajić, 2019). In such an environment, media outlets felt the need to report favourably on their financiers' activities at the expense of information quality and political pluralism (Milojević and Krstić, 2018). This has been especially visible on a local level, where outlets, instrumentalized as mouthpieces for public authorities, became caught up in a clientelist relationship with municipal administrations. At the same time, local independent media are often prevented from receiving public funds if they are deemed critical of the government. For that reason, they often rely on the civil society sector and international donor community. In best-case scenarios, media outlets break even, generating earnings for the duration of their projects while constantly seeking out new funding opportunities

(Jakobi, 2015). Besides irregular revenues and low salaries, the political threats and long-term court cases, they are subject to existential insecurity.

Methodology

The reseach of this article addresses the mismatch between the theoretically focused literature on precarity, which emphasizes the role of technology, and the small amount of empirically oriented work which would support those claims. In response, I conducted ten semi-structured, in-depth interviews with journalists working in local media outlets in Serbia. I focused on this specific group as they received less attention than journalists in large, for-profit legacy media environments. Such local journalists are caught in a harsh and restraining political-economic web. There is seldom a "large enough audience to financially support local coverage" (Pickard, 2020: 88), while the threats and violence they experience are those of an insecure democracy, a categorization which neatly fits Serbia's current historical moment (Hughes et al., 2017). For these reasons, situating my research topic within an expansive understanding of precarity, which incorporates both the political-economic and ontological dimension, seems appropriate.

Since reconciling the ontological notion of precariousness with the analysis of precarity as a labour condition has rarely been attempted in journalism studies, especially with digital technologies as the centerpiece of consideration, I opted for an exploratory approach. This would allow me to map the key issues and establish future research questions (Millar, 2017). Accordingly, I used snowball sampling, basing the selection of interviewees on my previous experience as a journalist and on recommendations from research participants. Journalists are not a difficult-to-reach population, but there is no official or comprehensive record of working media professionals in Serbia which would enable a more representative sample. In this regard, the limitations of snowball method cannot be entired avoided. The sample potentially lacks variability, and this may restrict the generalisability of findings (Kirchherr and Charles, 2018).

Notwithstanding this, I set out to gather as diverse material as possible and conducted interviews with eight female and two male journalists. The main criterion for selection was that they had dedicated at least half their working hours to doing journalism (many local media workers in Serbia have additional roles within the newsroom, whether administrative, managerial, editorial, etc.) For a more detailed description of research participants, see Appendix: List of Interviewees.

All interviews, with one exception, were done online via the Zoom platform and lasted approximately fifty mintues each. The questions were informed by previous research on precarity, digital technologies and journalism (Cohen, 2018; Hayes, 2021; Matthews and Onyemaobi, 2020; Örnebring, 2010; 2018; Sybert, 2023). The initial segment of each interview covered included general questions concerning journalists' employment situation and working conditions. The main interview part was more loosely structured, focused on digital technologies in respect to issues previously outlined by the interviewee. Each of them were given the details of my research and signed declarations of consent. They were informed they could withdraw at any point without explanation. The interviews were later manually transcribed, and thematic analysis was used to examine the material. This approach allows for "the perspectives of different research participants" to become evident, "highlighting similarities and differences, and generating unanticipated insights" (Nowell et al., 2017: 2). After multiple readings and familiarizing myself with the data, the themes were defined and guided by the distinction between the political and economic dimensions of precarity in light of the digital transformation.

"I'm the only journalist on the books"

"There used to be ten of us here", said one journalist, "but a few years ago, the owner came and said he can only pay five of us" (Interviewee 1). Once a regional public broadcasting service, this journalist had witnessed the privatization of this local television station in Western Serbia. The local town newspaper on the banks of the river Sava encountered a similar fate, another journalist told me. After several years of struggling to make ends meet, the print edition of their outlet got cancelled and their entire staff is compelled to work on a voluntary basis.
Thus, the question is not whether the traditional media were affected by the privatization but to what extent. Staff shortages and the shutting down of departments were the most common occurrences. As one journalist working on a local television station in Vojvodina told me: "Let's say I'm the only journalist on the books" (Interviewee 8).

Another difficulty facing local journalism is that contracted permanent employment is not the norm. Journalists working for legacy media organizations and those in digital-borne outlets covered by this research had the same experience. "We all work on a voluntary basis", repeats another journalist from an online portal in north-western Serbia, "and in line with our salaries, if I may call them that" (Interviewee 7).

There is a double process of precarity at work here. Firstly, journalists in non-standard employment relationships are not entitled to most of the rights granted by Serbian labour legislation (e.g., the right to limited working hours and for paid holiday and sick leave). Secondly, the journalists interviewed were not freelancers, nor did they work as such for their parent organization. They may have had side jobs (one interviewee told me she also worked as a therapist). In another case, a journalist whose print edition got cancelled said they had lawyers and former police detectives writing for them. Nonetheless, the primary source of income for my interviewees arose from atypical employment arrangements at their local news outlet. This meant that, unlike freelancers, they didn't choose who they worked for, or the kind of job they did. Such workers were subordinated to perform delegated tasks for their media organization. This socio-economic fragility puts journalists at existential risk. Without stable employment and long-term contracts, they cannot even plan their future. One television journalist told me that their bank instalments were approved by the bank.

This dire situation is not ubiquitous. As previously mentioned, digital-borne local newsrooms do fare a little better, with some of them providing stable work environments. However, as one journalist admitted, this was an exception to the rule. Another journalist, on a long-term contract at an online portal covering northern Serbia, said:

> This is the first time since we founded the outlet that I am employed by the media I work for. So, that happened. I hope this lasts, but, of course, it depends on whether you have projects or not. So, even this contractual situation is not certain, as you cannot plan long-term, only short-term. (Interviewee 6)

This quote shows that there is inherent uncertainty even when journalists can regulate their working conditions in a more standardized way. One major factor which maintains this precarious position is the instrument of project co-financing (used by the state as well as the national or international donor community). For the government, project co-financing was imagined as a remedy to promote independent journalism reporting in the public interest. However, media outlets, especially on a local level, see this as a lifeline due to decreases in advertising and other revenues. Moreover, the

stark polarization between the ruling structures, dominated by the Serbian Progressive Party and the opposition, spills over into the media environment. Consequently, the so-called ‘pro-regime’ and critical outlets emerge. In this context, the authorities often use project co-financing as a disciplinary tool which favour politically aligned media:

> Well, it’s very tricky when it comes to, especially if you are a professional and responsible journalist, as you cannot secure funding through the only available route in Serbia, and that is project co-financing. The criteria change every year to make it harder for local media to compete in the process; in addition, it is almost impossible to get the funds if you are a professional, politically unbiased and not close to that ruling structure. Consequently, we've been left without financial support: our responses to local and regional calls for project proposals as well as ministry-sponsored contests were rejected. (Interviewee 3)

The ruling Serbian Progressive Part first came into power after the presidential elections in 2012. Since then, the country has experienced a significant “decline of press freedom, slow media law enforcement, severe political pressures, marginalization of quality and investigative journalism, political instrumentalization of media, controlled advertising market, numerous judicial proceedings against journalists and overall economic insecurity of media across the country” (Krstić, 2023: 6). All of this coincided with the completion of the privatization process. Most of the local news outlets which were on sale were purchased under shady circumstances or had buyers politically close to the government. Dissatisfied with the conditions in mainstream national, as well as some local media, many journalists established new outlets to practice unbiased and objective reporting (Drašković and Kleut, 2016). However, as the above quote shows, they rarely receive public funds and subsidies, and are forced to look for money elsewhere, usually from the international donor community. This economic predicament has political reprecussions, as these journalists and outlets are often targeted as ‘mercenaries’ and ‘foreign agents’, which further jeopardizes their work and existence.

> For these reasons, journalistic precarity in Serbia must be expanded to include both the ontological experience and specific political-economic conditions, which constantly interact, especially within critical or independent media. This is not to say that those working in ‘pro-regime’ media do not face political pressure or censorship. Precarious work and precarious life are two sides of the same coin—the journalistic profession, at large, is disproportionately exposed to job uncertainty and existential vulnerability. It is made economically and politically undesirable and risky. In the next couple of sections, I examine how digital technologies exacerbate these already precarious conditions of local journalists in Serbia.

“I do stories when the ringing stops”

Digital platforms, or website and social media, were seen by those in legacy media as both the cause and cure for the multifaceted existential crisis facing journalism. “The reality is that the print edition won’t last, I cannot say when will that be, but we need the portal to survive someday in the future”, explained a journalist on their decision to go online (Interviewee 9). A similar story was told by another interviewee about the founding of an online media outlet in Southern Serbia:

> You couldn’t find news about Nis and your hometown on RTS (Serbian Public Broadcasting Service) unless a major crime happened, or a big corruption case, things that usually spark the interest of the entire country.… So, social media and sites

> increased our visibility and interest. People want to know what is happening in their town if they are not there.…The digital platforms made the local news more accessible. (Interviewee 4)

In a way, being online was experienced as a demand, "journalists must follow the trends." One interviewee remarked that "you need to have different networks, Viber groups, account on social media, video and audio content, you need to do podcast, you need to do short features and graphics" (Interviewee 6). Others also felt they were forced to engage with new technologies and be there, since "it is not enough to only post something on your website and say: "Look what I wrote about today!" (Interviewee 5).

Whether an expansion, or an inception, digital initiatives put additional pressure on already overburdened local newsrooms by exposing the consequences of privatization and the impoverished media market. Due to staff shortages, not a single interviewee told me they had an employee who was specifically in charge of moderating the website or managing social media. In a political-economic sense, online journalism "is a potential rationalization factor because knowledge production, publishing, and distribution can be combined in one or a few employee positions" (Fuchs, 2010: 21). Thus, digital technology enabled cutting the initially high costs of news production, such as printing and distribution (through telecommunications networks for example). They enhanced the individualization process advanced by neoliberal capitalism, since these tasks could be transferred onto a single person who could do what was required with their mobile phone or laptop, which they own anyway. Therefore, not only do local journalists have to cover everything, they also have to simultaneously take up a multitude of roles and become knowledgeable across different formats, from video features to podcasts:

> So, besides being a journalist, you're often a cameraperson and frequently the editor. Then, as an editor, you're not only editing news but also packaging the features. You enter the studio, read the instructions to the editor, producer, or director, explaining how everything should be, and so on. (Interviewee 3)

As with the atypical working arrangements described in the previous section, entrepreneurialism here was not purely voluntary, but was also forced upon them (by themselves or the management). This kind of self-initiative is reflected in the experience of one journalist working for an online news outlet in Vojvodina who took on the job of managing their Instagram account, since she did not want to "see that part suffer" (Interviewee 2). This clearly shows how the burden of responsibility shifted from the organization to the individual, who out of his or her passion for the job takes up more work which often requires learning new skills. All the interviewees involved with social media and multimedia production still see journalism as their primary occupational role, which is why these tasks disrupt their workflows and muddy their working hours. "It impacts your journalistic work when you have to share something every twenty-thirty minutes; you cannot start something, then switch to sharing, and then continue where you left off", recounted one journalist (Interviewee 4).

For this reason, complex and serious journalistic pieces are often done after hours, during the night, when there are no text messages or phone calls. One journalist remarked that "Some serious stories I do after 8 pm, when there is no ringing, so I sit, start writing and work until midnight". The sentiment was echoed by all participants (Interviewee 6). This ties in with the dedication and understanding of journalism as a job. These professionals conceive their practice as a 'call', with interviewees comparing their work to that of doctors and police officers in terms of their availability

and public service orientation (even though this can be detrimental to their health). Not working but being available for work all the time is exactly what Hardt and Negri (2009) emphasize in their description of precarity. Switching off becomes difficult, if not impossible:

> It happens that I get tired, and then I turn off one phone, and on the other, nobody even knows the number. So, sometimes, I turn off that phone, and then I think, 'What if someone needed me?' And then, well, I should turn on that phone just to see if there's anything. But, you know, messages are regularly checked every day, even those that end up in the spam folder, just in case. So, I check everything several times a day just to be on the safe side. There's not really that complete switch-off. (Interviewee 3)

It can be discerned from the interviews that technological changes enter the newsrooms bottom-up. Understaffed and financially depleted local media outlets cannot afford to undertake technological initiatives on a systemic level. Previous research shows that "incomplete and nonsystematic changes within newsrooms throughout Serbia still represent one of the main problems in adapting to the digital age" (Krstić, 2023: 5). Understandably, the implementation of new technologies in legacy media is reported as slower and more difficult since they operate within rigid and hierarchical structures. Nonetheless, journalists in general still "score best in terms of sending emails and using various messaging and communication apps", while more sophisticated activities are among the lowest ranked competencies (Krstić, 2023: 5). Thus, an individual's entrepreneurial initiative should work to integrate new technologies and skills into their everyday work, an added layer of responsibility which rests upon journalists, not organizations. Through incorporating the digital into journalism, they are "called upon to renew journalism's relevance and reinvigorate stagnating business models", while simultaneously trying to find balance not only between multiple, and mounting, job-related tasks, but also their work and life (Cohen, 2015: 514).

"This guy is filming you"

Local journalists are under intense political scrutiny. Due to the distinct polarization of the political and media scene, they are often on the receiving end of threats, censorship, and institutional silencing. According to the numbers annually updated by the Independent Journalists' Association of Serbia, attacks on journalists have drastically increased since 2017—which is when the current president Aleksandar Vucic came to power—with more than a hundred incidents recorded per year. For example, 69 attacks occurred in 2016; two years later, there were 102, while the peak was reached in 2020 with 195 incidents (IJAS, 2023). As one interviewee noted, the aggressive rhetoric from the top is reflected at the municipal level as well. This behaviour comes as a surprise to her, since they are not doing "investigative journalism" or interrogating official links with the criminal structures, but are just asking regular communal questions, e.g., about the water supply in a local district (Interviewee 8).

Avoiding answering questions or not providing invites to public events and assemblies is one method of hampering journalistic work. "We were asking about some restrictions on water, nothing serious, just service information, what is the reason behind them. The authorities told us that they cannot give that information to our media, so we should ask our colleagues from other outlets" said a journalist from an online portal in southern Vojvodina province.

In such an environment, different forms of pressure and risk came about via digital means. As most interviewees remarked, in local communities everybody knows everyone. "They can find me

on the street, they can discover where I live, what I do, what car I drive, your financial situation, everything", one journalist explained (Interviewee 2). Personal information, obtained through surveillance or social media platforms, is then used to discredit, shame, or threaten journalists, who are thus exposed to greater risks within the current political configuration in Serbia:

> They filmed me for a while. My colleague Nikola, who now works at N1 (Regional Television Station), and I, we were sitting and talking, and he just told me, 'This guy is filming you.' I asked, 'Why would someone film me?' Then we realized, you could really see the person adjusting and filming. We paid and left that café intentionally and went to another. But after 10 minutes, the same guy showed up and sat near us. (Interviewee 5)

Digital technologies are not only used to further blur the boundaries between journalistic work and personal life, but also to marginalize and excommunicate journalists from local communities. One journalist was labelled as a public enemy and her face appeared on 'wanted lists' all over the town where she lived. This impacted both her online and offline behaviour, for example, she forbade her family and friends from posting photos of her:

> I had this issue where I posted a photo in a swimming suit, and they used that photo of me to discredit everything I was doing. So, they would post it on fake pages, write some captions, and similar things, all to try and discredit me. Therefore, you don't even have the right to take breaks, go swimming, or anything like that. There's a clear boundary now between my private and professional life. But my private life means that I must hide; I can't go to places where all my peers go or do similar things, because I can't allow someone to take a photo of me with a beer or a cigarette in hand. There's also a clear boundary on that side of things, where I go, when I go, and how many people can be at that place at that moment for me to join. (Interviewee 3)

Digital technologies allowed for another, novel type of organized attack on journalists and local media. They are popularly known as 'bots', a term which originally signified programs that do automated tasks. However, it evolved to encompass people who act as such on social media by sharing, commenting, and posting in favour of or against a certain policy or political figure. In 2020, the company X (Twitter) announced that it had deleted over eight thousand accounts related to the ruling Serbian Progressive Party that served to promote the party and its leader Aleksandar Vucic (Danas, 2023). Similarly, in 2022, the company Meta announced that it had shut down the bot network of more than 6 thousand profiles on Facebook and Instagram which were linked to the party (N1, 2023).

As one journalist recollected, they had a "swarm of bots" which forced them to turn off the comments section, as well as the option for readers to suggest a topic for reporting (Interviewee 7). Another, who works for a prominent online portal in Vojvodina, said they had a situation with bots for years:

> We have the option to turn off the pluses and minuses we have in our comment section because the bots are a disaster.…They are assigned tasks. You can clearly see on which news articles you get what kind of comments, number of pluses and minuses. You can tell by the news.…You know exactly what will happen if you publish something related to Vucic, or some other high-ranking officials, basically from the government, you know you'll expect an influx of bots there. (Interviewee 2)

Journalists are, thus, increasingly pushed into a regime of political and social persecution via digital technologies. Most often, they are facing and enduring these challenges by themselves, without adequate, empathetic, organizational or institutional protection. These are the networks of support, in a Butlerian sense, which they have been stripped of, but that are necessary for a life to be lived and livable. Precarity is, then, a "politically and socially produced state in which some lives have to 'beg' more – and more often – not to be exposed to injury, violence and death" (Zaharijević, 2023: 43). They are disenfranchised as a group precisely due to their profession. Similarly, various ethnic, religious or gender populations are put through politically motivated sanctions and harms in other contexts. The vulnerabilities journalists experience are especially present in insecure democracies, such as Serbia, which have "appeared after political liberalization established (or re-established) competitive elections in post-colonial or transitional authoritarian regimes without addressing highly unequal economic structures or reforming justice systems" (Hughes et al., 2017: 646). Journalists adhering to the ethics of the profession threaten authoritarian and hybrid regimes, which employ extensive resources to silence them. Critical, local journalists are especially vulnerable. Research shows that attacks on them are "less likely to attract unwanted attention when they occur in politically remote areas and where impunity is high" (Gohdes and Carey, 2020: 158).

Concluding Remarks

Digital technologies and social media platforms have changed journalism in terms of everyday tasks, newsroom roles, production processes and professional identities. The transformation has coincided with the neoliberalization of the global media market, which has exacerbated and expanded insecurities already embedded in the dominant model of waged labour and standardized employment. Presented as the solution for the failing media industry, digital technologies, such as social media platforms, and neoliberalism facilitated the construction of the entrepreneurial self—a flexible and unattached subject who could move from one company to another, from one job to the next, organizing their work according to interests and available time.

However, these changes were never designed to benefit the workers at large. They are rarely, if ever, in control of the labour process, and, as individualized subjects, they are left with very little negotiating power. Employment flexibility and casualized contracts allowed capitalists to lower their labour expenses to evade the obligation to allow labour rights and to render workers dispensable. This is why precarity is the condition of the contemporary labour market (Millar, 2014).

This is not to say that work has become precarious only since the 1980s. For the Global South, or any other non-Western society which has never experienced the Fordist welfare state, work has always been precarious (Munck, 2013). This article is not calling for the return to such a model; one must recognize that all kinds of standardized wage labour bring a particular set of insecurities, degradations and exploitations (Millar, 2017). The aim should be to use precarity as a critical concept to articulate an alternative configuration of labour relations.

This article, more modest in its contribution, examined precarity as a labour condition and as an ontological regime in order to evaluate journalists' working environments and experiences. Precarious work strips journalists of their networks of organizational, institutional and social support, and exposes them to professional, bodily and existential harm. This is especially the case for local news outlet journalists in countries where they are downgraded, attacked or discriminated against. In addition, I have argued how these risks are amplified with the incorporation of digital

technologies into newsrooms and everyday life. The capitalist market and the government can use such technologies as levers to further generate dependency and insecurity.

Author Bio

Igor Išpanović is a Junior Research Assistant at the Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory, University of Belgrade. He is a third-year PhD student in the Cultural Studies program at the Faculty of Political Sciences, University of Belgrade. His areas of interest include journalism and cultural studies, the political economy of media and communication, and media ethnography. Igor holds an MA in Communication Studies (2021) and a BA in Journalism (2020). In addition to his academic work, he is an active freelance investigative journalist, collaborating with several national and regional investigative centers in Serbia and the Balkans.

References

Aydin B (2022) Politically motivated precarization of academic and journalistic lives under authoritarian neoliberalism: the case of Turkey. *Globalizations* 19(5): 677-695. https://doi.org/10.1080/14747731.2021.1902036

Badran Y and Smets K (2021) Anatomy of a precarious newsroom: precarity and agency in Syrian exiled journalism in Turkey. *Media, Culture & Society* 43(8): 1377-1394. https://doi.org/10.1177/01634437211011556

Bandelj N (2016) On postsocialist capitalism. *Theory and Society* 45(1): 89–106. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11186-016-9265-z

Betti E (2018) Historicizing precarious work: forty years of research in the social sciences and humanities. *International Review of Social History* 63(2): 273–319. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859018000329

Butler J (2006) *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (Reprint edition). Verso.

Butler J (2010) *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (Reprint edition). Verso.

Chadha K and Steiner L (2021) Precarity: the concept, evolution, forms, and implications. In Chadha K and Steiner L (eds) *Newswork and Precarity*. Routledge, pp. 15-30.

Cohen N (2015) Entrepreneurial journalism and the precarious state of media work. *South Atlantic Quarterly* 114(3): 513–533. doi: https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-3130723

Cohen NS (2018) At work in the digital newsroom. *Digital Journalism* 7(5): 571-591. doi: 10.1080/21670811.2017.1419821

Danas (2023) *I Tviter gasio botovske mreže naprednjaka, a Vučić rekao da mora da postane,, glavni bot* [Twitter shuts down progressives' bot networks, while Vucic says he has to become the chief bot], 25 February. https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/i-tviter-gasio-botovske-mreze-naprednjaka-a-vucic-rekao-da-mora-da-postane-glavni-bot/

Drašković B and Kleut J (2016) Mediji civilnog društva kao neiskorišćena šansa za transformaciju lokalnih medija u Srbiji: perspektiva medijskih poslenika [Civil society media as an untapped potential for transforming local media in Serbia: media professionals' perspective]. Car UV, Matović M and Turčilo L (eds) *Mediji i Javni Interes*. Fakultet političkih znanosti, pp 37-53.

Fuchs C (2010) Grounding critical communication studies: an inquiry into the communication theory of Karl Marx. *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 34(1): 15-41. https://doi.org/10.1177/0196859909338409

Gohdes AR and Carey SC (2017) Canaries in a coal-mine? what the killings of journalists tell us about future repression. *Journal of Peace Research* 54(2): 157-174.

Gollmitzer, M. (2014) Precariously employed watchdogs? *Journalism Practice* 8(6): 826–841. https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2014.882061

Hayes K (2021) The networked newsroom: navigating new boundaries of work. *Journalism Practice* 1-23. doi: 10.1080/17512786.2021.1949627

Hayes K and O' Sullivan M (2023) Labouring the news: management control strategies and work intensification in the digital newsroom. *Journalism*, 14648849231174059. https://doi.org/10.1177/14648849231174059

Hughes S, Mellado C, Arroyave J, Benitez JL, de Beer A, Garcés M, Lang K and Márquez-Ramírez M (2017) Expanding influences research to insecure democracies. *Journalism Studies* 18(5): 645–665. https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2016.1266278

Indepedent Journalists' Association of Serbia (nd) Baza podataka napada na novinare. Available at: https://www.bazenuns.rs/srpski/napadi-na-novinare (accessed 9 November 2023)

Jakobi T (2015) Prekarnost, (auto)cenzura i (auto)destrukcija medija u Srbiji [Precarity, (self-)censorship and (self-)destruction of media in Serbia. Mihailović US (ed), *Od Novinara do Nadničara. Prekarni Rad i Život*. Dan graf; Fondacija za otvoreno društvo; Centar za razvoj sindikalizma, pp. 89-108.

Jessop B (2005) Fordism and post-fordism: a critical reformulation. In Scott AJ and Storper M (eds) *Pathways to Industrialization and Regional Development*. Taylor and Francis, pp 42-62. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203995549

Jevtović Z and Bajić P (2019) Neuspela tranzicija medijskog sistema Srbije [Unsuccessful transition of media in Serbia]. *Sociological Review* 53(3): 1020-1045.

Kalleberg A and Vallas SP (2018). Probing precarious work: theory, research, politics. *Research in the Sociology of Work* 31: 1–30.

Kirchherr J and Charles K (2018) Enhancing the sample diversity of snowball samples: recommendations from a research project on anti-dam movements in Southeast Asia. *PloS one* 13(8): e0201710. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0201710

Krstić A (2023) Digital transformation of journalism and media in Serbia: what has gone wrong? *Journalism* 1-17. https://doi.org/10.1177/14648849231151798

Kulić M (2020) Redefinisanje uloge novinara u novom medijskom okruženju: ideologija novinarstva, polarizacija medija i socioekonomski položaj novinarar [Redefining the role of journalists in new media environment: journalistic ideology, media polarization and socio-economic position of journalists]. *CM Communication and Media* 25(48): 115–135.

Matthews J and Onyemaobi K (2020). Precarious professionalism: journalism and the fragility of professional practice in the global south. *Journalism Studies* 21(13): 1836-1851. doi: 10.1080/1461670X.2020.1797524

Mihailović S (2015) Sve nesigurniji rad i život medijskih radnika [Increasingly insecure labor and life of media workers]. Mihailović US (ed) *Od Novinara do Nadničara. Prekarni rad i život*. Dan graf; Fondacija za otvoreno društvo; Centar za razvoj sindikalizma, pp 51-88.

Milivojević S (2011) *Profesija na raskršću – novinarstvo na pragu informacionog društva* [Profession at a crossroads – journalism entering information society]. Fakultet političkih nauka - Centar za medije i medijska iztraživanja. https://www.fpn.bg.ac.rs/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Profesija-na-Raskr%C3%85%C2%A1%C3%84%E2%80%A1u.pdf

Milić V, Kleut J, Milinkov S and Šovanec S (2021) *Percepcije socio-ekonomskog položaja novinara i medijskih radnika u Vojvodini* [Journalists' and media workers' perceptions of their socio-economic status in Vojvodina] [Report]. Nezavisno društvo novinara Vojvodine.

Millar KM (2014) The precarious present: wageless labor and disrupted life in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. *Cultural Anthropology* 29(1): Article 1. https://doi.org/10.14506/ca29.1.04

Millar KM (2017) Toward a critical politics of precarity. *Sociology Compass* 11(6): e12483. https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12483

Milojević A and Krstić A (2018) Hierarchy of influences on transitional journalism: corrupting relationships between political, economic and media elites. *European Journal of Communication* 33(1): 37-56. doi:10.1177/0267323117750674

Márquez-Ramírez M, Amado A and Waisbord S (2021) Labor precarity and gig journalism in Latin America. In: Chadha K and Steiner L (eds) *Newswork and Precarity*. Routledge, pp. 137-150.

Munck R (2013) The precariat: a view from the south. *Third World Quarterly* 34(5): 747-762. https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2013.800751

N1 (2023). Šta su zapravo botovi i po čemu je Srbija specifična u odnosu na ostatak sveta [What are bots really and what makes Serbia specific to the rest of the world?] 12 July. https://n1info.rs/vesti/sta-su-zapravo-botovi-i-po-cemu-je-srbija-specificna-u-odnosu-na-ostatak-sveta/

Nowell LS, Norris J M, White DE and Moules NJ (2017) Thematic analysis: striving to meet the trustworthiness criteria. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 16(1). https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406917733847

Örnebring H (2010) Technology and journalism-as-labour: historical perspectives. *Journalism: Theory, Practice and Criticism* 11(1): 57–74. doi:10.1177/1464884909350644

Örnebring H (2018) Journalists thinking about precarity: making sense of the 'new normal'. *#ISOJ Journal* 8(1): 109-127.

Pickard V (2020) *Democracy without journalism? confronting the misinformation society*. Oxford University Press.

Rick J and Hanitzsch T (2023) Journalists' perceptions of precarity: toward a theoretical model. *Journalism Studies* 25(2): 199-217. https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2023.2293827

Standing G (2011) *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*. Bloomsbury Academic.

Stupart R (2021) Precarity, technology, identity: the sociology of conflict reporting in South Sudan. In: Maweu J and Mare A (eds) *Media, Conflict and Peacebuilding in Africa Conceptual and Empirical Considerations*. Routledge.

Sybert J (2023) Navigating precarity: disruption and decline at the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette. *Journalism Practice* 17(4): 737-754. doi: 10.1080/17512786.2021.1939105

Zaharijević A (2023) Equal bodies: the notion of the precarious in Judith Butler's work. *European Journal of Women's Studies* 30(1): 37-48. https://doi.org/10.1177/13505068221137695

Appendix: List of Interviewees

Identifier	Gender	Geographic Area	Media Type	Position
Interviewee 1	F	Western Serbia	Television station	Journalist and Director
Interviewee 2	F	Vojvodina	Radio station and online news outlet	Journalist
Interviewee 3	F	Central Serbia	Press and online news outlet	Editor-in-chief
Interviewee 4	F	Southern Serbia	Online news outlet	Journalist
Interviewee 5	M	Vojvodina	Online news outlet	Journalist
Interviewee 6	F	Vojvodina	Online news outlet	Journalist
Interviewee 7	M	Vojvodina	Online news outlet	Journalist and Deputy Editor-in-chief
Interviewee 8	F	Vojvodina	Television station	Journalist
Interviewee 9	F	Vojvodina	Weekly and online news outlet	Journalist
Interviewee 10	F	Central Serbia	Weekly and online news outlet	Editor-in-chief