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# “LIKE BEING SHOT IN THE FACE” OR “I’M GLAD I’M OUT”

## Journalists’ experiences of job loss in the Australian media industry 2012-2014

*The Australian news media industry has recently experienced a dramatic contraction, resulting in the loss of an estimated 3000 journalism positions since 2011. But what does the process of being laid off (more commonly understood as “redundancy” in Australia) actually mean for those affected? Drawing on a survey of more than 200 journalists who left what were mostly long-term jobs in large newsrooms between 2012 and 2014, this paper examines how respondents conceptualised their redundancy experiences in response to an open-ended question that was part of a 2014 survey. As well as assessing the often complex and sometimes visceral responses in terms of whether they were positive, mixed or negative, the paper discusses a range of themes to emerge, and notes discrepancies that relate to whether the redundancies were voluntary or forced, and by age and gender, and to some extent, current work status. It also finds that while overall the responses to redundancy skew more negative than positive, an overwhelming majority of those surveyed believe their well-being has improved since leaving their jobs.*

**KEYWORDS** Journalism; journalism redundancies; layoffs; job loss; management; emotions; news industry; precarious work.

### **Introduction**

While newsrooms in the US and UK experienced mass layoffs from 2008 (Nel 2010; Reinardy 2016), in Australia, which was less severely affected by the global financial crisis, a fragile optimism prevailed in some quarters that the extent of journalism job loss could be contained (Este et al. 2010, 3). Such hopes vanished in 2012 as mainstream media companies undertook perhaps the largest episode of job shedding in Australian media history. While precise job loss figures are notoriously difficult to determine, due to both a lack of agreed methodology of what constitutes a journalism job (Edmonds 2016) and the reticence of some media companies to disclose redundancy details, between 2011 and 2017 it is estimated that as many as 3000 positions disappeared (Phillips 2018) – around a quarter of all journalist jobs.

In Australia, such job losses are commonly referred to as redundancies, and are either characterised as “voluntary”, where staff respond to a call out from management, or “involuntary”, where management decides which jobs will be targeted. In both cases, however, those affected receive financial packages that are commonly known as redundancy payments that are prescribed by law and/or negotiated, commonly with union

involvement. While some journalists have left jobs of their own accord, most forced departures have included some kind of redundancy payout.

The scale of the redundancy rounds in 2012 at Fairfax Media (now Nine), News Limited (now News Corp Australia) the commercial Network Ten, reflect the seismic shift away from the well-resourced newsrooms of long-established metropolitan newspapers to much smaller digitally-driven newsrooms reliant on outside organisations for sub-editing work and on freelance contributors. It should be noted that there have also been substantial redundancies over the last six years at the publicly funded Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), which faced significant budget cuts by the hostile federal Coalition government (MEAA 2017, 6; Ricketson and Murphy 2016, 105-106). Media start-ups offering hope for new forms of journalism or providing ideas for new business models and new outlets emerged, such as *The Conversation* and *The Saturday Paper* and Australian versions of international publications such as *The New York Times* and *The Guardian*. But these innovations have not been sufficient to offset the impact of thousands of lost journalist jobs, and some, such as HuffPost Australia, have since shut down. Meanwhile in-house sub-editing have declined or disappeared, along with specialist sections and rounds, foreign bureaus and freelance budgets. And much of the available journalism work has taken the form of precarious freelancing rather than more traditional newsroom roles.

To date, these redundancy rounds have been examined by scholars for their scale, for the preponderance of older and more experienced journalists among those laid off, for their impact on regional and rural journalists compared to their metropolitan counterparts, and whether those taking redundancy packages found work and if they did, in what industries and occupations (Zion et al. 2016a; Zion et al. 2016b; O'Donnell et al. 2016; Sherwood and O'Donnell 2016). There has been less attention paid so far to the actual experience of redundancy. This article will focus on the experiences, emotional as well as material, of those who took redundancy packages from media companies in Australia between 2012 and 2014. The primary source of information is the written responses provided by 221 people who completed an online survey for the research project. The responses are rich with detail and say much about not only the personal circumstances of those affected, but also provide strong views on the state of a profession and an industry that has been undergoing far-reaching change, both in Australia and elsewhere.

## **Literature Review**

Contemporary research relating to job loss has a pedigree that extends back into the 1930s Great Depression studies that were “the source of important ideas about the function of work and about how employment affects the lives of those who experience it” (Feather 2014, 2-3). While much of the research since then has focussed on how the redundancy process has affected blue collar workers, especially those in manufacturing industries (Smith 1991; MacKenzie et al. 2006; Blau 2007; Gardiner et al. 2007, 2009; Anaf et al. 2013) and other forms of working-class employment (Ezzy 2000), laid off white-collar workers have also been widely studied (Ebby and Buch 1995; Goldenberg and Kline 1997), including

telecommunications workers in Australia (Clarke and Patrickson 2001), middle or senior level executives (Parris and Vickers 2010) and academics (Portwood 1985, Leckie and Rogers 1995).

Leckie and Rogers point to studies of professionals and managers that found they viewed their work as being more central to their lives than was the case with other types of workers, and that the loss of identity associated with what employees view as meaningful work being particularly devastating. Further, for professionals, there is a correlation between satisfaction with work and satisfaction with life, which suggested that professional workers are more affected in some respects by job loss (Leckie and Rogers 1995, 145).

However, the kind of work undertaken prior to job loss is just one of many factors that plays a role in the experience of being laid off. In their socio-psychological study of 371 workers from a range of occupations who were made redundant in Australia's Mitsubishi factory, Anaf et al. (2013) showed that the extent of negative mental health consequences of job loss is connected to the increased level of stress experienced by those respondents enduring a prolonged period of uncertainty prior to redundancy. They argued that workers do not have a sense of agency within an employment structure where work security is limited or where potential job loss is imminent, and this means they perceive that they have less control over their lives and feel shame, a loss of status, and lower self-esteem (Anaf et al. 2013, 9).

Anger is a frequent theme in job loss literature. High levels of anger are evident in a variety of blue- and white-collar roles in studies conducted in the 1990s (Smith 1991; Leckie and Rogers 1995). For instance, anger that continued and intensified throughout a chaotic redundancy process was experienced among academic librarians made redundant in Canada, even after they found new work (Leckie and Rogers 1995, 152-153). Sometimes anger felt by those laid off is tinged with relief, especially when workers were experiencing 'underutilisation' as part of a management strategy to persuade them to take voluntary redundancy. Research by Coombs (1998) on the sociological implications of voluntary redundancy within the public sector in South Australia in the 1990s drew attention to a sense of underutilisation. For example, as one employee noted: "After my position (job) was surplus as a result of downsizing I was pushed into a corner to do nothing for months on end and periodically pressured by management (both written and verbally) to take 'voluntary redundancy' while there was still work available... the stress introduced to our staff was unbearable prior to the package separation (well-orchestrated by our management), thus placing much fear on the future of our staff, making an alternative lifestyle more suitable" (Coombs 1998, 30, 32).

Turning from general experiences of redundancy to the particular experiences of journalists, it is necessary first to understand the context of journalists' occupational standing, which has deep historical roots. As industrial court judge, Isaac Isaacs, pronounced during a case about the journalists' award wage in Australia in 1917, "Journalism is really a profession 'sui generis'. I cannot measure it by what is paid for totally different work" (Lloyd 1985, 121). The bulk of the cohort surveyed for this study spent most of their career in

journalism during the heyday of legacy media before digital disruption upended the news media's classified advertising business model. This meant they enjoyed greater career stability, but there was ongoing tension in their occupational standing. There was a split between the autonomy and professional identity they enjoyed (Sherwood and O'Donnell 2016) and the constraints of working within a tightly organised daily industrial production system. On the one hand, gathering the day's news in newsrooms has traditionally been centrally organised along hierarchical lines; editors tell journalists what to cover and journalists respond accordingly under unyielding deadlines. On the other hand, journalists are granted, and expected to exercise, a degree of autonomy; initiative and enterprise in the pursuit of news and stories have long been prized in newsrooms, even among sub-editors who do not gather news themselves but may well have earlier in their career and who still appreciated the value of initiative (Simons 2007, 295-319). Journalists responding to the survey were accustomed to getting out of the office in search of news, observing events first-hand, meeting contacts and developing story leads. They would keep the news desk apprised of their whereabouts but enjoyed freedom to move around and to make their own judgements. In short, the first element of life in newsrooms resembles factory work; the second resembles creative work.

There are a growing number of studies that describe the subjective experiences of job loss for journalists and discuss the issues that arise both before and after the event. These include the significant degree of stress, exhaustion and burnout that factor in the intention to leave their jobs for journalists working in the United States (Reinardy 2011, 201) and the associated negative effects of holding a stressful job during the period American journalists were being laid off (Hawkins 2016; Reinardy 2011, 2013). Hawkins, whose thesis examined the shared experiences of American journalists undergoing structural change, reported a wide range of negative experiences, due to the stressful factors present in an increasingly uncertain work environment (2016, 2).

Davidson and Meyers identified the different stages of coping experienced by redundant Israeli journalists, comparing one stage to the Jewish Shiva seven-day mourning period (2016, 602). Their research aligns with the larger body of work on coping with job loss that exists in the psychology, socio-psychology and counselling literature, particularly those applying the Kubler-Ross (1969) five stages of grieving framework to the redundancy experience (Warr 1987; Borgen and Amundsen 1987; Ezzy 1993; Guindon and Smith 2002; Blau 2007; Bell and Taylor 2011; Anaf et al. 2013; Brenner et al 2014).

Other research has focused on the difficult and unsettling reality that "life after being laid off is tough" for journalists in the United Kingdom (Nel, 2010, 29; quoted in Zion et al. 2016a, 4); while a study of Australian journalists made redundant between 2012 and 2014 by Zion et al. highlighted the common experiences of income loss, uncertainty, and a sense of a challenge to professional - and self- identity (2016b, 5). This aligns with recent industry data in Australia that has shown that those who turn to freelance journalism, traditionally a hard way to make a good income, are struck by the precarious nature of available work, according to the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance's (MEAA)

submission to a Senate inquiry into the future of public interest journalism (MEAA 2017). Raito and Lahelma (2015)'s comparative study of Finnish journalists and managers during the 1990s' recession shows that initially the journalists' capacity to undertake freelance work enabled them to earn a modest living and gave them an advantage on the route back to full employment. However, after repeated failure to find full-time employment they experienced a decline in mental well-being, which was similar to the emotional response experienced by the managers (2015, 735).

However, a more recent Finnish study of laid off journalists found that while re-employment involves not only significant practical issues and emotional challenges (Heinonen et al. 2017), "new beginnings can be and often are a positive period in one's professional life," (p. 10) and that even those embracing irregular work arrangements such as freelancing felt more in control of their lives once they had left the uncertainties of possible retrenchment from their previous jobs behind.

Analysis of a range of datasets by Örnebring drawn from studies in 14 European countries found that journalists make sense of precarity using a set of long-established professional norms and that they "largely accept it as a natural part of journalism" because it is "in line with the key professional norms of entrepreneurship and meritocracy" (2018, 109). However, Örnebring distinguishes between Eastern European journalists and Western European journalists, especially those from countries with strong employment protections, who are more likely to regard precarious work as a threat (2018, 121). He notes that in this respect the United Kingdom is more similar to Eastern Europe most probably due to the deregulation of labour in the British media industry in the 1980s and 1990s. Örnebring has also noted that young professionals across Europe have accepted the risks of their own profession and the need to individually manage their careers, and are less likely to belong to a professional collective or describe a sense of community that extends outside of their own workplace (2018, 117-118). Elsewhere, Örnebring and Möller have studied journalists who have left the occupation, either voluntarily or involuntarily, and analysed leaving the occupation from a context that incorporates their life situations as a whole (2018, 1051). Drawing on research that focuses on livelihood strategies people use to cope with uncertain and precarious material and life circumstances, they argue that "gender is a salient factor in explaining experiences of job loss, future career options and journalistic identity" (2018, 1058) and that more research should focus on these themes.

While we have elsewhere examined the material circumstances and work transitions of this group the way that the redundancy process was understood by those exiting long term newsroom roles has yet to be analysed. To make sense of the experiences of those journalists who left jobs in Australian newsrooms at this time, his paper focuses on the following questions:

**RQ1:** How did respondents conceptualise the redundancy experience? [vis a vis practical/emotional/week of redundancy – a way of dealing with the openness of the survey question]

**RQ2:** To what extent can their experiences be understood as positive, negative or mixed?

**RQ3:** How did their experiences vary according to demographic and situational variables?

### **Research Methods**

This study is part of a broader longitudinal research project, which is tracking the experiences of Australian career journalists laid off between 2012 and 2014 through annual surveys. Participants were recruited from the growing number of journalists who had left major newsrooms, where contact details are public and easy to obtain. Many, however, had moved on to dispersed workplaces or to freelancing, unemployment or retirement. Potential research respondents were identified using a call-out to interested parties via the project website, industry contacts provided with permission by the Media Entertainment & Arts Alliance (MEAA), published lists of laid-off journalists and personal contacts. These journalists were invited via email to participate in a survey about their individual job loss and post-job loss experiences. Those who agreed were asked to share details of the survey with colleagues who had also left their jobs in the 2012–2014 period. In addition, Twitter and other social media platforms were used to recruit potential respondents. In this way, snowball sampling enabled us to identify and invite participation from approximately 500 journalists. However, one potential limitation that this study acknowledges is that using snowball or Respondent-driven sampling (Heckathorn 1997) runs the risk of over-representing those most invested in the topic (e.g. disgruntled ex-journalists).

The data collection instrument was a self-administered online survey of 52 questions, created and accessed using the cloud-based SurveyMonkey tool. The survey was administered between October 2014 and January 2015. A total of 266 of the 500 journalists in the database answered the questionnaire, for a response rate of 53.2%. However, 41 entries were subsequently excluded from the data-set because of inadvertent duplication, failure to meet the 2012–2014 job-loss criterion or invalid responses. The sample profile, described in more detail below, highlights the trend towards increasing precariousness of employment in Australia journalism, particularly for mid- to late-career newspaper journalists (Hanusch 2013; O'Donnell et al. 2016). To protect participant confidentiality, which was the main ethics issue for this research, respondents are referred to only by a number.

Through our baseline data the 225 survey respondents are characterised as follows: overwhelmingly, they came from the nation's two biggest print media companies, Fairfax Media (now Nine) and News Limited (now News Corp Australia) (107 respondents or 45% and 77 or 34% respectively), with a much smaller number coming from broadcast news outlets, including the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) and Network 10. A majority of those surveyed said their redundancy was voluntary, with 23% saying it was involuntary. More than three in four were full-time employees and nearly nine out of ten survey respondents had been journalists for at least a decade; 10% had more than 40 years'

experience in journalism. The majority of respondents (60%) earned between AUD\$80,000 (Approximately GBP £43,000 or USD \$56,000) and \$AUD140,000 (Approximately GBP £76,000 or USD \$98,000) yearly. Just over 70% were members of the journalists' union, the Media Entertainment & Arts Alliance (MEAA). A majority of the respondents were male – 58% compared to 42% female.

This paper focuses on responses to the fourteenth question that invited respondents to “tell us about the experience of becoming redundant, including any emotional or practical issues encountered.” This was the second of 17 open-ended questions of the survey, and the first question to invite respondents to engage in interpretations of their experiences. We deliberately placed this question ahead of other thematically-related open-ended questions so that we could gauge what they saw as the most important aspects of the redundancy experience. However we are also aware that in doing this, some respondents began to cover themes that were the subject of more specific questions later in the survey that focused on topics such as subjective senses of well-being, to be discussed below, attitudes to the current state of journalism, and how they continue to network with former colleagues.

In all, 221 of the 225 respondents provided answers to this question. Responses were analysed using qualitative analysis and correlated with demographic and other baseline data gleaned from other closed responses questions. This included whether their redundancy was forced or voluntary, gender, age, year of redundancy, whether or not they were members of the journalism union, and whether or not they were continuing to work in journalism post-redundancy. The answers were also correlated with responses to another open-ended question (Q41) that asked respondents to compare their overall well-being at the time of the survey with the time at which they left their jobs, which in the majority of cases was around two years previously.

In classifying the comments, we assessed all 221 according to four broad categories: positive, mixed, negative, and not discernible.

An example of a positive response was:

“I felt fine about it. I had reached the end of what I wanted to achieve in journalism - I could see no more challenges. The redundancy offer came at the right time. I had no future employment secured, but I was not concerned.” Respondent 214.

An example of a mixed response was: “It was a joy to be out ... but it was overwhelmingly depressing to have lost what defined me. Financially, I pretty much paid off the house, so that was a big benefit. And you miss your colleagues.” Respondent 45.

And this is an example of a response that we classified as negative:

“I spent 13 months applying unsuccessfully for jobs I felt qualified for. I felt ageism was at play here. I became frustrated and near the end of this time began to panic. I applied for jobs that were less than I wanted and was told I was over-qualified. Finally I won a contract to write a book for a top NGO.” Respondent 159.

These three responses also illustrate another characteristic of the data, namely, that the way that respondents engaged with the term “redundancy experience” varied



considerably. For this reason, we also coded all the responses according to whether they included details that related to each of the two prompts in the question: emotional issues and/or practical issues. We also sought to identify whether respondents referred to events that occurred in the week that they left their jobs, whether they referred to changes over time since learning that they would be exiting their newsroom roles, and whether they referenced improved circumstances since redundancy. These categories were not mutually exclusive.

Further qualitative coding of the responses identified a range of sub-themes informed by the literature including relief at leaving long-term jobs, readiness to leave, deteriorating conditions in the workplace, whether they felt undervalued in their former roles, missing former colleagues, anger, gender, concerns about identity, and financial issues.

## **Findings**

The question that respondents were invited to provide open-ended answers to was “Please tell us about the experience of becoming redundant, including any emotional or practical issues encountered.”

With such an open-ended prompt, it is not surprising that responses traversed a broad range of themes relating to their redundancy experience. In all, 61.5% (n=136) referred to their emotions, either directly or indirectly, while a slightly higher proportion, 67.9% (n=148) referred to practical issues. Only 34.8% (n=77) referenced experiences in their week of redundancy in their responses, a reflection of the extent to which “becoming redundant” can be seen to refer to the moment of job loss in the context of the processes and experiences that preceded and followed it.

Keeping in mind, then, that not all responses were referring to the same kinds of experiences, we coded all of them against one of the four overall categories: positive, mixed, negative and not discernible, as outlined in the previous section.

Overall, 47% of respondents were coded as being mixed in their response, with around a third (33.5%) having an overall negative experience, and around half that proportion (16.3%) having an overall positive response. Seven of the 221 completed responses (3.2%) were coded as not discernible.

## **TABLE 1 (insert here)**

### *Key Themes*

Key themes to emerge across all responses were: the poor state of the workplace they were leaving behind or having a toxic workplace (20.1%), with half of those specifically criticising management (10% of total), readiness to leave their jobs (23.1%), relief at leaving (14%), missing former colleagues and work (10%), financial circumstances relating to redundancy (20.4%) - both negative and positive, a loss of professional identity (11.3%)

feeling undervalued in the roles that they had left (10.4%), stress (9.5%) and feeling depressed (7.2%). Some also volunteered that life had improved over the period since they left their jobs (8.6%), with many making positive remarks about taking a break and retirement (7.2%).

Many of the respondents provided substantial and often visceral detail of their redundancy experiences that raised several of these themes concurrently, including this former online newsroom editor from a newspaper.

“It was a horror story. I had volunteered for redundancy a few months earlier, but had been turned down. Three weeks prior we had been told by [name of senior manager deleted] that digital was the future and news was in our DNA etc etc and that on the webdesk we had the safest jobs in the building. Then we didn't. Out of our team of 5, 3 of us were made redundant, including the 2 people who had built the website from scratch. One of them was in hospital at the time, and it was left to me to go visit him and tell him the good news. Nobody from the company bothered. After 23 years in the building I wasn't given a farewell, not even an official announcement. I packed up my desk, wrote a final email to editorial and walked out without so much as a thankyou for your service and a goodbye wave. It was emotionally shattering and humiliating and totally shaming, to be honest. It was as if we had done something wrong. The only thing missing was the security guard frogmarching me out the door. I was made redundant in July, found a job in November, which started in January of 2013 in Sydney. It sounds like a quick thing but it wasn't. It was excruciating. My parents were terrified I wouldn't find work. And so was I to be honest. I had to pack up 23 years of life in one city and move to a city I never wanted to live in but had no choice about. I wouldn't piss on [name of proprietor deleted] if he were on fire.” Respondent 129

Here the respondent picks up three of the key themes discussed in this paper, namely: the poor state of the workplace; criticism of management, and feeling stressed and undervalued. The response demonstrates the way these factors reinforce and inform each other and how collectively they determine how the experience and process of redundancy is judged.

Respondent 40 lamented that journalists with decades of experience, including some who had taken great risks for the company as reporters, walked out the door with no public acknowledgement. Her response reveals that many respondents felt devalued by their managers during the redundancy process and how much of their personal identity was wrapped up in being a journalist.

“It was a strange and sad experience. I didn't officially know that my redundancy application had been approved until three days before I finished work. I was harassed by my boss on my second last day for not being able to assist in chasing a story idea. The redundancy process came amid a major re-organisation of newsroom procedures. As a result of this re-organisation, I was told my then current role, as international editor of [title of paper], would end. I would be re-assigned to an

undefined role. The conversation in which I was informed of this took no more than 30 seconds. It was humiliating and insulting. In the weeks leading up to the announcement of the results of redundancy process it became obvious that the company was keen to rid itself of the bulk of its older and senior journalists. People with 30-plus years experience, some of whom had literally put their lives on the line while reporting ... walked out the door with no public acknowledgement."

Respondent 112, who worked at a metropolitan daily newspaper, wrote of her concern for former colleagues who were left behind after she took redundancy. Her response reveals how relief at leaving the newsroom often reflects the unpleasant nature of the workplace or redundancy process.

"Immediately after leaving [publication title] I experienced major panic about my decision. I had been a full-time journalist for almost 20 years (the last five or so on four-days a week). It was a major re-adjustment - I had been used to working to deadlines, in a fast-paced newsroom, surrounded by stimulating and interesting colleagues, all high on adrenalin. I had a glorious life of travel, art openings, exhibitions, talks. It was a life full of challenge and excitement. And I ended up working from home, alone. So much of my sense of self-worth was tied up with the idea of being a 'journalist' with a major metropolitan daily. Frankly, it's been good to get some perspective on the very ego-driven and self-centred life of a journalist. I no longer pine for the newsroom, in fact, I think it can be a very unhealthy place. I loved it for all my years in news, but now can't imagine being back there. What I have not lost, is my utter love for writing, thinking and analysis. I just want to do it in other ways. And from what I hear from colleagues who remain at [name of publication], the workloads and resulting stress levels are extremely high and debilitating. And I have seen the effects on some colleagues who have suffered anxiety because of the high workloads and increased stress in the newsrooms of today, where one is expected to do so much across so-called 'platforms', on fewer resources."

Respondent 37 shows how closely relief is tied to leaving increasingly stressful conditions in the workplace. "I have been pretty gainfully employed freelancing since I left and when there is not much work during quiet periods, I revel in my semi-retirement. I still have plenty of contact with colleagues in senior and editing positions at [publication name] and they all say 'You made the right decision'. They hate it and a number of them have seen their health suffer through the stress. I'm glad I'm out."

Respondent 105 wrote succinctly of both the relief at leaving work that had become unpleasant and of the satisfaction associated with a large financial payout, a factor that softened the blow of redundancy (or made it attractive) for many of the survey respondents. "It was both easy and great. The world of journalism was crushing my mental health and getting paid to leave was a bonus."

For others, particularly veterans with decades of newsroom experience, the experience was even more positive. "I figured that after 30 or so years in newspapers, no one was going to throw that amount of money at me again. I saw as it as an opportunity to

do something else, to wrap up some loose financial ends and to prove that I was not defined by one thing. The decision was entirely mine. In that regard, compared to so many others, I was one of the lucky ones.” Respondent 210.

Respondent 79, a senior reporter with over five decades of experience in newspapers, was still more succinct: “Euphoric - a decent payout after 52 years in newspapers.”

The fact that redundancy was not forced and because a new job materialised quickly were important considerations for Respondent 138: “I was fine at the time because it was voluntary. I found another job soon after.” The terms of the redundancy payouts, which according to MEAA chief executive officer, Paul Murphy, were at “the higher end of the spectrum” compared to other industries (personal communication 25 January 2018), was welcomed by numerous respondents.

In all, 13 of the 36 people in the positive category nominated the significant financial payout they received as a primary reason for embracing redundancy. For Fairfax Media journalists, the terms of the redundancy negotiated by the MEAA were: two weeks’ severance pay, plus four weeks’ pay for each year of service uncapped. For those who had been with Fairfax their entire working lives, this amounted to up to three and a half years’ salary, which made the offer almost irresistible for those nearing retirement age. For News Corp Australia journalists, the terms of the redundancy were slightly less generous: two weeks’ severance pay, plus three weeks’ pay for each year of service up to 28 (Paul Murphy, personal communication 25 January 2018).

## **TABLE 2** (insert here)

### **Variations**

#### *Voluntary vs involuntary*

Not surprisingly, one large difference in experience of redundancy within the cohort was between those who took redundancy voluntarily and those who were forced to leave. The 22% of respondents said that their redundancy was involuntary were more than twice as likely to have a negative experience of redundancy than those who volunteered to leave, and less than half as likely to have had a positive experience.

For instance, Respondent 55 felt they were in “the best job of my career” but that their employer had little interest in quality, dedication or experience, preferring instead to employ young people at a lower rate.

“It was devastating ... Others advised me they had known for weeks beforehand I would go, which I found very distressing. I received no warning and was handed my notice seconds into the conversation with no recourse, from a new boss who had never met me, and, it transpired, misunderstood my job. He then offered me the opportunity to reverse the termination if I nominated someone to take my place, which I was revolted by and refused. I left immediately.”

**TABLE 3** (insert here)

*Gender*

A noticeably greater proportion of women reported having negative experiences of redundancy than men. This correlates with women being more likely to refer to experiences in the week of redundancy (45.1%) than men (27.3%). Not surprisingly, then, more women told us they experienced shock (10.75%) than men (2.3%). Women were also more than three times as likely than men to reference feeling stressed (15% to 5.5%), and 10 times as likely to mention gender issues (9.7% to 0.8%), with four respondents specifically referencing the proximity of redundancy to maternity leave. Women were also more inclined to reference practical issues associated with redundancy (74.2%) than men (61.7%), though when it came to making reference to emotional issues, there was no discernible gender gap.

Gender gaps were also evident when it came to negative views of the state of the workplace they were leaving behind – 17.2% of men noted such features compared to 25.8% of women. And far more women (16.1%) noted that they felt undervalued in their previous work than men (6.3%). Conversely, men were more likely to say that they were relieved to go by a margin of 16.4% to 10.8%.

**TABLE 4** (insert here)

*Age*

There were also discrepancies concerning the age of the respondents, with those under the age of 50 at the time of completing the survey more likely to report a negative experience of redundancy. Most notably, those under 50 were half as likely as their older colleagues to have felt ready to leave their jobs despite both having a similarly degree of concern with negative factors in their workplaces. Those under 50 were also slightly more likely to make reference to emotional factors than those over 50.

This age divide aligns with how long people had been in the company when they took redundancy, with those who had been on board for more than 25 years generally having a better experience of redundancy than those who had been in their roles for less than 25 years.

Financial circumstances and dependents are also a common factor in this age group. As respondent 215, a sub-editor in her early 40s who had been working part-time put it:

“It has been disastrous for my family from a financial point of view. My husband and I were both made redundant from [company name]- me in October 2012 and he in February 2013. We badly misjudged the economic climate around us and mistakenly assumed we would be able to find similar-level paid work quickly and easily. This has not proven to be the case and 18 months later my husband is still looking for full-

time work, competing with the thousands of other journalists for a tiny pool of jobs. About six months ago I successfully applied for a full-time position in a PR agency, but the stress on our family unit to maintain our mortgage payments while giving our three children a good childhood, has been enormous.”

Experiences of the under 50s, however, also varied, with those under 35 significantly more positive in outlook than those aged between 36 and 50. For those aged 35 and under, the relevant percentages were 27.8% positive, 44.4% mixed, and 27.8% negative (making them overall slightly more positive than those over 50), while the corresponding figures for the 36 to 50 year-olds was 9.6%, 41% and 43.4%.

#### **TABLE 5 (insert here)**

##### *Work, Union Membership, and Year of Redundancy*

To gain an understanding of the relationship between current work and the redundancy experience we correlated our coded responses with the results to a forced choice question asking respondents to select a number of current work options. These included working in journalism (including freelance), working in a mix of journalism and other, working outside of journalism, taking a break, retired, and looking for work. The latter category, which drew 17 responses, were by far the most downbeat, with none reporting a positive experience of redundancy, seven (41.2%) reporting a negative experience and 10 (58.8%) reporting a mixed experience. However very little difference in the overall experience of redundancy could be discerned according to whether or not respondents were still working in some form of journalism, save for a slightly more positive response to the redundancy experience by those who went on to work in non-journalism roles. Those who had retired or were taking a break were more positive again about their redundancy experience.

Union membership was not a significant factor when it came to how respondents experienced redundancy, and there was also little variation in redundancy experience by which year respondents had left their roles. In other words, those who left in 2012, and had been out of their long-term roles for two years at the time of the survey, were no more or less likely to have had a negative experience than those who left in the same year that the survey was taken.

#### **TABLE 6 (insert here)**

##### **Redundancy and Well-being**

Despite the challenges respondents faced during the redundancy process, it is worth noting that by the time that they completed this survey, which in most cases was around two years after leaving their long-term newsroom roles, a substantial majority noted that their sense of well-being had improved. In question 41, we asked “Please tell us about your

overall sense of well-being now, in comparison to the time of redundancy.” Coding of these 217 completed answers (from a total sample size of 225) revealed that around two-thirds said they felt better, almost a quarter felt about the same, and fewer than 10% said they felt worse. To quote one typical response: “Better, more zen-like, but I’m sad for the profession and some colleagues” Respondent 197: As even this short response illustrates, feeling better is not the same as being happy with the changes that have occurred to journalism, but sadness is not despair.

**TABLE 7** (insert here)

Not surprisingly, those who said that their well-being was worse were far more likely than other respondents to have had a negative experience of the redundancy process: in all, 65% (13 of the 20) of those who experienced lower levels of well-being also reported a negative experience of redundancy, while the remaining 7 (35%) had a mixed experience, with none of this group reporting a positive experience of redundancy.

**Discussion and Conclusions**

While the circumstances of journalism job loss in Australia are both geographically and historically specific, this paper contributes to an understanding of how journalists conceptualise redundancy as both an event and a process, albeit mostly at a two-year distance from leaving their jobs - at a time of stark transition for the country’s news media industry, and how they make sense of the experience within the broader framework of their sense of well-being and livelihoods.

The survey of Australian journalists whose jobs were made redundant between 2012 and 2014 captured a diverse range of interpretations of the redundancy experience, with respondents referencing a mix of views and anecdotes that related to emotional and/or practical issues before, during and after the time at which they left their positions. While overall these skewed more negative than positive, that around half of respondents could be categorised as “mixed” illustrates the complexity of many redundancy experiences.

Common themes that arose such as relief and feeling ready to leave what were often characterised as toxic workplaces reveal that many had reached a stage of acceptance about the reality of moving on from what were mostly long-term newsroom roles. The extent to which the same group reported an improved sense of well-being since leaving their jobs also illustrates acceptance, as well as attesting to just how challenging aspects of the redundancy experience had been for many. The relatively few responses that directly mentioned anger or being angry (just seven out of 221) may appear to be at odds with the relative prominence of anger as a reaction to job loss in the literature, but might also be connected to the degree to which participants have since come to terms the changes they had endured, as is reflected by the high proportion who reported an improved sense of well-being since leaving their roles. As Respondent 35 put it: “Looking back, I'm still annoyed (no

longer angry) at the speed of it all. But it was the best thing that ever happened to me. And my mental state? Sensationally well!”

The extent to which participants reported a negative experience of redundancy was found to be linked to the following factors: whether or not redundancy was involuntary, whether respondents were looking for work, working, or retired, and to the gender, and age of the respective participants. While it is not surprising that those who had no agency over whether or not they left their jobs were more likely to report negative experiences, variations along age and gender lines point to the challenge that these two (overlapping) groups face in adapting to the prospect and reality of more precarious work, especially in the context of family responsibilities, as is most clearly illustrated by four of the respondents referencing the proximity of maternity leave to the redundancy process. These findings particularly support the argument made by Örnebring and Möller (2018) that gender is a salient factor in journalism job loss.

The discrepancy within the group of under 50s, who collectively make up half of the overall survey sample, is also significant. The finding that those 35 and under were more likely to be satisfied than those who were either 36 to 50 years or those over 50 can be seen to support Örnebring’s contention that younger professionals are more likely to accept the realities of a precarious work environment. However, it is also significant that those between 36 and 50 were far more likely to report a negative experience of redundancy than those who were older. The relatively positive experiences of older respondents can be attributed in part to the often-substantial size of their payouts, and relative lack of financial commitments compared to their younger counterparts.

While survey answers include complaints about aspects of the job as well as relief at being freed of an increasingly unsatisfying workplace, there were also expressions of commitment to and concern about the plight of journalism. In many cases it was not journalism that respondents were happy or relieved to be leaving, but the diminished environments in which it is practiced or the lack of imagination or grace of the people entrusted with managing newsrooms. Their answers convey a clear concern for what the industry is becoming and what the consequences might be for society. This concern has not been the focus of this article but does suggest potential further research, and is the subject of future research outputs from this team, which will draw on subsequent annual surveys of the cohort whose responses were examined in this paper.

With respect to the visceral nature of many of the comments, it is a truism that journalists need to ask hard questions of those in positions of power and authority; this practice requires a tough-mindedness in the face of being browbeaten or lied to that inculcates a worldly forthrightness and a willingness to engage in robust debate. This is evident in the survey respondents’ comments about how their managers handled the redundancy process; it extends to blunt comments about the various media companies’ most senior executives and proprietors. These comments are not necessarily personal but assume the journalist knows as much if not more than the manager about journalism, and has a passion for its practice that executives, preoccupied with the business of media, have



left behind. The comments also suggest a tension that exists for journalists in large newsrooms between their standing as an employee paid to do what they are told and their standing in the community and among other journalists as people with independence and influence. It was a tension felt acutely among those who were confronted by the prospect of needing to leave within days after serving the company for decades.

An interesting potential direction for future research would be to compare these responses to those from laid-off workers in other professions, especially those known for valuing enterprise and creativity and for serving the public good, to assess whether similar loyalties to the respective industry, or the underlying craft, would remain so resolute, despite the trauma of mass-redundancies. A limitation of the survey is that it did not include any senior managers from the media companies, for the obvious reason that these managers were not themselves being laid off. The absence of this perspective means that we are unable to discern whether managers in media companies in Australia are any better or worse prepared to oversee large scale job loss, and suggests a further future path for research, especially in the light of ongoing digital disruption in the media and in many industries.

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## Tables

**TABLE 1**

Question 14 responses

	<b>All (n=221)</b>	<b>%</b>
Positive	36	16.3
Mixed	104	47.1
Negative	74	33.5
N/A	7	3.2

**TABLE 2**

Key Themes

<b>Key Themes (Not Mutually Exclusive)</b>	<b>Number referencing</b>	<b>% of completed responses</b>
Practical issues	147	67.0
Emotional issues	136	61.5
Week of redundancy	77	34.8
Transition issues	81	36.6
Ready to go	51	23.1
Toxic workplace	46	20.1
Relieved	31	14.0
Loss of identity	25	11.3
Feeling undervalued	23	10.4
Critical of management	22	9.9

Missing former colleagues	22	9.9
Stress	21	9.5
Better over time	19	8.6
Break/time off	16	7.2
Depressed/depressing	16	7.2

**TABLE 3**

Variations by whether voluntary or involuntary

	<b>General (N=221)</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Voluntary N=169</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Involuntary N=52</b>	<b>%</b>
Positive	36	16.3	32	18.9	4	7.7
Mixed	104	47.1	87	51.5	17	32.7
Negative	74	33.5	44	26.0	30	57.7
N/A	7	3.2	6	3.6	1	1.9

**TABLE 4**

Gender

	<b>General (221)</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Male (128)</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Female (93)</b>	<b>%</b>
Positive	36	16.3	25	19.5	11	11.8
Mixed	104	47.1	66	51.6	38	40.9
Negative	74	33.5	33	25.8	41	44.1
N/A	7	3.2	4	3.1	3	3.2

**TABLE 5**

Age

<b>Positive/Negative</b>	<b>Over Age 50 - %</b>	<b>N=120</b>	<b>50 And Under %</b>	<b>N=101</b>
Positive	19.2	23	12.9	13
Mixed	51.7	62	41.6	42
Negative	27.5	33	40.6	41
N/A	1.7	2	4.9	5
Significant Variations				
Ready to Go	30	36	14.8	15
Loss of Identity	6.7	8	16.8	17

**TABLE 6**

Working in Journalism, Mixed, Outside Journalism and Others (Not Working)

	<b>Working in Journalis m (N=66)</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Mix of journa lism and other N=66</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Outsi de Journ alism N=50</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Taking a break or retired) N=21</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Looking for work (N=17)</b>	<b>%</b>
Positive		13.4		13.6		20		38.1		0
Mixed		49.2 5		47.0		40		47.6		58.8

Negative	34.3	36.4	34	14.3	41.2.
N/A	3.0	3.0	6	0	

**TABLE 7**

Well-being

Total	Better (N)	Better (%)	Same (N=)	Same %	Worse (N=)	Worse %	N/A (N=)	N/A %
217	144	66.3	52	23.9	20	9.2	1	0.5