

Journalistic Precarity Beyond The Fordist Baseline: A Critical Interpretive Synthesis

V. Aswin*, M. Srihari

Department of Communication and Media Studies, Bharathiar University, Tamil Nadu

ABSTRACT

Precarity has become a central concept in journalism studies, originating in sociological paradigms and subsequently contributing to the labour turn in the field. The conceptual apparatus through which journalistic precarity is now understood is built predominantly on the Global North contexts. The most recent systematic review of this literature found that the twenty out of the twenty-one sampled studies originated from labour markets of Western Europe, Northern America and Australia. Drawing on the critique of Nielson and Rossiter that Fordism was the historical exception rather than the general norm, the review adopts a Critical Interpretive Synthesis of the growing body of scholarship on journalistic precarity in Global South and adjacent non-Western contexts. Organising the literature around four analytical themes, the review finds that the Global South evidence challenge three key assumptions of the inherited framework: the assumption of a secure non-precarious labour market which is in decline; the conception of state as a regulator rather than a direct producer of precarity; and the reliance on passion and self-exploitation as the mechanism to endure precarity. The review further identifies an emerging concern with precarity acting as a filter that determines who can enter and sustain journalistic work. The article argues that the Global South cannot be treated as the periphery of precarity debates awaiting incorporation into the existing framework but is instead central to reconceptualising the general assumptions about precarious conditions.

Keywords: journalistic precarity, precarization, Global South, labour turn, objective precarity, subjective precarity.

INTRODUCTION

Journalism scholarship has taken a labour turn, moving beyond a focus on media texts and audience studies to examine the working conditions, well-being and exploitation of the media workers^[1]. Over the last decade, a substantial body of work has documented how journalists experience the disruptions brought into their field. Consequently, precarity, a concept rooted in sociology of work, has become an organising concern within the field. Scholars provide empirical evidence for how precarious the journalistic employment has become through the collapse of advertising-funded business models, waves of layoffs, outsourcing, growth of freelance and atypical work contracts and the platformization of news distribution^[2-4]. Rick and Hanitzsch's^[5] integrative theoretical model of journalists' perceptions of precarity followed by Rick's^[6] first attempt to measure objective precarity in journalism quantitatively, mark the culmination of the ongoing discourse on journalistic experience of precarity.

This article posits a critical question concerning the geographical emphasis of existing scholarship. The most recent systematic review of the literature on the precarization of journalistic work, covering studies between 2014 and 2024, found that the 20 of the 21 peer-reviewed articles in its sample originated from the Global North^[7]. Countries such as Germany, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, Ireland and the Scandinavian nations account for the majority of studies. The study observed that the field would expand beyond its current geographical segments and this review attempts to address that anticipation. Empirical evidence concerning journalistic precarity has emerged from Brazil, Nigeria, China, Vietnam, Turkey, the Gulf states and India, yet these studies remain fragmented. A comparative perspective on this body of evidence can help address the observed gap in the literature. More importantly, examining what this body of evidence collectively does to a theoretical framework developed outside these contexts can

Relevant conflicts of interest/financial disclosures: The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

reveal the tensions and limitations of existing understandings of journalistic precarity.

The review's central analytical tension draws on Neilson and Rossiter's criticism of the evolving debates on precarity, which they argue are based on a faulty historical premise^[8]. Precarity was understood as what workers experience when historically established protections that ensured stable and secure employment are dismantled. This understanding rests on the assumption of a pre-existing normal condition of work that did not necessarily exist in non-western contexts. Nielson and Rossiter argued that these protections constituted a brief settlement confined to a few countries and a privileged segment of the workforce, and went on critique that Fordism was an exception rather than a general norm. Hence, the conditions of the Global South cannot be understood as a deviation from a Western baseline. Instead, they should be understood as contexts in which precarity has been central to labour relations. Situated within this reframing, the review addresses two questions. First, what does the available scholarship reveal about how journalistic precarity is constituted, experienced and managed in the Global South and adjacent non-Western contexts; and second, how the existing body of evidence challenges the conceptual framework inherited from the Western-centric literature.

METHODS

The literature on journalistic precarity outside the Global North is scattered across journalism studies, the sociology of work, area studies and press freedom research. It does not share a stable vocabulary and a substantial portion of the relevant evidence deals with precarity without naming it explicitly. Accordingly, the review must draw on evidence from heterogeneous sources including grey literature, and it attempts to critically question the existing frameworks in an evolving sub-field, rather than merely aggregating an established field. Hence the review adopts a Critical Interpretive Synthesis (CIS) approach that treats the existing literature itself as an object of scrutiny^[9]. Specifically, CIS draws on the principles of grounded theory, allowing the organizing concepts to emerge from the evidence, while critically interrogating the assumptions upon which the field has been constructed.

Given the dispersed and conceptually diverse nature of the literature, a sampling frame was constructed to identify relevant literature through three complementary strategies. First, structured searches were conducted in academic databases, journal archives and search engines such as Scopus, Taylor and Francis Online, SAGE Journals, Wiley Online Library and Google Scholar. Keyword combinations of the terms "journalistic precarity", "precarization of journalists", "precarious journalism", "media work", "freelance journalists" and "journalistic labour" along with regional qualifiers including Global South, Latin America, Africa, China and Middle East were employed. Second, forward and backward citation chaining was performed from a set of anchor texts: Rick and Hanitzsch^[5], Chadha and Steiner^[11], Ornebring^[4], Nielson and Rossiter^[8] and Honc^[7], whose reference list and sample were used as a map of the existing Global North corpus against which newer work could be situated. Third, the tables of contents of *Journalism Studies*, *Journalism Practice*, *Digital Journalism*, *Journalism and Media, Culture and Society* were monitored for relevant work published through mid-2026.

Inclusion criteria were determined analytically rather than geographically, also adhering to CIS's emphasis on theoretical relevance over methodological uniformity. The review includes peer-reviewed studies of journalistic labour conditions in contexts that lack the Fordist baseline assumed by the foundational precarity literature, that is, contexts in which a standard employment relationship with welfare-state protections was never the norm for most workers, or in which the state's treatment of journalism extends beyond regulation into direct pressure. Institutional and press freedom reports (Reporters Without Borders, the International Federation of Journalists) were used as contextual grounding where peer-reviewed evidence was thin. Foundational theoretical sources were included without date restriction as the review's purpose is to test an inherited framework, while the empirical corpus is concentrated in the period from 2014 to 2026, with particular emphasis to studies published from 2020 onward. The final corpus comprises 30 sources including peer-reviewed studies, monographs and grey literature.

CIS prescribes that analysis proceed through constant comparison, iterative theme refinement and recursive movement between evidence and emerging theory, analogous to primary qualitative research^[9]. The present review adopts both deductive and inductive approaches: themes were derived deductively by extracting assumptions from the inherited framework, as well as inductively from patterns the framework could not accommodate. CIS also specifies two signature outputs: a synthesising argument and synthetic constructs. While the former integrates evidence across studies to reconceptualise the phenomenon, the latter transforms evidence into a conceptual form not found in any single study. The analysis that follows questions the three load-bearing assumptions of the existing precarity framework against the non-Fordist contexts.

The Foundational Ideas of Journalistic Precarity

The foundational ideas of precarity are organised into two stages, beginning with the general sociological debate and subsequently extending into creative labour studies and journalism. Castel proposed precarity as the dismantling of a historically constructed settlement that ensured social protections to wage labour^[12]. His three-zone model comprising zones of integration, vulnerability and disaffiliation led to what German labour sociology later operationalised into seven dimensions of objective precarity. They are income, social security, employment stability, recognition, social integration, the content of work and life planning^[13,14]. Bourdieu without explicitly naming precarity, brought the political insight that insecurity functions as a mode of domination that disciplines the workers as the way power structures intend to do^[15]. Standing introduced precariat as an emerging class^[16]; Butler and Lorey relocated the concept by undertaking ontological stance^[17,18]. Kalleberg defined precarity operationally as work that is uncertain, unpredictable and risky from the point of view of the worker^[19].

The translation of precarity into journalism proceeded through creative-labour studies. Hesmondhalgh and Baker observed and formulated the concept of self-exploitation, where in creative workers accept conditions that would be refused by the workers elsewhere because the work is integrated into identity and meaning, so that passion and exploitation are not

opposites but intertwined^[20]. Morini et al. documented the same tension inside newsrooms as precarious passion and passionate precariousness^[21]. Örnebring^[4] showed that journalists themselves understand precarity as the new normal and an unchangeable backdrop to be managed individually rather than contested collectively, while Kuehn and Corrigan's^[22] notion of hope labour explained why entrants accept their conditions as investments in careers. Gollmitzer brought democratic stakes to the debate by showing that the dimensions of precarity are simultaneously dimensions of journalistic capacity; income instability limits investigations, legal vulnerability narrows what can be pursued and isolation erodes the infrastructure of watchdog function^[23]. Counter tendencies and resistance were documented by Cohen et al.^[24], Salamon^[25] and Norbaeck^[26] and survival strategies by Martin-Sanchiz^[27] and Mathisen^[28].

Rick and Hanitzsch's model represents the culmination of the ongoing debates around journalistic precarity that now anchors the subfield^[5]. Their four-column model describes the causes of precarity (sociocultural, political, economic, technological and organisational factors), seven dimensions of objective precarity, individual dispositions that mediate perception and finally a continuum of subjective precarity revealing six perceiver types. The model's achievement is to hold objective conditions and subjective experience together without collapsing one into the other and Rick^[6] has since operationalised its objective side quantitatively. Chadha and Steiner's^[11] edited volume mapped the empirical landscape internationally, including Latin American evidence brought by Marquex-Marurez et al.^[29], while acknowledging that large parts of the Global South, remained under-represented.

Three assumptions of the current framework should be evaluated against the evidence from the Global South. The first is the baseline assumption, that is precarity is conceptualised as a decline from a standard employment relationship that once defined normality. The seven dimensions are calibrated against that standard and the very term precarization names a process of erosion^[30]. The second is the regulator-state assumption: the political cluster in Rick and Hanitzsch's model comprises media

regulation, market regulation, labour market policies and trade union influence. The state appears as a rule-setter whose policies may permit or constrain precarious employment. This perspective appears to be a political dimension looked from a stable liberal democracy. The third is the passion assumption: the question of why workers endure precarity is answered through the lens of self-exploitation, calling or hope. These mechanisms have largely been documented among workers who at least in principle, could have chosen alternative forms of work. The sections that follow test each assumption against the available Global South evidence.

Precarity Without a Baseline

The first and most fundamental challenge appears at the level of the baseline itself. Neilson and Rossiter's historical argument is validated by the empirical evidence. In most of the Global South contexts, there was no Fordist settlement from which journalistic employment could decline. Matthews and Onyemaobi, proposing the concept of precarious professionalism from the Nigerian case, describe a journalism in which unstable employment, low and irregular pay, lack of professional development and public hostility are not recent departures but constitutive conditions of the occupation, sustained by the precarity of the media organisations themselves^[31]. Marquez-Ramirez et al. reach a parallel conclusion for Latin America, where informality, gig arrangements, multiple job arrangements and political pressure have long been ordinary features of journalistic labour rather than fresh erosions of a protected norm^[29]. Suleiman extends the Nigerian analysis to the watchdog function, finding a press that aspires to investigation but is structurally confined to reporting easily observable wrongdoing, a gap between ambition and investigative capacity that resource conditions shape^[32].

Gomes and Banjac make the point with particular clarity in their study of community journalists in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro, framed explicitly as a contribution to the labour turn^[33]. Participants in their study work within news projects for which funding fragility, short horizons and dependence on grants are the permanent condition of existence; precarity is normalised within the projects themselves and the

journalist's relation to it cannot be narrated as an erosion of protections. The same structural picture emerges from the International Federation of Journalists' South Asia Press Freedom Report^[34], which reveals journalists are moving into a media gig economy with near-total absence of labour protection for freelance workers and from the Reuters Institute's documentation of the Indian digital-native sector, where mixed revenue models are the founding condition of the outlets that now carry a disproportionate share of the country's accountability journalism^[35].

The Indian case does not outright challenge the baseline assumption, rather adds a sectorial nuance. The Indian labour market as a whole has been overwhelmingly informal throughout the modern period and Standing's narrative of decline does not describe it^[16]. Indian journalism contained a quasi-Fordist outlook where legacy print and broadcast organisations offered staff positions, statutory wage-board protections under the Working Journalists Act, union representation and recognisable careers. The movement of journalistic labour out of that settlement and into digital-native, freelance and contract arrangements is therefore experienced by Indian Journalists as a real precarization, a break from an industry norm, even though it is not a break from the national labour-market norm^[36]. The key takeaway is that the baseline is neither universal nor absent. Rather, it is organised sectorally and historically specific. Since precarity is assessed relationally, a baseline-sensitive understanding would treat the existence, scope and memory of any prior settlement as an empirical variable^[30]. Journalists can experience precarity even in already informal labour markets. The attempt should be to identify whether their insecurity results from the loss of previously existing protections or from the intensification of conditions in contexts where such protections never existed.

Methodologically, instruments built on the standard employment relationship, including the contractual indicators operationalised by Rick, require translation before they can classify workers in economies where the formal contract is itself a minority experience^[6]. Theoretically, the zone architecture inherited from Castel begins to look like a description of one regional history rather than a general one. The Global South evidence exemplifies that the zone of integration is

not realistic and hence the analytical lens should look for differentiating positions within the generalised insecurity^[33,37].

The State as a Producer of Precarity

Rick and Hanitzsch's model supposes political factors shape precarity through regulation, labour policy and the strength or weakness of unions; the state sets conditions within which economic and organisational dynamics produce insecurity^[5]. The Global South evidence describes categorically different dynamics where states that act directly upon journalists and news organisations, deploying legal, financial and administrative instruments in ways that produce material insecurity as an intended or accepted effect. In these contexts, the political dimension is not one cause among five; rather it is frequently the dominant cause of precarity.

The pattern recurs in cases that are otherwise dissimilar in context. Wang and Li document how a Chinese newspaper once celebrated for investigative reporting has been hollowed into producing work that conforms state-approved frames, with the loss of investigative talent to other industries as a consequence. Precarity functions here by reducing people's ability to act, choose, speak or work freely^[38].

Bulut and Ertuna show how the pandemic functioned as a shock for Turkey's journalists, compounding economic, bodily and political precarity in an authoritarian context in which dismissal, prosecution and harassment are continuous with ordinary labour discipline^[39]. Badran and Smets, studying exile journalists in Turkey, describe an entire newsroom constituted in precarity and find the paradox that despite their precarious conditions, journalists often experienced a degree of professional and creative autonomy that had been impossible in their country of origin^[40]. The finding complicates a straightforward assumption of precarity resulting in the loss of autonomy. In the Gulf countries, legal-institutional dimensions of precarity takes a distinctive form. For expatriate journalists, the right to residence in the country is tied to employment or income-generating capacity, making immigration status itself a source of insecurity. This happens to be a structural condition, apparently with no parallel in the western literature^[41]. Despite this, Mellor, finds that freelancers in Dubai

often perceive their conditions as successful when compared with the circumstances in their home countries^[42].

Indian context provides considerable body of work into the legal-coercive dimension of precarity. Insecurity has been produced through seemingly neutral legal and financial instruments against journalists and media outlets. The instruments include anti-terror law, money-laundering law, foreign-funding regulation, tax and enforcement raids and criminal defamation, and their use against journalists and non-legacy outlets has been extensively documented by press freedom organisations^[43,44]. The peer-reviewed literature has begun to reflect this reality. Kumar and Bhat find that investigative journalism in India thrives in form while being captured in function, deployed by major television channels to serve the interests of those in power and situate this within the framework of media capture^[45]. Ravikumar et al., interviewing journalists across organisational tiers and linguistic regions, show how political pressure, economic dependence and organisational hierarchy merge into a structurally embedded regime of influence that journalists internalise through everyday practice^[37]. The early-career, regional and precariously employed journalists encounter the sharpest constraints. Precarity and media capture appears to be mutually reinforcing as insecure journalists are cheaper to discipline and disciplined outlets offer less secure work.

Emphasis should be given to legal-coercive precarity in its propagation. A single coercive event impact across every dimension of the inherited objective precarity framework. The seven dimensions of objective precarity, designed to disaggregate market-driven insecurity can be simultaneously produced by a single political act that has a chilling effect across the industry^[46]. Hence, treating such episodes merely as press freedom violations alone and conceptually separating from precarity mischaracterises their nature. For the workers involved, these episodes constitute precarity itself, experienced through lost wages, abandoned investigations and foreclosed futures. The framework's political cluster therefore requires a reconceptualization from viewing the state as a regulator to understanding it as an actor whose intervention influences all other dimensions of

insecurity. Comparative evidence including Vietnam's negotiated space for corruption reporting and the post-socialist entanglement of political and economic pressures documented in Serbian local journalism suggests that India is representative of a class of cases rather than an exception^[47,48].

Passion, Self-exploitation and Its Limits

The existing framework anchors on different vocabulary of passion to explain how workers endure precarity: workers in creative field exploit themselves as creative work is bound to identity^[20] journalism is a calling and its meaning sustains even in precarious conditions^[21]; entrants perform hope labour anticipating a future reward^[22]. The observation is real and relevant in Global South contexts. But evidence shows that it is neither universal nor sufficient and that its prominence on the literature may itself reflect the populations the existing scholarship sampled.

Gomes and Banjac provide the most direct test in this direction. Among favela-based community journalists, passion was not the primary explanation for tolerating precarity^[33]. Precarity was normalised within the news projects, negotiated through supplemental income from side jobs and other income sources, who could frame the work as activism, than by employees who depended on it and demanded professionalisation and pay. The scholars observe that these workers generally could not draw on family financial support to make noble sacrifices for the public good, deviating from the passion narrative in Global North accounts, where the satisfied precarian is frequently sustained by a partner's income, inheritance or property^[5]. When the household buffer is absent, the affective economy of precarity reorganises around endurance, supplementation and exit rather than romanticise self-sacrifice.

Convergent findings appear in other contexts as well. Guo and Fang show Chinese women journalists disproportionately represented among journalism graduates, exiting the field early under the combined pressure of gendered pay gaps, stereotyping and insecurity and passion does not retain them^[49]. Gollmitzer finds that migrant freelance journalists in Germany, experience more income insecurity because they do not have alternative sources that non-migrant freelancers can access^[23]. Therefore, the ability to cope with or endure precarity depends less on

psychological factors like passion, hope or calling and more on the material resources and opportunities available to workers. Mellor reveal how freelancers in Dubai further entangle the situation: precarity is been tolerated because it compares favourably with the conditions at their home country^[42]. And Badran and Smets demonstrate that passion or purpose operating in the opposite direction from self-exploitation thesis; that is, meaning can emerge from precarious conditions rather than cause them^[40]. Journalists find professional and creative fulfilment within precarity rather than entering precarious work in pursuit of such fulfilment. Read altogether, these studies do not reject the passion thesis; they reflect the variation with geographical contexts. Workers endure precarity most likely when they have sufficient social and material support that make the sacrifice sustainable. The implication of this evidence for the inherited framework is that its dispositional mediators such as life stage, resources and personality must be joined by household and class position as primary rather than residual variables. The reason why workers accept or endure precarious work is context specific and must be empirically investigated rather than universally assumed.

Precarity as a Filter: Who can Sustain the Work?

The three themes observed in the review converge on an emerging frontier of the subfield. Precarity is not merely a condition experienced within journalism; it also functions as a selection mechanism that governs who can enter, sustain and progress in the profession. Since enduring precarity requires buffers such as household income, family wealth, metropolitan access, class and caste networks, and alternative employment opportunities, the unequal distribution of these resources shapes the social composition of journalism. Consequently, it also shapes the perspectives, beats and communities that journalism can represent.

The evidence for this filtering is accumulating from several directions. Araujo's Portuguese interviewees voiced the concern that precarity is making journalism off-limits to those without resources, eroding newsroom diversity^[50]. Cohen et al. documented the exit dynamic among laid-off Canadian journalists, who interpreted structural displacement as individual failure and left the field^[2]. Meanwhile, Lukan and

Cehovin Zajc^[51] traced Slovenian journalist's migration into public relations as the rational response to exhausting availability demands of journalism. Guo and Fang examine the Chinese context through the question of "where are the missing girls" with respect to journalism student's career choices^[49].

In the Global South cases, the filter is sharpened by the political dimension: where journalism carries legal and physical risk in addition to material insecurity and the possibility of who can afford to do it tightens further. Reports from South Asia describes early-career journalists, particularly from minority communities and conflict regions, abandoning the field before establishing themselves^[34]. Ravikumar et al. add the stratification finding that autonomy under capture is a resource unequally distributed, concentrated among metropolitan and symbolically empowered journalists, while the precariously employed accept the sharpest constraints^[37].

The filter theme matters because it connects labour conditions to journalism's democratic function with a mechanism more specific than the general claim that precarious watchdogs watch less efficiently^[23]. Investigative and accountability journalism is constitutively resource-intensive demanding long horizons, legal exposure and sustained institutional backing and hence the genre is most sensitive to the filter. When only the buffered can sustain such work, accountability journalism inherits the demography of the buffered and the question of who watches the watchdogs acquires a sociological answer. The existing scholarship registers this concern but has not yet studied systematically the social-composition data on who performs precarious journalism in Global South contexts, of the kind Rick has begun to assemble for Germany, largely does not exist^[6]. In the assessment of the present review, this remains the single most consequential empirical gap that the labour turn has yet to fill.

CONCLUSION

The review addresses what the growing body of Global South scholarship does to the existing conceptual framework through which journalism studies has come to understand precarity. The attempt to bring regional nuance over the general assumptions regarding precarity debates synthesised four major

themes: The baseline of stable employment from which precarity collapses, is a sectoral and historical variable but, not a universal condition. The state that merely regulates the conditions of journalistic labour is been challenged by contexts where the state itself becomes the principal producer of journalistic precarity through legal-coercive means. The passion that reconciles workers to insecurity is one affective configuration but it is largely limited to workers who possess sufficient social and material buffers to sustain it. Anchored on the three conceptually variant premises, the question of who can afford to enter and sustain journalistic labour emerges as a critical filter shaping the social composition of the profession. Hone's observed that research on precarization of journalistic work would expand beyond Global North countries that have so far produced it^[7]. The existing scholarship is expanding and this review has tried to show that it is not merely additive. Drawing on Neilson and Rossiter's critique, this review argues that the geographic contexts assembled here are not the periphery of precarity research awaiting incorporation into a settled framework. They constitute the norm from which the framework must be reconceptualised, thereby revising its Fordist assumptions.

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HOW TO CITE: V. Aswin*, M. Srihari, Journalistic Precarity Beyond The Fordist Baseline: A Critical Interpretive Synthesis, *Int. J. Sci. R. Tech.*, 2026, 3 (7), 152-161. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21240524>