

Written off

How the Indian news media deals with its freelance journalists

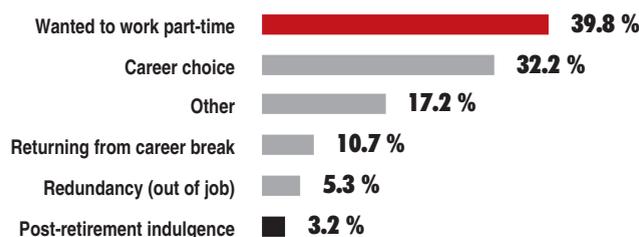
In late February last year, we carried out an informal survey of freelance journalists in India. The questionnaire itself was *ad hoc*, but the trends that emerged were clear—most freelance journalists in this country are perceived to be the stepchildren of the Indian news media. Though some indications are there, we want to come up with concrete numbers. Hence, this—the first ever research study about the status of freelance journalists in India. We wanted to look at job (in)security, payment defaulters, general working conditions, legal frameworks, copyrights, arm-twisting tactics of news establishments, *et al.*

The entire survey was carried out online. There were 50 questions in all, broken down into six sections. The total number of respondents was 793. Quite a few responses—43 in all—had to be excluded from the survey for being incomplete or inconsistent. The survey was carried out over a 15-day period in March-April 2008. The results could not be compiled and published within the promised period because of logistical constraints.

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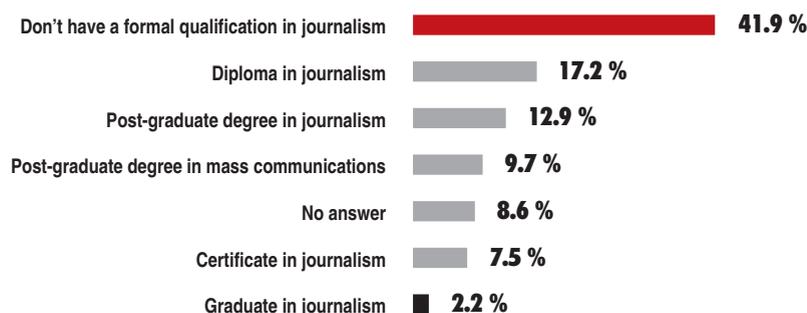


1. How did you start freelancing in the first place?

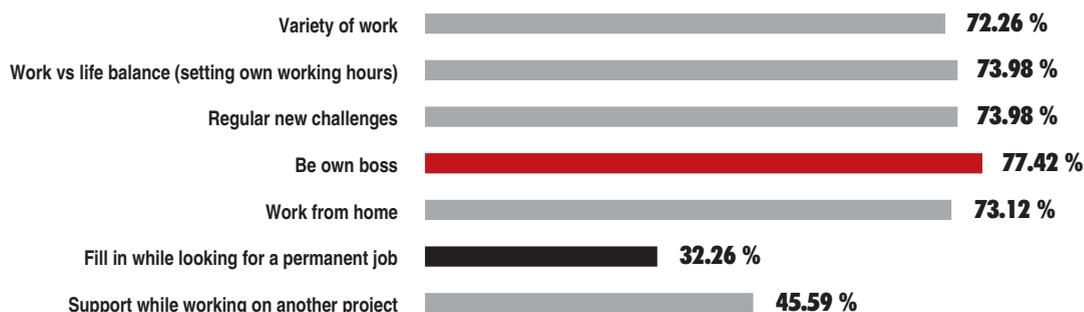


Note: The percentage figures here will not add up to 100 since a handful had more than one reasons for taking up freelancing

2. Do you have any formal qualifications in journalism?



3. What are your key reasons for freelancing?



Note: Respondents were asked to rate each aspect on basis of whether they strongly agreed, somewhat agreed, neither agreed nor disagreed, somewhat disagreed, strongly disagreed with it. Respondents also had the option of either marking the particular aspect as 'not applicable' or leaving the question unanswered altogether. These ratings were subsequently used to arrive at a weighted mean on a scale of 100.

4. What are the biggest challenges you face while freelancing?



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My overall experience is the work that pays me decent is not satisfying. The work that gives utmost satisfaction and offers professional challenges, does NOT really pay well. That's the irony. Translation between different languages is a niche area, and a very creative one at that. But people generally do NOT really VALUE it and understand its finer nuances and intricacies.

— *Manohar Notani*

There are breaking news stories that can be reported from India daily. There are social issues and women's issues and human rights issues that need to be brought to attention. And who's doing that? The foreign media. The foreign media, which has limited understanding of Indian issues is bringing out much better work than the Indian media itself. So what do Indian freelance journalists like me do? We write for the foreign media where we can get some respect, and a regular income. That's tragic.

— *Anon*

Earlier publications public or private would pay up, now they find simple excuse that the work has not been selected or rejected or not what we wanted and are not paid. There's no respect for your work any longer. It has become so commercialised that the this field has become more of a PR work than actual journalism. So much of yellow journalism has seeped in that publications are helpless but have to toe the line of the adverts. The press is now a sorry state of affairs. The editorials of most publications keep changing so often that freelancers find it harassing to just network all over again and in no time the contact is again moved on. Although I love the freelancing work, I find it less stimulating these days and sincerely wish to diversify. The only major disadvantage is that you are not accepted seriously in any journalistic clubs or association or don't get credentials and others think you are only doing this as pass time, which is so wrong. They also think that if you have been freelancing, you are not qualified, even though you have written more articles and experienced more than a full time employee. It is also frustrating at times to answer to new kids on the block who have simply been put on the higher seat without much experience. The fun and challenges of investigative journalism is over.

— *Dhara*

I am happy . I think, I have set an example being a successful language journalist. It may be because of my skill, social networking, ability to understand news. professionalism etc.

— *Shamantha DS*

We need a network of freelancers in India so that we could be more aware and enhance our collective bargaining against publications.

— *Frederick Noronha*

I really wish there were more opportunities for humour writers and fiction. When I began writing in 1983, BG Verghese of the *Indian Express* sent a note with every rejection, to explain why. So did Vishwa Nath of the Delhi Press. That was very encouraging and educative.

— *Anon*

There are newspapers where you may be paid for the article, but not for the photographs you have taken. This has happened to me many a time. I do not understand the logic here. And yet, these very same publications may engage photographers whom they pay quite well, if not handsomely. Even if a journalist is paid for photographs accompanying her piece, the rates will be abysmally low. It is as if her photographs do not command any acknowledgment; and this in spite of taking pains to select the very best photographs for being published.

— *Anon*

Indian freelance writers need to realise that they CAN write for foreign publications and look to break into those markets instead of begging editors in India to pay more than their measly Rs.1/word rate. Foreign publications need writers and we are as good as the rest of the world, if not better.

— *Anon*

I feel freelance Journalists are not respected in regional media in India. My experience says that normally mainstream media does not believe in freelancers.

— *Sachin Kumar Jain*

Working in this field has helped me a lot. I have developed a lot of contacts and build a strong network in my region. Can get the most happening news in a jiffy. Work culture sometimes is very bad.

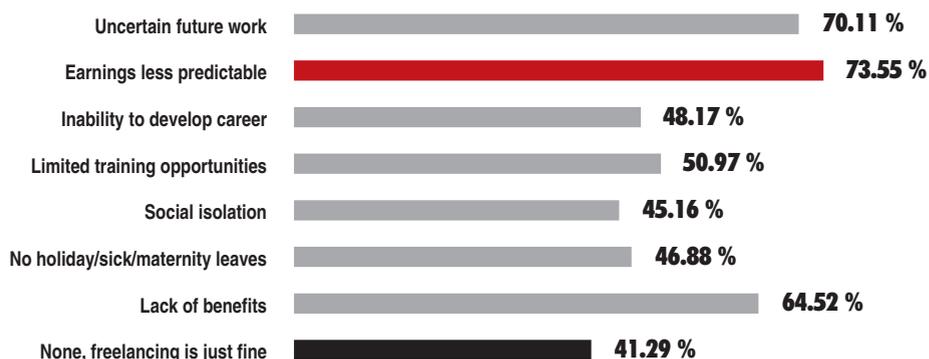
— *Anon*

I am hearing impaired since childhood, and have written hundreds of articles on the welfare of the disabled. Most of my published articles went a long way in helping implementation of many policies in many places. So, as a freelancer, I am quite satisfied.

— *Kodakkal Shivaprasad*

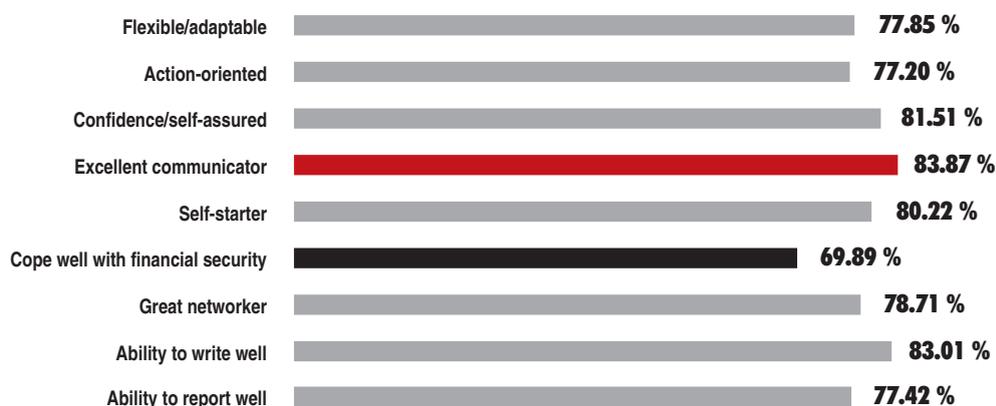


5. What are the main disadvantages of having freelancing as a career?



Note: Respondents were asked to rate each aspect on basis of whether they strongly agreed, somewhat agreed, neither agreed nor disagreed, somewhat disagreed, strongly disagreed with it. Respondents also had the option of either marking the particular aspect as 'not applicable' or leaving the question unanswered altogether. These ratings were subsequently used to arrive at a weighted mean on a scale of 100.

6. What are the qualities needed to be a successful freelance journalist?



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7. Do you think freelance journalism leads to any of the following?



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The best paymasters pays best, who delays and who often forgets to: what freelancers have to say

The best paymasters

1) Times of India, The	21%
2) Telegraph, The	16%
3) Hindu, The	5%
4) Hindustan Times	4%
5) Down to Earth	3%
Eenadu	3%
Indiatogether.org	3%
JetWings	3%
Mint	3%
Frontline	3%
Economic Times, The	3%
Rashtriya Sahara	3%
Images Business of Fashion	3%
Swagat	3%

They delay the most

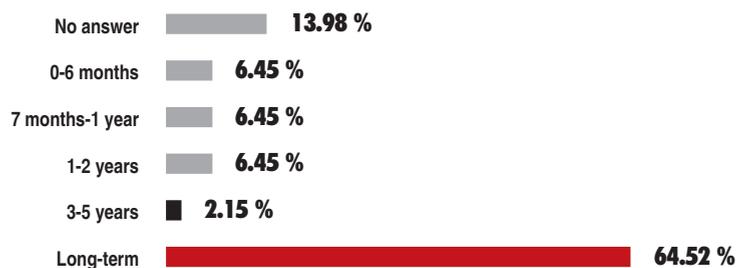
1) India Today	19%
2) Dainik Bhaskar	7%
Dainik Jagran	7%
Loksatta	7%
Navhind Times	7%
Press Trust of India	7%
Statesman, The	7%
Deccan Herald	7%
Navbharat Times	7%
Week, The	7%

They often don't pay up

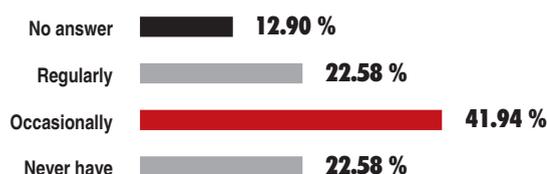
1) Pioneer, The	22%
2) Navbharat Times	11%
Tehelka	11%
3) Dainik Jagran	4%
High Life	4%
Gurl	4%
CNN-IBN	4%
Sahara Times	4%
India Today	4%
Deccan Herald	4%



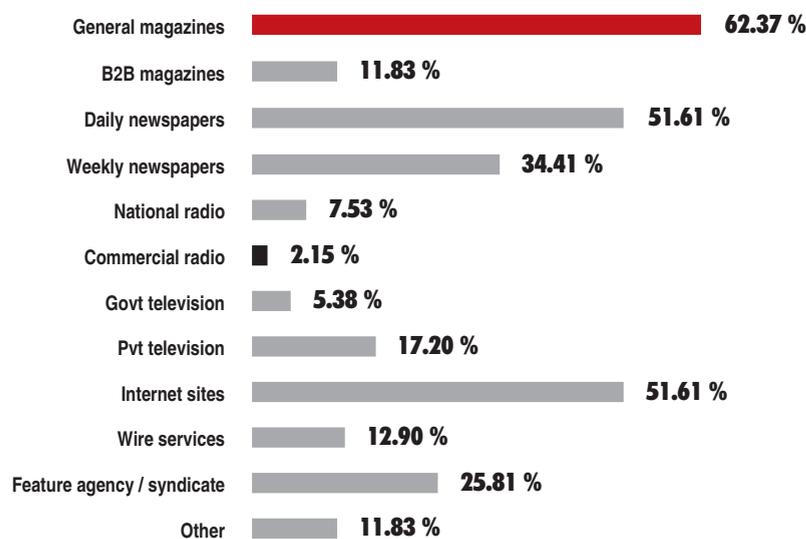
8. For how long do you plan to continue freelancing?



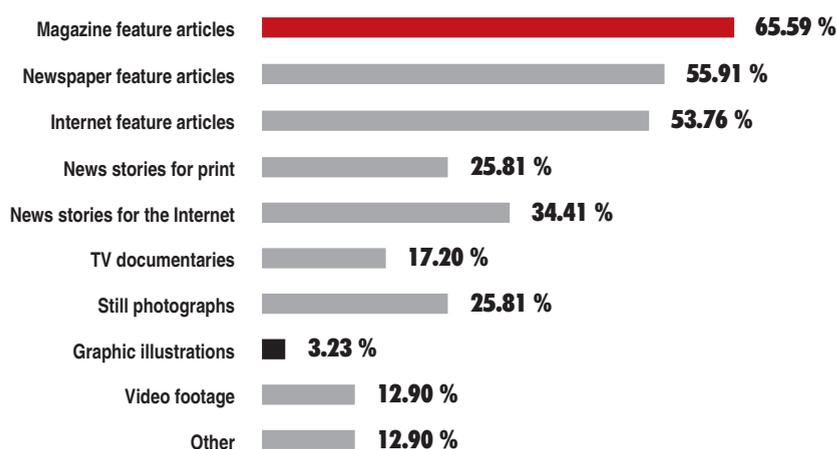
9. Do you work for publications / channels / sites / agencies based outside India?



10. Which sectors of the media do you send your work to?



11. What kind of freelance material do you produce?





The entire business of freelancing is looked upon with disrespect. It is sometimes infamously synonymised with the word "consultant" which till a few years ago, remained an euphemism for being unemployed. But with most organisations employing people on a contract and referring to them as consultants to cut down costs and tax liabilities, it remains to be seen if the word "freelancer" *per se* gains some responsibility or not in the near future. Whenever one mentions freelance journalist it conjures up a person desperately looking for work - retainer, stringer or even columnist are better respected. Therefore, the dice is loaded against him/her from the very start. A freelancer has to keep selling stories which are never good enough for the publication. Till a few years back, due to the space available in the weekend pages, human interest stories could get in and a freelancer could manage to survive as one providing a second income in the family. But with publications going more visual to compete with television, there is hardly any space. Besides, staffers are now expected to do both the pages and write. Being based in Kolkata is the worst. Earlier, most national magazines had a sort of retainer in every centre but this city fell off the map due to lack of revenue and/or celebs. But still if influential editors wish they can encourage competent freelancers but most often choose not to due to whatever reasons. For any freelance work, there should be a mandatory period of 3 months within which money should be paid or some 50 per cent paid on work delivered (rest paid on publication) so that travel, if any, computer & phone charges are taken care of to an extent.

— Anon

I was the editor of an Indian training journal and an international professional journal, while in government service and was for a short while, the editorial advisor of a regional economic journal. The last-named was a frustrating experience, given the obsession with advertisements by the owners. The former two were smooth-sailing, as I had total autonomy. While most my of writing was adjunct to lecturing on professional aspects, it was very occasionally, as I gave priority to lecturing. I had written occasionally in *Frontline* and the *Hindu* and comment regulary in some Tamil magazines and at infrequent intervals in the *Times of India*, *Outlook* and the *Economist*.

— Anon

Copyright problems: theoretically they are meant to be the journalist's. In practice, no newspaper in India allows that to happen. Not unless you're a Nobel laureate or an acclaimed author who knows quite well

that he/she owns the copyright. Problems in international wire services of their clientele using your stories, giving the agency their copyright but omitting the journalist's byline. The wire service then appears to have no legal hold over their customer/clients for deleting bylines. On the face of it, there is no copyright infringement as such, since the agency has been credited, but the freelance journalist loses out. There is, of course, nothing in India that pays attention to freelancers in the first place, besides paying attention to copyright infringements such as these. Terrible attitude in the profession towards freelancers. In the west, mainly, freelancers get known for their work and publications are only too well aware that freelancers will do hazardous (war, etc) work at far less cost to the publication. They definitely get more respect by their colleagues. India has absolutely no awareness of the contribution that freelancers bring to the publication in question or to journalism in general. You can quote me for the first two paragraphs ONLY. Kindly do not quote me on my third paragraph.

— Anon

Once working as a freelancer for the *Pioneer* I went to interview Muzaffar Ali for an article for their Sunday Magazine at his house in Lucknow. He has Rampur hounds and one of them had just littered. I saw a pup wriggling in a basket and picked it up. Before I know it the mother comes charging at me and bites me in the upper thigh. When I went home there were teeth marks, a huge blue bruise the size of a palm and she had drawn blood. On enquiring from Muzaffar sa'ab I learnt she wasn't vaccinated. The vaccinations cost Rs750! I was paid Rs650 for the article --that too after two months! Some experience!

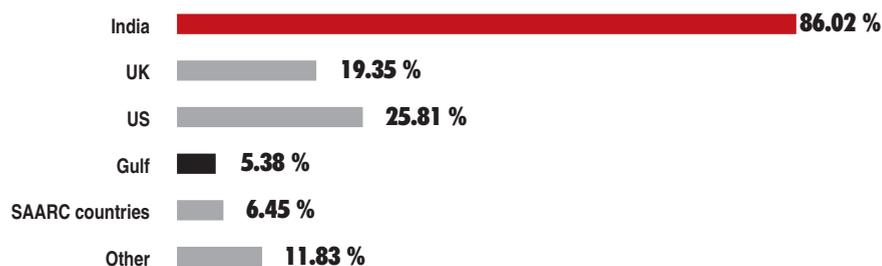
— Anon

When I began freelancing in January 2003, my friends and relatives weren't convinced about my career future and they looked upon the work as something one should never start off with. I was a fresh graduate then and now probably seeing my writing credits (I've worked for 54 print and online publications, in India and abroad worked with 60 editors), they seem to be convinced one make a successful career freelancing as a writer. Fortunately, my husband and my parents as well as my brother has always stood by me. My husband's three-shift schedule makes me think I made the right decision to freelance and this way, I am able to manage both home and work without much effort. Once a freelance writer has enough experience and is willing to negotiate and have the will to say 'no' if the publication offers low-pay rates, well there needn't be any other hindrance.

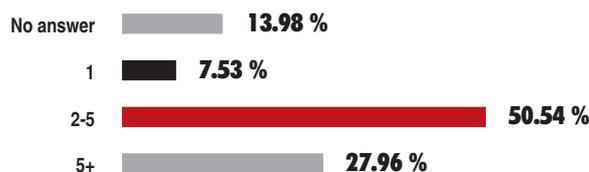
— Resmi Jaimon



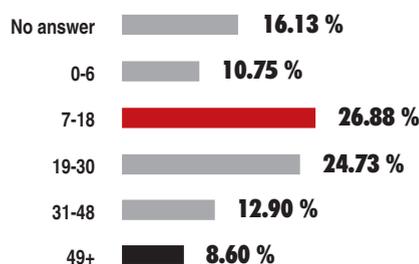
12. Where do you sell your material?



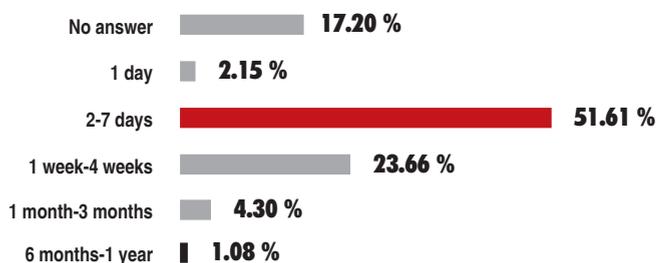
13. For how many pubs / channels / sites / agencies do you produce material?



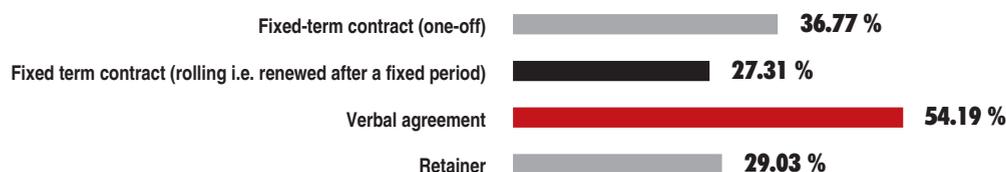
14. How many hours a week do you have to devote to freelance work?



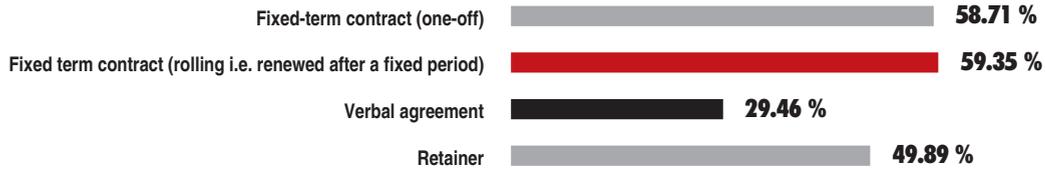
15. What is the usual deadline you have to meet?



16. What is the legal framework under which you usually work?

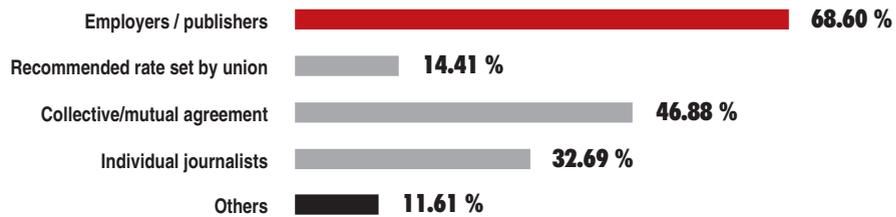


17. If you had a choice, how much of these options would you prefer?

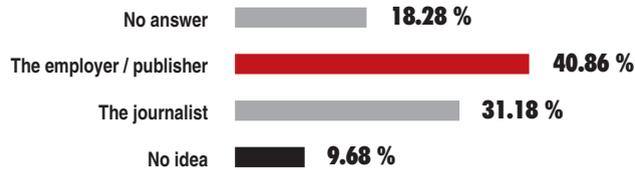


Note: Respondents were asked to rate each aspect on basis of whether they strongly agreed, somewhat agreed, neither agreed nor disagreed, somewhat disagreed, strongly disagreed with it. Respondents also had the option of either marking the particular aspect as 'not applicable' or leaving the question unanswered altogether. These ratings were subsequently used to arrive at a weighted mean on a scale of 100.

18. In terms of who sets the rate of work, which of the following happens?



19. Who usually holds the copyright of the work?

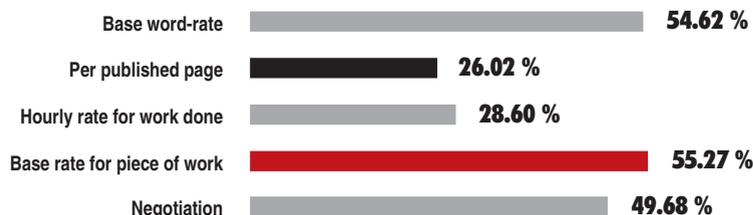


20. Foreign publications are better than Indian ones in the following aspects

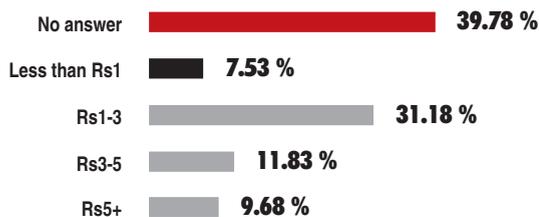


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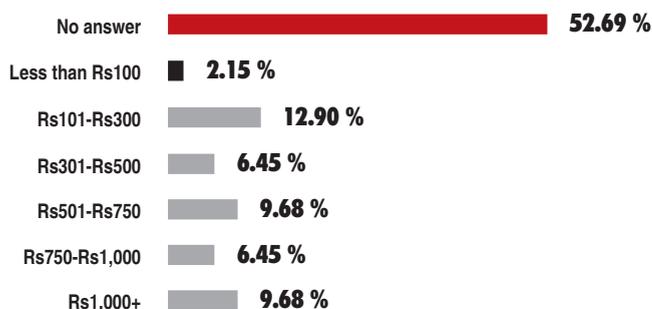
21. What kinds of base remuneration rates do you prefer?



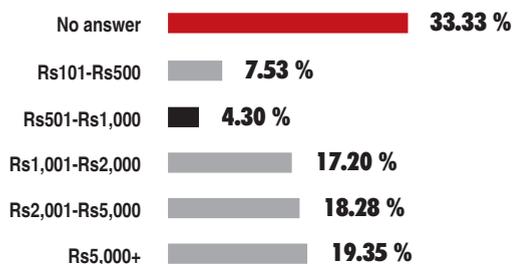
22. If and when you are paid a base word rate for work done, how much is it?



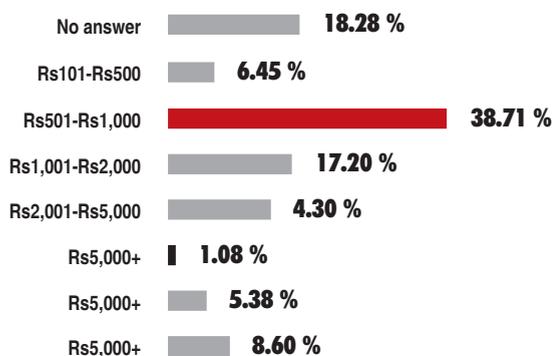
23. When you are paid on a per published page basis, how much is it usually?



24. When you are paid a lumpsum for your work, how much is it usually?



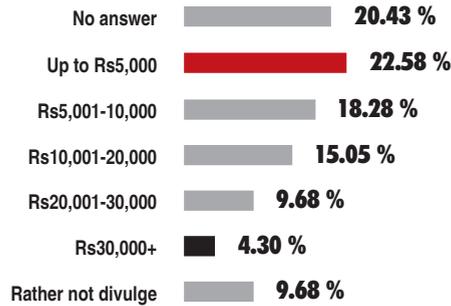
25. Have payment rates changed compared to five years ago?



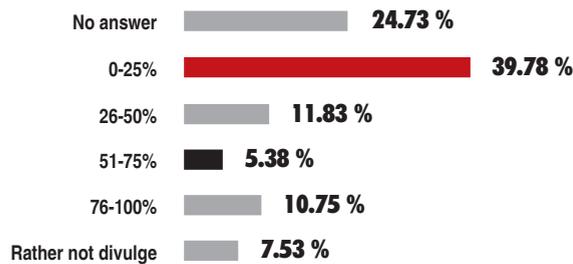
26. Is your freelancing work the only source of income for your household?



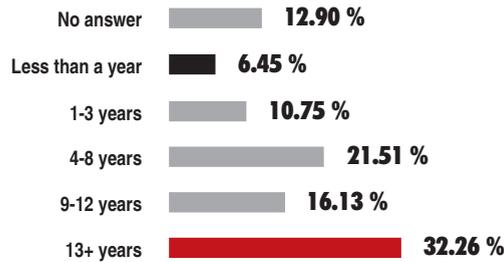
27. What is the monthly earning from your freelancing work?



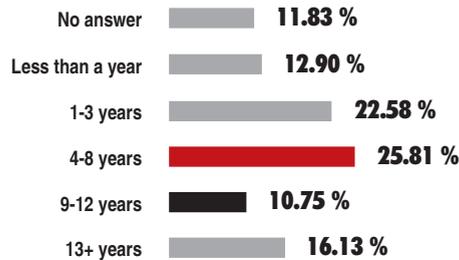
28. What percentage of your income comes from producing freelance material?



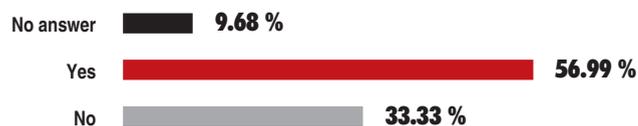
29. For how long have you been a journalist?



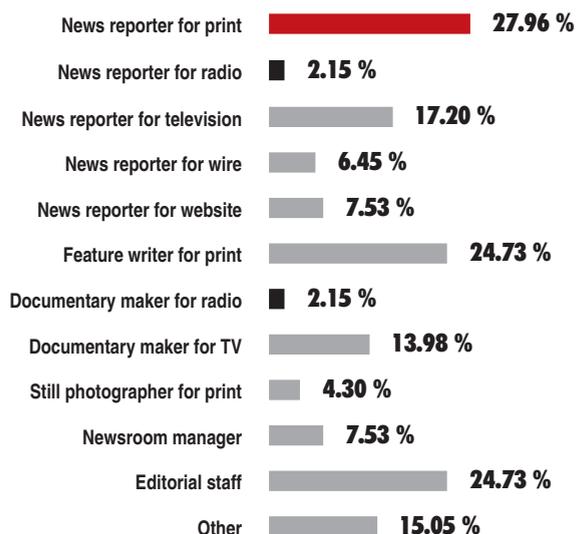
30. For how long have you been a freelance journalist?



31. Have you ever worked as a full-time, permanent employee in a news outlet?



32. What have you worked as?



33. Are you a member of any journalists union / association?

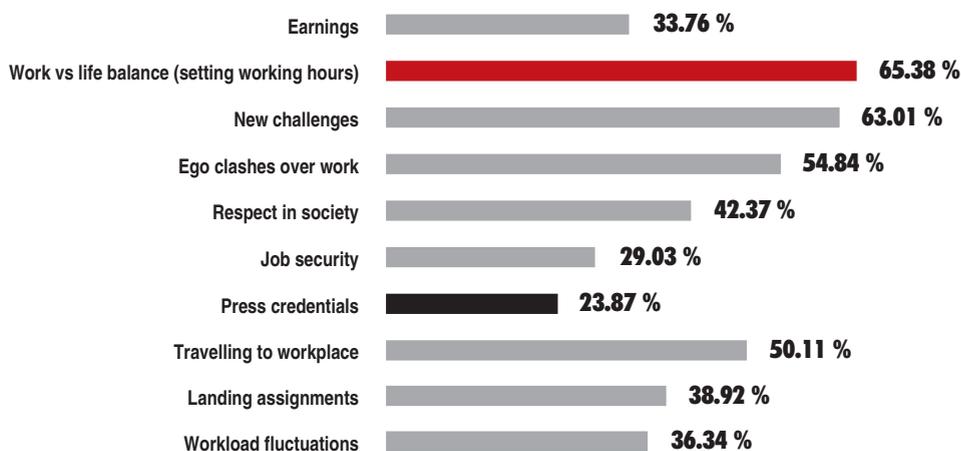


34. Overall, are you happy/satisfied being a freelance journalist?



Note: Respondents were asked to rate each aspect on basis of whether they strongly agreed, somewhat agreed, neither agreed nor disagreed, somewhat disagreed, strongly disagreed with it. Respondents also had the option of either marking the particular aspect as 'not applicable' or leaving the question unanswered altogether. These ratings were subsequently used to arrive at a weighted mean on a scale of 100.

35. Compared to full-time journalists on these counts, are you better-off?



Note: Respondents were asked to rate each aspect on basis of whether they were better off, the same, worse off, or had no idea. Respondents also had the option of leaving the question unanswered altogether. These ratings were subsequently used to arrive at a weighted mean on a scale of 100.

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