



# Don't freelances look young these days?

It's said that a budding journalist was once directed to a box containing a single piece of paper with the words: "Good luck – you're on your own." Such urban legends will resonate with the growing number of young freelance journalists. While going freelance used to be largely the preserve of those with a proven track record in the newsroom, it is increasingly a necessity for mid and even entry-level journalists, in a climate where first jobs have all but been superseded by unpaid internships, and cutbacks are biting elsewhere. Add to this that staff jobs which do exist are largely marketing or high-level administrative roles masquerading as journalism to attract literate applicants, and it's clear why many feel they have little choice but to work for themselves.

Rachel England, 26, went freelance at the beginning of this year, having been made redundant from her job as assistant editor for an environmental industry publication just two years after finishing her training at Cardiff. "I definitely feel like I've been forced into freelancing," she says. "Certainly freelancing at this stage of my career is brutal, which is something my freelance peers agree on. We've

While working for yourself once came after a staff career, many new journalists must now go solo, finds **Maxine Frances Roper**

not had sufficient time to build useful relationships with employers, who tend to rely on their tried and trusted freelances."

Matthew Caines, 23, co-founder of the journalism blog Wannabe Hacks, became a full-time freelance straight after graduating from Birmingham University, where he was features editor of the student newspaper. He studied history and had no formal training in journalism, but began writing food pieces for trade publications, having worked part-time as a sous chef while a student. He progressed to fashion pieces, working mainly for men's lifestyle webzine Sartorial Male, and now writes for the Guardian's Professional section. Though circumstances initially forced him into freelancing, he's happy with the outcome: "Jobs are too over-subscribed and ask for experience. Where are you going to get that from without a job in the first

place? Freelancing offers the chance to work at home, with your parents and without rent, and gives you that industry experience. Maybe one year down the line you'll have 10, 20, even 30 articles under your belt and a clippings book that stands out much more than any other graduate."

Rachel says she has gleaned her most useful survival strategies from online networking with other freelances through forums such as JournoBiz, which cover everything from crafting pitches to the perennial issue of setting rates and chasing payments. Just as journalists who are starting out should avoid the serial internship trap, freelances who are just beginning must avoid the ever-present temptation to write for free. As John Toner, freelance organiser for the NUJ, warns: "Some people have the attitude that freelances can do some work for them as a favour because they assume they are getting paid work elsewhere. Or friends will ask a freelance to work for free, but how many such friends can a freelance afford to have?"

Just as students are having to adapt their career expectations, so too, are journalism course providers, who are taking a wider approach to training than they have in the past. According to Lorraine Davies, director of the Periodicals Training Council, the majority now focus students on portfolio working, with a career that mixes permanent employment, fixed term contracts and freelancing opportunities. For the first time, a recent graduate from the MA in journalism at Goldsmiths has been invited back specifically to talk to current students about freelancing, and 'keeping your head above water while waiting for the right job to come up'. Course leader Angela Phillips is optimistic about the prospects for young freelances: "Ironically, they are often getting better opportunities than in the past, because staff cuts mean that there is a real need for well-trained casual staff. The casuals, and freelancers, are then ready to pounce on the new jobs as they come through so it's not all doom and gloom!"

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