

## DISAPPEARING FREELANCE WORK

**IN THE spring of 2008, the Freelance Industrial Council noted that work was disappearing, very quickly, particularly from the regional newspaper industry, in both the UK and the Republic of Ireland, but the London-based national broadsheets had also started making noticeable cutbacks.**

As what happens to freelance work frequently hits staff shortly afterwards, FIC started to collate reports of disappearing work more formally. The implosion of the regional newspaper industry which gathered momentum later in 2008, with hundreds of threatened redundancies, confirmed freelancers' earlier fears.

Early last year for instance, freelancers also noted that reporters were increasingly being encouraged to "blag" photographs from PRs, picture use is limited to what's included in contracts with PA, so reducing opportunities for freelance (news and sports) photographers. Also, news and feature desks appeared to have become increasingly reluctant to pay freelancers anything for stories or pictures, let alone tips. Freelancers wondered whether such moves were the direct result of management edicts.

By May 2008, the "credit crunch" and inflation were being blamed. The slowdown in the housing market had directly – and quickly – affected property advertising. (Ad sales reps appeared slow off the mark in identifying alternative advertisers – such the social housing providers taking over many unsold properties needing tenants.) Then, the increase in petrol prices at that time hit car sales – and motor advertising.

### Cuts reported by July 2008

- Casual sub-editing shifts at the *Yorkshire Post* (Johnston Press) being cut back to fewer than 50 a year, with rates still at 2001 levels, despite a compound pay increase of at least 30 per cent for staffers in that time.
  - Cuts to *Daily Telegraph* (property) supplements largely written by freelances and representing significant reductions in work and income for regular contributors.
  - Scottish and Universal Newspapers, based in Paisley and part of Trinity Mirror, seeking to reduce their freelance spend by £20,000 and their spend on photography by £10,000.
  - Media Wales, the Cardiff-based *Western Mail* and *South Wales Echo* group (TM), cut freelance use to almost nothing.
  - The *South Wales Evening Post* in Swansea (Northcliffe) has completely stopped using freelance writers, photographers in news, sport and features.
  - The *South Wales Argus* in Newport (Newsquest), the last big evening paper still to take work from freelances, telephoned regular contributors to say their budgets have been cut and they will only take minimal work from us.
  - *The Press* in York (Newsquest) was not using much, if any, freelance copy or hiring freelances for casual reporting or sub-editing shifts before recent industrial action and the announcement of redundancies. Chapel members do not expect freelances to be paid to take up any of the workload after jobs are lost.
  - Newsquest has also announced redundancies at the *Northern Echo* in Darlington. Again, despite the workload, no additional freelance work is expected.
  - The *Bristol Evening Post* and *Western Daily Press* (Northcliffe) picture desk has reportedly had the freelance budget cut, yet again, apparently as a result of a corporate directive sent to all regional managements.
- One freelance wrote: "here are quite a number of freelancers ... who have virtually had their throats cut. We are all diversifying and it is not necessarily all about the money. We do like to write pieces about local people and characters for the local media which are often taken. I, for example, have numerous athletics contacts but have not been able to do anything about their achievements and aspirations - particularly in the Olympic Games year - for papers ... because they will not pay or simply ignore your copy. The only way, it seems, to get anything published is to give it away, which we won't."

## July – December 2008

In December 2008, FIC members were again asked to try to find out how much media industry work was disappearing – either in their geographical areas or according to skills such as photography and subbing.

### UK NATIONAL NEWSPAPERS

**Telegraph Media** are getting rid of casual/freelance subs. At the **Times**, T2 is cutting back on freelances.

At the end of November 2008, **Associated Newspapers** were cutting back on casuals. **Express Newspapers** were ending shifts for sub-editors.

A regular sub/casual on a **London-based national daily** was told, in December 2008, that budget savings were needed, especially in “substantial” cuts to spending on casual subs. They intended to introduce six-hour shifts from early January 2009, from 5pm-11pm (but ending at 10.15 in lieu of breaks) for £120.75.

A freelance producing a weekly column for the last two/three years has had the commission cancelled by the same title.

Others have noticed that some London-based national titles have been reducing the word counts of commissioned pieces rather than reducing rates per se while cutting the titles’ costs. (This may be linked to the redesigns of some titles intended to require fewer editorial staff, but with a knock-on effect for freelance contributors.)

### REGIONAL NEWSPAPERS

The **Bristol Evening Post** and **Western Daily Press** have severely cut freelance photographers, hitting news shifts in particular, but also bringing some sports coverage back in-house. (The same is expected elsewhere.)

### MAGAZINES

**Progressive Media Group** – which publishes design, architecture and building magazines and has a 50 per cent share in *The Spectator* – has cut freelance work as well as staff jobs. Subs – on freelance contracts – have gone from 18 days work a month to **five**. Freelance contributors (writers) are being reduced and the website is being produced in India, with content being written entirely from press releases.

One FIC member wrote: “Over the past year or two I have lost a number of regular clients due to the closure of magazines, or mergers/outsourcing. I’m expecting to lose another of my best clients soon due to outsourcing, which will carry a change in editorial direction and freelance

### CONCLUSIONS

**Taken together, these identified instances of vanishing work can, fairly, be seen as representing the equivalent of scores of freelance livings. One informal estimate suggested that this could be between 60 and 80 jobs, probably more. Also, long-standing freelances are so concerned that staff journalists being made redundant may try to turn freelance at a time when media industry work is also disappearing that FIC has produced guidance notes, called *Turning Freelance?* Undercutting already dire rates by those cushioned with redundancy payments or pensions is feared. The situation is made even worse as national titles try to slash rates, a move that others are expected to follow. No campaign addressing disappearing staff jobs should ignore the ramifications for freelances – either in terms of the amount of work available or the rates offered.**

terms with the result that it’ll no longer be worth my while to write for them. This not because the magazine was in trouble, far from it, but because the proprietors think they can make more money if they contract it out to the likes of Haymarket.”

Another contributor to UK-subs reported that one publisher of law magazines had downgraded subbing to be “part of the editorial assistant role”.

### PROFESSIONAL/BUSINESS SECTOR

- **Times Ed Supp** started cutting back on freelances in late 2007.

- **Server Management**, an IT magazine published by Story Worldwide, has taken freelance subbing work in-house.

### REPUBLIC OF IRELAND

The magazine sector has been steadily cutting back on freelances over the past couple of years. *Harmonia* magazines decision to use only staffers cost one freelance two regular features, a main source of income.

Since October 2008, one of Ireland’s biggest selling magazines – *the RTE Guide* – has got rid of all freelances bar the gardening expert. Another freelance lost a principal source of income.

### BOOKS

Dorling Kindersley has reportedly recently opened an office in India and their regular contributors are now expecting more editing work to be based there.

Alden, a well-known printer/publisher in Oxford has recently gone into liquidation.

Also, a writer of food books was, in late 2008, asked to prepare a draft, including recipes. Instead of money, the publisher offered £100 worth of books. Apart from three people, everyone working for another food title was earning the same or less than 10-15 years ago per feature, per recipe or per day.

Other publishers are reportedly increasingly selling on projects to others offering poorer terms and money (like passing on bad debts).