
Guest editorial: Flexible working schemes and the changing conditions of media and communication labour

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Flexible working schemes have moved from the margins to the centre of media and communication labour. Across journalism, public relations, advertising, marketing and related fields, flexible work is no longer an exceptional arrangement but an increasingly normalised condition of professional life. This transformation has often been accompanied by a celebratory language of autonomy, agility, entrepreneurialism and work-life balance. Yet, as the contributions to this special issue make clear, flexibility cannot be understood only as freedom. It also entails insecurity, blurred boundaries, heightened self-responsibilisation and uneven access to recognition, stability and support.

The rationale for this special issue emerged from precisely this tension, framing flexible working schemes as part of a wider structural reconfiguration of media and communication industries. It highlighted questions of self-branding, professional identity, freelance-client power dynamics, organisational change and convergent work practices such as branded content and content marketing. The conflict between celebratory discourses of independence and the precarious realities of vulnerability associated with flexible work foregrounded questions about how contemporary flexible workers are expected to be endlessly adaptable, resilient, entrepreneurial and networked while bearing the hidden costs of labour-market transformation.

This special issue also forms part of a broader and cumulative research trajectory. It builds on earlier studies on freelancers and professional virtual communities ([Anton and Moise, 2021](#); [Moise and Anton, 2022](#)), on freelancers and global news construction networks ([Hellmueller et al., 2017](#)), on freelancing, gender and well-being in public relations ([Fielden et al., 2003](#); [Tench et al., 2002](#)), while also reflecting work developed within the EUPRERA Women in Public Relations Network ([Topić et al., 2020](#)). Those earlier studies examined communication amongst freelancers, online communities and professionals in digitally mediated contexts, especially during and after the COVID-19 period. They were followed by *Gender and Freelancing in the Communication Industries. Experiences, Practices, Discourses* ([Anton and Moise, 2025](#)), a book that expanded that agenda toward a more explicit engagement with gender, well-being, precarity and inequality, showing that freelancing is routinely framed as empowering while often obscuring financial instability, unequal pay, limited access to networks and the continuing pressure to reconcile professional aspirations with care responsibilities. The present special issue extends that trajectory further. It moves beyond freelancing as a discrete category and examines flexible working schemes more broadly across media and communication sectors, thereby treating flexibility as an established labour and industry arrangement rather than simply as an individual employment choice.

This shift in emphasis matters. The literature review opening the special issue ([Moise et al., 2025](#)) shows that scholarship across media and communication industries has consistently identified a dual reality: freelancers and other flexible workers often value autonomy and flexibility, but they also operate in conditions marked by precarity, feminisation, constant skill renewal, networking pressure and growing dependence on digital tools and platforms. This duality also reflects two waves of research: an earlier phase, in which freelancing was often conceptualised as a marginal or atypical work arrangement, sometimes even as a lifestyle choice and a more recent phase, in which it is increasingly understood as embedded in neoliberal, digital and platformised labour markets. What the studies gathered here add is a more comparative and industry-spanning understanding of this development.



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Taken together, the contributions map contemporary media and communication labour across different countries, sectors and methodologies. They show that flexible work is not simply changing where work is done geographically, but also how careers are imagined, how professional identities are negotiated and how inequalities are reproduced or contested. Three themes stand out in particular.

First, the issue demonstrates that flexibility is an organisational and sectoral transformation, not just an individual arrangement. [Álvarez Nobell et al. \(2025\)](#), drawing on the Latin American Communication Monitor, offer a longitudinal perspective on public relations in 20 countries and show that flexible work has expanded considerably through digitalisation and the aftermath of the pandemic. Yet that expansion has not translated into improved salary conditions for most professionals; rather, it has developed alongside greater outsourcing and a growing role for consultancy-based models. At the same time, their study points to empathetic leadership as a crucial condition for making flexible arrangements more sustainable. In a different setting, [Mustafai and Podnar's \(2025\)](#) study of creative directors and executives in Slovenian marketing and communication agencies similarly reveals the ambivalence of telework: respondents value autonomy, productivity and better work-life balance, but also report isolation, communication problems, knowledge-sharing difficulties and the loss of spontaneous idea generation that often depends on face-to-face interaction. [Simon's \(2026\)](#) study of flexible workers in the UK media and communication sector broadens this perspective by showing how flexible work reshapes professional culture across the sector, with workers increasingly oriented not towards a single employer but towards maintaining their own brands while adapting to virtual collaboration, technological change and the demands of continuous learning. The article also points to the importance of more intentional organisational support, including career development, inclusive norms, networking opportunities and mental health resources. Read together, these studies challenge any simplistic assumption that flexibility is inherently progressive. Organisations may gain agility, but workers may absorb the costs of fragmentation, weaker support structures and greater responsibility for managing boundaries, careers and well-being.

Second, the issue shows that flexible work is deeply tied to questions of professional identity, fluidity and self-presentation. These dimensions were present from the outset in the call for papers, which emphasised self-branding, self-promotion and the changing professional identity of the “new flexi-worker”. [Anton et al.'s \(2025\)](#) article on professional fluidity between media and communication industries develops this insight by examining professionals who have moved between the two sectors in Romania and Poland. Their findings indicate that transitions are driven by the search for better working conditions, greater stability, career growth and personal adaptation, while technology and flexible work arrangements facilitate such movement. At the same time, this fluidity may destabilise the symbolic boundaries of journalism, with some transitions perceived as a “sell-out”, even as workers themselves develop dual identities and transferable skill sets. [Petroff and Ramirez Gonzalez's \(2025\)](#) study of self-branding strategies in the gig economy adds another layer by showing how digital profiles become sites where workers must frame and market their competences. Analysing 444 public profiles, the authors identify differentiated discursive frames around technological, creative and personal skills and show that women and men do not present themselves in the same way on digital platforms. Flexible work, in other words, is not only a contractual condition, but also an identity project.

Third, the special issue draws attention to the conditions that make flexible work sustainable rather than merely survivable. [Moise et al.'s \(2025\)](#) overview article situates flexible working schemes within a broader transformation of media and communication labour, showing that across journalism, public relations, advertising and marketing, flexibility is increasingly normalised while remaining tied to insecurity, skills pressure and continuous adaptation. [Pang et al. \(2025\)](#) develop this concern further in their study of freelance media and cultural workers in Singapore, where precarious working conditions are described as routine and resilience often takes the form of short-term coping rather than lasting change.

Their article shows that resilience and adaptability are often valorised precisely where stronger structural forms of support are absent. In this sense, what appears as individual resourcefulness may also signal a broader withdrawal of organisational and policy protections.

For these reasons, the main contribution of this special issue is to reposition flexible work as a structural condition of media and communication industries. It brings journalism, public relations, marketing and adjacent communication sectors into the same analytical framework, connects micro-level experience with meso-level organisational cultures and places gender and inequality at the centre of labour analysis rather than at its margins. It also offers comparative reach across varied national contexts and methodological approaches, from longitudinal surveys and sector-wide survey research to mixed-method analyses, interviews and discursive studies.

The implications extend beyond scholarship. For organisations, the findings point to the need for fairer and more sustainable support structures for freelancers, teleworkers and other flexible professionals, including better integration, clearer expectations, access to training and recognition of the hidden costs of flexibility. For policy, they underscore the urgency of addressing insecure conditions that remain normalised under the language of innovation and entrepreneurialism. For education, they suggest that communication programmes must prepare students not only for portfolio careers and cross-sector mobility, but also for the contractual, ethical and political realities of flexible labour.

Flexible working schemes are now embedded in the architecture of communication labour. The question is no longer whether flexibility exists, but how it is organised, governed, lived and narrated. The articles in this issue show that flexibility cannot be approached solely through the vocabulary of innovation or professional freedom. It must also be read through the lenses of precarity, gender, organisational culture and professional fluidity. In that sense, the shifting landscape examined here is not merely technological or managerial. It is social, political and ethical. Understanding that complexity is essential if communication industries are to move towards forms of work that are not only flexible, but also fair.

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