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The Direction and Demographics of Journalists' Trajectories: Evidence from One American City, 2015–2021

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ABSTRACT

This paper tracks the professional trajectories of journalists in one American city (Seattle, Washington) from 2015 to 2021. Using an original data set, it finds high degrees of professional inertia (journalists holding the same job) and exit (individuals leaving journalism); cases of advancement, by contrast, account for just over 16 percent of the sample. White men are more likely to retain their jobs; women, persons of color, those with limited professional experience and working for online-only news media exit at comparatively higher intervals; those possessing degrees from a prestigious university or a graduate program tend either to advance professionally or leave journalism. Demographic patterns are also largely reproduced within specific trajectories, with white men tending to advance to or retain esteemed beats and editorships, while women, persons of colors and those with graduate degrees proceed via “softer” news beats or functional specializations, especially jobs oriented towards data, analytics, and audiences. Findings suggest that professional trajectories are undergirded by multiple social inequalities.

KEYWORDS

Journalists' trajectories; demographics; local journalism; United States; careers; Bourdieu

Five years after retiring from the *New York Times*, Ira Henry Freeman (1966) authored a book for aspiring journalists. His message expressed unrestrained confidence and optimism. “At this moment and for the foreseeable future,” he wrote, “there is a job in journalism for every qualified young college graduate” (29). To be sure, he noted, one might not initially work at *The New York Times*, *Life* magazine, or *CBS News*. Nonetheless, any aspiring journalist could expect “a job at a reasonable wage on a good newspaper or magazine, radio or television station.” What’s more, they could anticipate clear and steady professional advancement over time. “The great majority of staffmen on the biggest papers, magazines, and electronic stations started their careers on small units” (31). So long as one was willing to work hard, the opportunities were endless. “One of the solid satisfactions in journalism,” he asserted, “is that success depends largely on merit, at least in the great majority of jobs among writers and working editors” (19).

Of course, journalism in 1966 was hardly the meritocracy that Freeman claimed it to be. Women and persons of color, to take obvious examples, faced very real barriers to professional entry, let alone advancement. Yet the blinkered confidence and optimism that Freeman expressed was not merely the universalization of a dominant group’s particular

experiences; it also reflected more general developments in journalism. At the time of his writing, the population of journalists in the United States was expanding steadily each year; decennial surveys show that the population would nearly double in size between the 1970s and 1990s (Weaver, Willnat, and Wilhoit 2019). This expansion, moreover, fed into the very meritocratic belief that Freeman articulated. Anticipating “clear and steady professional advancement over time” is seemingly easier to do when the profession itself is clearly and steadily expanding.

The situation today—amidst well-documented patterns of professional retrenchment and rising precarity—is markedly different. Yet despite important scholarship that tracks shifts in journalistic careers (Davidson and Meyers 2016a; Deuze 2007; Kosterich and Weber 2019), surprisingly little work has explored their direction, and the demographics that underpin them. How many individuals actually advance professionally? How many instead remain in the same jobs, experience decline, or simply leave the profession? How do patterns of professional mobility vary, both by gender and race but also educational attainment, professional experience, and medium? This paper explores these questions using an original data set that tracks the career trajectories—the series of positions an individual occupies over time in a dynamic social space (Bourdieu 1996)—of journalists in one American city from 2015 to 2021. In doing so, and by exploring a city and time period in which journalism employment was relatively stable, the study provides some preliminary insights into the relative degree of professional mobility in American journalism.

Tracking professional trajectories over time contributes to several important debates among both journalists and journalism scholars. These include: the relative openness of the profession to groups that are historically underrepresented or play subordinate roles within newsrooms; the utility of university degrees, both at the undergraduate and graduate levels, in shaping opportunities for professional advancement; the extent to which young journalists with limited professional experience remain in journalism despite seemingly bleak future prospects; and the relative mobility of journalists across different media (i.e., online, broadcast, print). By exploring these issues in a single American city, the study also contributes data about career patterns in a setting—the urban metropolis—that is recognized as both an important source of news provision in the American context and highly vulnerable due to crumbling economic foundations that traditionally supported such careers (Anderson 2013).

Trajectories: Directions

Prior research provides important population estimates of the journalistic population in the United States (Grieco 2020; Weaver, Willnat, and Wilhoit 2019). This affords insight into the relative size of the nation’s professional corps of journalists and the extent to which it has changed over time, both in absolute terms and with respect to its internal composition (i.e., relative proportions by gender, race/ethnicity, educational attainment, job types). It provides less apprehension, though, into the specific trajectories of individual journalists. Some university-based journalism programs, in the United States and to varying degrees around the world, “track” students, but typically for just a few years after graduation. As a result, publicly available data that provides insight into the mobility (or lack thereof) of a broad number of journalists is scarce. This study therefore

provides some baseline figures from one empirical setting that might inform future scholarship.

In contrast to Ira Henry Freeman's unidirectional optimism, extant scholarship describes a diversity of career experiences (Deuze 2007). Some journalists do forge ahead professionally, even amidst industry-wide retrenchment (Kosterich and Weber 2019). But others do not evince clear patterns of professional progress. Happily or not, many remain in the same, or functionally similar, roles over time (Davidson and Meyers 2016a). Still others are subject to professional decline, taking on less prestigious and sometimes less well compensated jobs due to shrinking professional horizons (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2010). Finally, some exit the profession altogether due to the perceived bleakness of current and future prospects or the attractiveness of work options outside of journalism (Davidson and Meyers 2016b; Reinardy 2011). The relative proportion of these experiences—i.e., how many advance, maintain, decline, leave—has to my knowledge not been the subject of any study, within or beyond the United States.

Bourdieu's (1996) concept of "trajectory" provides one conceptual tool for studying these diverse experiences. The term refers to "the series of positions successively occupied by the same agent" over time (258, my emphasis). Foregrounding the experiences of individual journalists over time marks an important difference from extant survey-based research, which samples randomly based on a total population. This longitudinal emphasis captures the directions of contemporary journalistic careers—i.e., the prevalence of professional mobility, the frequency of decline or departure—that are surprisingly absent in current studies. As such, the approach not only avoids Freeman's unidirectional optimism; it also steers clear of sweeping statements about the impending "death" of professional journalism. In their place, it invites researchers to examine the range of career paths among journalists and investigate which individuals cluster along which types of trajectories.

For Bourdieu, trajectories are socially anchored. By this, he means that prior socialization shapes career expectations and equips individuals with the skills and dispositions to respond to opportunities and challenges they encounter. This socialization begins with basic ideas about the "proper" (i.e., socially legitimate) types of work for women and men and continues throughout one's educational and professional life. These experiences are not merely different; social demographics (gender, race, educational attainment, etc.) also tend to be linked to distinctive trajectories (e.g., with men holding prestigious degrees advancing at higher rates than women with similar degrees; Marchetti 2005). Rather than see career mobility solely as a function of individual merit or professional struggles, the concept of trajectory thus provides an opportunity to explore the long-standing social demographics that correspond with unequal patterns of mobility (or their absence).

In addition to this longitudinal emphasis, the concept of trajectory highlights the dynamic structure of the profession. The meaning of specific jobs, in Bourdieu's view, is not unchanging or static; rather, their significance evolves over time, often as a result of shifting patterns of social recruitment (Bourdieu 1998). For instance, an influx of women reporters into specific jobs often corresponds to those jobs' symbolic (and sometimes economic) devaluation (Djerf-Pierre 2007). Therefore, in addition to tracking professional mobility in general, it is necessary to explore the specific forms that it takes across various demographic lines (e.g., women might advance via "softer" beats like

education and health, whereas men proceed via more professionally prestigious assignments in politics and investigative reporting; alternatively, the influx of women into historically “male” jobs might coincide with the jobs’ symbolic devaluation). Crucially for Bourdieu, these varied patterns of professional mobility appear neutral (i.e., as a result of merit and hard work) only to the extent that their social anchors and demographics are ignored, minimized or misrecognized.

Bourdieu’s interest in how demographic factors impact variation both within and between journalists’ trajectories links up with long-standing concerns about gender, race, education, experience and medium-specific opportunities. For this reason, below I summarize what prior journalism research suggests in this regard. In doing so, my primary aim is to use this prior research to set assumptions about the broad trends that might be expected with respect to the demographics underpinning journalists’ trajectories. This research, I suggest, gives indications regarding which demographics to look at. While hardly exhaustive, it provides a starting point for scholars to investigate variations in journalists’ trajectories.

Trajectories: Demographics

Feminist scholars have long stressed gender-based differences in journalists’ career possibilities (Steiner 2012). The percentage of individuals advancing to managerial positions who are men (70 percent) outpaces their overall presence in the workforce (just over 60 percent; ASNE 2018; Weaver, Willnat, and Wilhoit 2019). And while the proportion of women in American journalism has doubled since the 1970s, women are less likely to advance to prestigious beats like politics and business, ascending instead via “softer” topical foci like health or education or “functional specializations” like copy editing (North 2016; van Zoonen 1998). Men also appear more likely to retain their jobs, especially in television where aesthetic criteria are used to replace or demote “aging” female journalists (Ellerbe 1988). Women working at newspapers report feeling like a “subordinate class” in male-dominated organizations that do little to support gender equality (Everbach and Flournoy 2007). Partly as a result, women in surveys express an intention to leave journalism more frequently than men (Reinardy 2009). Taken together, this suggests that women are less likely on the whole to advance than men and, when they do, their advancement is likely to occur via less prestigious jobs.

The picture appears even more stark when viewed through the lens of race and ethnicity. Sixty percent of the United States population identifies as white (United States Census Bureau 2019); however, whites account for nearly 90 percent of professional journalists in the most recent survey data, leading Weaver, Willnat, and Wilhoit (2019) to write that persons of color are “vastly underrepresented in the journalistic profession” (110). At the same time, the survey does find growing numbers of non-white journalists with limited professional experience, which the authors interpret as potentially meaning that recent efforts to diversify newsrooms as having been “somewhat successful” (110). Less clear, though, are the specific trajectories of persons of colors in journalism. Newsroom management has long been overwhelmingly white, as are reporters working the most prestigious beats (e.g., politics, investigations; Robinson 2017). Discerning whether these patterns have changed is difficult. Many U.S. news organizations do not self-report these data; those that do tend to be at the forefront of inclusion and diversity

efforts; and independent surveys suffer from extremely low response rates (e.g., in October 2021, the News Leader Association, which now oversees the U.S. newsroom diversity survey, extended its survey response deadline after receiving fewer than 250 responses from 5,900 organizations; see Bauder 2021; Scire 2020).

Most American journalists (92 percent) hold an undergraduate degree (Weaver, Willnat, and Wilhoit 2019). Past research suggests that variation in career trajectories stems more from where an individual has studied than what she or he studied. Graduates of highly selective institutions, for example, often do not study journalism but nonetheless advance to some of the most prominent management and newsroom positions. The growing tendency to pursue graduate degrees provides an additional avenue for individuals seeking to advance their careers. Approximately 25 percent of journalists now hold such degrees (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2019); investigative reporters are among the most likely to attend graduate school (Lanosga et al. 2017). Some report pursuing graduate school as ways to reskill and improve their chances of job advancement, often through positions that emphasize data analytics, web design, and user experience (Kosterich and Weber 2019). Others say that it provides a glide path out of journalism and into industries with better remuneration, more stable work schedules and improved job stability (Lynch 2015). Thus, it may be that professional trajectories are shaped by both the amount and relative prestige of one's educational attainment.

Journalism has long been viewed as "a young person's occupation" (Weaver 1998, 456). Yet the median age of American journalists has increased substantially in the past two decades, largely on account of the shrinking job market. As a result, "many newsrooms have to function with a small number of experienced staff and a large number of young and frequently changing reporters" (Joseph and Oller Alonso 2021, 743). While it seems likely that many journalists exit the profession relatively early, it is not clear how early such exits might occur. Also unclear is what relationship exists between those with more experience and their professional trajectories. Individuals with more than 20 years of experience tend to remain in the jobs they already hold (Weaver, Willnat, and Wilhoit 2019), and this implies a "sweet spot" of between 10 and 20 years when individuals are most likely to advance. Given the need for technologically-savvy journalists, it seems likely that advancement would be most likely to happen among those jobs.

Online-only news outlets have been hailed as providing opportunities to journalists who might otherwise leave the profession (Deuze and Witschge 2020). More is written about the founding of such entities, though, than the career trajectories of individuals working in them over time. Given the rapid churn found in other aspects of the digital economy for cultural producers (Poell, Nieborg, and Duffy 2021), it seems plausible that journalists working at online media leave the profession at higher rate than their legacy media peers. Conversely, print and broadcast media, while shrinking, still provide nearly twice as many jobs as online outlets do (Walker 2021). It stands to reason, therefore, that career advancement will be most likely to occur at legacy outlets.

Those who leave journalism are commonly assumed to move onto other communication jobs, like marketing, public relations and branding (but see Nygren 2010 for skepticism about this assumption based on Swedish data). Less is known about the sectors in which they go work. Businesses promise better pay, which may appeal to individuals coming from a field with notoriously low salaries; at least some might be attracted to

join as employees or perhaps start their own venture (Cushion 2007). Yet jobs in government agencies or civil society organizations might appeal for political and moral reasons (in addition to potential stability), as they allow former journalists to retain their vocational sense of contributing to the common good. Some individuals, especially women with family care requirements, might leave the workforce entirely (Reinardy 2009).

Case, Data and Methods

Building on the above, this article explores journalists' trajectories in a single American city—Seattle, Washington—from 2015–2021. Metropolitan settings are especially important and vulnerable in the context of American journalism (Anderson 2013). Journalists in these places provide important local and state information that is largely absent from national news media, yet crumbling economic foundations make it difficult for journalists to build lengthy careers in such settings. Despite the growing concentration of jobs in media capitals like New York and Washington D.C., the vast majority of American journalists (~80 percent) still work outside these cities (Benton 2016). Understanding the trajectories of journalists in metropolitan cities is therefore important in its own right. Looking at a single city, moreover, provides baseline data as a necessary first step in charting such trajectories elsewhere.

While no city fully represents any other, Seattle shares many characteristics with other American cities: a daily newspaper that employs the bulk of reporters in the city, several chain-owned television stations that have downsized in recent years while being bought up by new owners, a mixture of public and commercial radio providers, and an active mix of online pure players (Powers and Vera-Zambrano 2016). If anything, journalists' trajectories might reasonably be assumed to be more stable in Seattle than other cities. Its daily newspaper is family-owned and historically more committed to public service journalism than chain or hedge-fund held newspapers (Hughes 2015). As a technology hub, moreover, journalists have access to capital to support online pursuits.

While overall newsroom employment in metropolitan newsrooms has dropped substantially since 2008, most job losses occurred prior to 2015 (Grieco 2020; Walker 2021). This makes the period under analysis a relatively stable period in journalism employment in cities generally and Seattle particularly. This makes Seattle and the time period under examination a “most likely” case for professional stability, at least among metropolitan U.S. cities, as it has experienced fewer overall job cuts in the past six years than peer cities (and certainly fewer overall cuts than witnessed in the so-called “news deserts” (Abernathy 2020) found in smaller towns and counties). The latter two years (2020–21) correspond to the Covid-19 pandemic, which might be expected to impact journalistic trajectories; to date, however, available data suggest that most cuts have come in the form of furloughs and pay reductions rather than outright layoffs (Tracy 2020). One news organization in Seattle—the alternative weekly newspaper *The Stranger*—did lay off 18 employees (including six journalists) at the start of the pandemic (Frizzelle 2020). However, the total number of journalists at that organization is low relative to the broader population of journalists in the city, and thus unlikely to dramatically impact the findings presented here.

In 2015, as part of a larger comparative study (Powers, Vera-Zambrano, and Baisnée 2015), I sought to build a comprehensive database of all full-time journalists working in

Seattle. My definition of a journalist drew from the *Worlds of Journalism* study, which emphasizes individuals involved in producing and editing journalistic content, as well as editorial supervision and management. To identify these individuals, I visited the “newsroom contacts” pages for all print, television, radio, and online-only news outlets within the city limits; expert local informants (journalism faculty, professional journalists) helped ensure that no news organizations were omitted from this survey. In a spreadsheet, I copied the name and job title of journalists listed in these organizations. This method purposely excludes journalists living in Seattle working for non-local outlets (e.g., wire services, national media), and which lay beyond the theoretical scope of the article. Less fortuitously, it also undercounts the population of freelance journalists, who often tend not to be listed on the newsroom contacts page. In total, I identified 430 journalists working at a Seattle news organization in 2015. The name, job title, and news organization for each individual was listed in a spreadsheet.

In 2021, I updated this spreadsheet. To ascertain the current status of each individual, I conducted a web search, including newsroom contact information, personal LinkedIn pages, personal web pages, and social media accounts. Given low survey response rates, and the relatively public nature of many journalists’ profiles, this method more effectively identifies the current job status of individuals in the dataset. The specific job for each journalist, as well as the organization for which they work, was listed in the spreadsheet. Each job was also assigned one of four broader classifications, editor/producer, reporter, on-air talent, and functional specialization (i.e., jobs tasks with specific aspects of news production and distribution, like copy editing, data analytics, and audience engagement; see Marchetti 2005). These classifications provide broad insight into the types of jobs through which individuals do and do not experience mobility, thus giving insight into the dynamic structure of the profession. I complement this data with specific examples to illustrate the types of jobs individuals hold (or advance to) across demographic lines.

Comparing the 2015 job to the 2021 job, each individual’s trajectory was categorized in terms of its direction. These categorizations considered individual mobility in light of the professional hierarchies of job titles and news organizations. Functional specializations were considered the lowest among job titles, followed by reporters, on-air talent (radio and television news announcers, newspaper podcasters and videographers), and editors (Marchetti 2005). News organization prestige were considered on the basis of audience size. Those experiencing upward movement within or beyond their organizations were categorized as advancing. Examples include a digital producer becoming an editor; a staff writer for an alternative weekly gaining employment as a beat reporter at the main daily newspaper; and an investigative reporter at the main daily newspaper taking a job at a leading national newspaper. Those holding the same job title were classified as maintaining; a small number of individuals with functionally equivalent jobs—e.g., a traffic reporter for one television station who takes the same job at another station—were also classified in this way. Those who lost jobs and took up work as freelancers were classified as declining; those who left journalism were classified as leaving. Finally, a small number of journalists who either retired or died were classified as “other.” All coding was done by the author.

Demographic information pertaining to the debates listed above were also collected. Gender was classified as male, female and non-binary; given broad interest in social

difference, race/ethnicity was classified as white and person of color. For both categories, every effort was made to locate journalists' publicly-accessible self-descriptions. Because self-descriptions of race/ethnicity were not always present, I followed prior researchers in combining both census and visual data to classify that variable (Chakravarty et al. 2018). Each surname was matched against frequently-occurring surnames in the 2010 census data, which provides the percentage of instances in which that surname is associated with a specific racial/ethnic group. Surnames associated with a specific group 90% or more of the time were coded as belonging to that group. Those associated with a specific group 80% of the time were classified based on visual and other author data (e.g., presence in a historically-underrepresented journalists' association). Surname matches below 80 percent, and for which visual data could not be collected, were left unclassified ($N = 17$).

Educational attainment and professional experience data were gathered through social media accounts, individual websites and LinkedIn pages. To ascertain the relative utility of a "prestigious" university degree in professional advancement, any degree from an institution with an acceptance rate of 20 percent or less was classified as restrictive. To assess the utility of post-undergraduate education, any degree (MA, MBA, PhD) beyond a bachelors was classified as graduate education. Nearly all post-undergraduate education came in the form of a master's degree. Professional experience was classified as ten years or fewer; 11–19 years; and 20 years or more (experience data was not found for 26 individuals). I also classified the medium in which an individual worked. Finally, those who left journalism between 2015 and 2021 were classified in terms of the job type, sector, and role to which they went.

In what follows, I begin by summarizing journalists' trajectories and their demographic underpinnings, before describing variations with each particular trajectory. My descriptions aim not to discern the relative influence of any one variable vis-à-vis others (i.e., whether gender is more influential in outcomes than race/ethnicity). Instead, it aims merely to report broad patterns in terms of which journalists get to do which types of journalism, and thus provide baseline data that can be used in future scholarship. As I discuss in the conclusion, further analyses—which would entail collecting additional types of data—are necessary to grasp the concatenation of social demographics that correspond with particular trajectories.

Findings

Nearly 40 percent of all journalists in the sample held the same job in 2021 as they did in 2015. Roughly 30 percent of all individuals left journalism entirely. In contrast to these more common trajectories, advancement is less prevalent, though not rare: 16.5 percent of journalists can be characterized as moving upwards in career terms in the period under analysis. Individuals evincing clear signs of decline are few, however, accounting for just 2.8 percent of the sample. The remaining journalists have either retired or are deceased: together, they account for just under 10 percent of the sample. The status of about four percent of individuals could not be ascertained through publicly available data. See [Table 1](#).

Trajectories vary in important ways by gender. The percentage of men who remained in their jobs outpaced that of women: Just over 42 percent of all men held the same job in

Table 1. Demographics of Journalists' Trajectories.

		Advance % N	Maintain % N	Leave % N	Decline % N	Retired % N	Unknown % N
<i>Gender</i>	Women (183)	17.5 (32)	32.2 (59)	35.0 (64)	2.2 (4)	7.7 (14)	5.5 (10)
	Men (245)	15.1 (37)	42.4 (104)	25.3 (62)	3.3 (8)	10.6 (26)	3.3 (8)
	Non-Binary (2)	100 (2)	0	0	0	0	0
<i>Race/Ethnicity</i>	PoC (63)	20.6 (13)	31.7 (20)	39.7 (25)	1.6 (1)	6.3 (4)	0 (0)
	White (350)	16.6 (58)	39.4 (138)	28.9 (101)	3.1 (11)	10.3 (36)	1.7 (6)
<i>Education</i>	Graduate (76)	21.1 (16)	31.6 (24)	40.8 (31)	1.3 (1)	3.9 (3)	1.3 (1)
	Prestigious (70)	27.1 (19)	28.6 (20)	34.3 (24)	1.4 (1)	7.1 (5)	1.4 (1)
<i>Experience</i>	<10 years (46)	10.9 (5)	13.0 (6)	71.7 (33)	2.2 (1)	0	2.2 (1)
	10–20 yrs (148)	22.3 (33)	31.1 (46)	41.2 (61)	2.0 (3)	2.0 (3)	1.4 (2)
	>20 years (210)	15.2 (32)	48.6 (102)	15.2 (32)	3.3 (7)	17.1 (36)	0.5 (1)
<i>Medium</i>	Print (224)	15.2 (34)	39.3 (88)	26.3 (59)	1.8 (4)	10.3 (23)	7.1 (16)
	TV (76)	17.1 (13)	39.5 (30)	30.3 (23)	3.9 (3)	9.2 (7)	0
	Radio (72)	20.8 (15)	45.8 (33)	20.8 (15)	1.4 (1)	8.3 (6)	2.8 (2)
	Online (58)	15.5 (9)	20.7 (12)	50.0 (29)	6.9 (4)	6.9 (4)	0
<i>Total</i>	430	16.5 (71)	37.9 (163)	29.3 (126)	2.8 (12)	9.3 (40)	4.2 (18)

Notes: A small number of deceased individuals were coded as “retired.” Total N for Race/Ethnicity and Experience are <430 as a result of publicly unavailable data for some individuals. Due to rounding, percentages may not add up to 100.

2021 as they did in 2015, compared to 32 percent of women. Conversely, women left journalism at substantially higher rates than men. During the time period under observation, 35 percent of women exited from journalism; approximately 25 percent of men likewise exited. Given the greater prevalence of men than women in the sample, these trends suggest at a minimum that women are less likely than their male counterparts to remain full-time journalists. Comparable proportions of women and men advance, decline and retire, though the small number of individuals who evince decline in the dataset (12) make demographic patterns difficult to discern.

Racial and ethnic data suggest similar issues regarding retention. Nearly 40 percent of white journalists retained the same job title, compared to just over 30 percent of persons of color. Data regarding departures from journalism also appear heavily skewed, with the percentage of persons of color exiting outpacing that of whites (39.7 percent versus 28.9 percent, respectively). Journalists of color and whites advance at proportionately equal rates; however, the raw number of white journalists dwarves those of persons of color (58 versus 13). Advancement data thus indicates only a very modest diversification of the profession in racial and ethnic terms.

Educational attainment data highlights the potential for more—and more prestigious—schooling to advance careers in journalism and to prepare individuals for careers beyond journalism. These two trajectories account for 60 percent of all individuals with graduate degrees or degrees from prestigious institutions. They also account for a greater proportion of those who advance and leave the profession. By contrast, 15.3 percent of those who maintain are in possession of graduate degrees, and just 12.7 graduated from prestigious institutions (figures calculated by dividing raw N for degrees against total N for trajectory; data not shown in table).

Most early career journalists left within ten years of entering the profession. Between 2015 and 2021, more than 70 percent of all individuals with fewer than ten years of professional experience departed journalism. This figure drops to just over 40 percent for those with between 10 and 20 years of experience, and to 15.2 percent for those with more than 20 years of experience. Those with ample professional experience, by contrast,

are more likely to remain in their same jobs. Nearly half of those with more than 20 years of experience maintain their position, and this figure declines for those with less experience (31.1 percent for those between 10 and 20 years, and just 13 percent of those with less than a decade of professional experience). Those who advance tend to come disproportionately from those with more than 10 years of experience.

The one substantial difference across medium types is found in the trajectories of journalists at online only news outlets. Half of all journalists working at online-only media left journalism in the time period under analysis. By contrast, just over 20 percent of all those working in online-only media maintained their jobs. This suggests that online sites may play a role of temporarily maintaining journalists in the field, only to see them depart ultimately. Otherwise, trajectories show few substantial differences across medium types. Between 15 and 20 percent of journalists in any medium advance professionally, mirroring the broader pattern associated with professional advancement. Journalists working in print, radio or television also maintain their jobs and leave journalism at levels that broadly mirror the broader sample.

Advance

Within specific trajectories, internal divisions exist. Among those journalists who advance, men garner a greater proportion of jobs as on-air talent (75.0 men versus 25.0 percent women), as editors and producers (57.7 versus 42.3 percent), and as reporters (55.6 versus 44.4 percent). Women and those identifying as non-binary, by contrast, appear more likely to advance via functional specializations (68.4 percent versus 31.6 percent for men). Many of the functional specializations jobs among those who advance entail a focus on audiences, platforms or data analytics, including, for example, a director of community engagement and a product manager. See [Table 2](#).

Race/ethnicity data suggests similar trends. More than 80 percent of all those who advance to jobs as editors and reporters are white. This indicates little, if any, progress regarding diversification of newsroom management. What's more, persons of color that do advance are not associated with the news beats, like politics or investigative reporting, that are historically viewed as most prestigious. The two persons of color in the sample who do advance as reporters, for example, work on the race and sports beats, respectively. The only job category in which persons of color constitute more than 20 percent is found in functional specializations. As with gender, these jobs are overwhelmingly focused on audiences, platforms and data analytics.

Those distinguished by their education tend to advance via functional specializations or jobs as editors. More than a third of all those who ascend via functional specializations hold graduate degrees; the same proportion also graduated from prestigious universities. Roughly a quarter of those who move up in editorial positions have similar educational backgrounds. By contrast, not a single person who advanced to being on-air talent holds either a graduate degree or a degree from a distinguished institution. Graduate degrees are relatively uncommon among those who advance as reporters (17.6 percent); graduation from a prestigious university, however, is slightly more common (27.8 percent of all reporters who advance).

Advancement among relatively inexperienced journalists is fairly uncommon. Therefore, the primary split emerges between those with moderate and substantial amounts

Table 2. Remaining Journalists' Most Recent Occupational Title, by Trajectory.

		Advance				Maintain				Decline			
		Eds. % N	Rep. % N	On-Air % N	Func. Spec. % N	Eds. % N	Rep. % N	On- Air % N	Func. Spec. % N	Eds. % N	Rep. % N	On-Air % N	Func. Spec. % N
<i>Gender</i>	Women	42.3 (11)	44.4 (8)	25.0 (2)	57.9 (11)	25.7 (9)	33.9 (20)	34.1 (14)	57.1 (16)	100 (1)	27.3 (3)	0	0
	Men	57.7 (15)	55.6 (10)	75.0 (6)	31.6 (6)	74.3 (26)	66.1 (39)	65.9 (27)	42.9 (12)	0	72.7 (8)	0	0
	Non-Binary	0	0	0	10.5 (2)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<i>Race</i>	PoC	17.4 (4)	11.1 (2)	27.3 (3)	21.1 (4)	8.6 (3)	15.3 (9)	9.8 (4)	14.3 (4)	100 (1)	90.9 (10)	0	0
	White	82.6 (19)	88.9 (16)	72.7 (8)	78.9 (15)	82.9 (29)	84.7 (50)	87.8 (36)	82.1 (23)	0	9.1 (1)	0	0
<i>Education</i>	graduate	26.1 (6)	17.6 (3)	0	36.8 (7)	14.3 (5)	16.9 (10)	12.2 (5)	14.3 (4)	0	8.3 (1)	0	0
	prestigious	26.9 (7)	27.8 (5)	0	36.8 (7)	11.4 (4)	13.6 (8)	17.1 (7)	3.6 (1)	0	8.3 (1)	0	0
<i>Experience</i>	<10 years	7.7 (2)	5.6 (1)	0	10.5 (2)	2.9 (1)	6.8 (4)	0	3.7 (1)	0	9.1 (1)	0	0
	10–20 yrs.	34.6 (9)	61.1 (11)	42.9 (3)	52.6 (10)	28.6 (10)	27.1 (16)	24.4 (10)	37.0 (10)	0	27.3 (3)	0	0
	>20 years	53.8 (14)	33.3 (6)	57.1 (5)	36.8 (7)	60.0 (21)	66.1 (39)	70.7 (29)	48.1 (13)	100 (1)	54.5 (6)	0	0
<i>Medium</i>	Print	53.8 (14)	61.1 (11)	12.5 (1)	42.1 (8)	62.9 (22)	50.8 (30)	24.4 (10)	92.9 (26)	0	36.4 (4)	0	0
	TV	0	22.2 (4)	75.0 (6)	15.8 (3)	5.7 (2)	27.1 (16)	29.3 (12)	0	100 (1)	18.2 (2)	0	0
	Radio	26.9 (7)	0	12.5 (1)	36.8 (7)	14.3 (5)	16.9 (10)	41.5 (17)	3.6 (1)	0	9.1 (1)	0	0
	Online	19.2 (5)	16.7 (3)	0	5.3 (1)	17.1 (6)	5.1 (3)	4.9 (2)	3.6 (1)	0	36.4 (4)	0	0

Notes: Eds. = Editors/Producers; Rep. = Reporters; On-Air = On-Air Talent; Func. Spec. = Functional Specialization.

Percentages calculated against total number of individuals in a category, including those with "unknown" data (e.g., no race determined, no available public data on experience). Therefore, some percentages do not add up to 100.

of professional experience. Individuals with between 10 and 20 years of experience who advance tend to do so through reporting jobs and functional specializations. More than half of all those who advance via functional specialization have between 10 and 20 years of experience; more than 60 percent of those who advance as reporters do. By contrast, those with more than two decades of experience tend to comprise a greater proportion of advancement to jobs as editors and producers (53.8 percent), and on-air talent (57.1 percent).

Medium differences are largely unsurprising. Print media comprise the bulk of advancement for jobs as editors (53.8 percent) and reporters (61.1 percent). The majority of on-air talent advancement occurs at television stations (75.0 percent). Online media constitute between 15 and 20 percent of all advancement for reporter and editor roles, and just over five percent of all functional specialization jobs. This data suggests that print media continue to be the primary source of career advancement for “traditional” journalism jobs as editors and reporters, and perhaps even of “older” and “newer” functional specializations (e.g., copy editing, data analytics).

Maintain

Among those who maintain, men tend to hold onto jobs as editors: 74.3 percent of all editors working in the same job are men. Similar patterns can be observed among reporters (66.1 percent men) and on-air talent (65.5 percent). Men overwhelmingly maintain reporting jobs in the areas of business, politics, sports and investigative reporting. For example, of the nine politics reporters who retain their jobs in the time period under analysis, seven are men; all but one of nine sports reporters are men; of four investigative reporters, three are men (data not shown in tables). By contrast, women who maintain tend to do less prominent editorial work. Of 15 general assignment reporters who maintain, eight are women; the two features reporters who maintain are female, as is the one education reporter. The only job type in which women constitute more than half of the group is functional specializations. In contrast to colleagues who advance, many of these functional specialization jobs involve copy editing (eight of 12 copy editors are women). Those functional jobs that entail arts, graphics and photography, by contrast, comprise more men than women (eight and five, respectively).

Race/ethnicity trends among those who maintain are even more imbalanced than those found in gender. Of 32 people who hold onto their jobs as editors or producers, just three are persons of color. Prestige beat reporting, moreover, remains overwhelmingly white. Just one person of color (out of nine) maintains a job as a politics reporter; all four investigative reporters who retain their jobs are white; and just four of nine sports reporters identify as persons of color. All 12 columnists who retain their jobs are white. Jobs in functional specialties, which offer women a degree of (lower status) stability, are predominantly held by whites (82.1 percent).

Educational attainment and professional experience do not appear substantially different among those who maintain. Generally speaking, reporters with more educational attainment seem to have less professional experience, and they constitute a fraction of those who retain their jobs. Those with more professional experience, by contrast, tend to have less educational attainment. Medium differences mostly follow trends seen

among journalists who experience professional advancement. Print media provide the greatest source of opportunities for maintaining one's job: 62.9 percent of all editors holding the same job work at print media, 50.8 percent of all reporters do the same, as do 92.9 percent of functional specialists.

Decline

Those who experience decline have far more in common than other groups, likely because there are so few individuals in this group. On the whole, they tend to be highly experienced professionals; few, however, hold graduate degrees or have attended prestigious institutions. Nearly all decline from stable jobs to more precarious positions as freelance journalists. These groups tend to be composed primarily of white men; just one person of color and four women (out of 12 total) are included.

Leave

Individuals who leave journalism evince a mixture of commonalities and distinctions. The vast majority of those who leave journalism find work in a related "communication" job in marketing, public relations or branding. A small number of individuals, though, pursue work in seemingly unrelated lines of work. Examples include a Buddhist teacher, a firefighter, a professional cook, and a medical supplies salesperson, among others. Men seem more likely than women to remain in a communication-related job (88.7 versus 78.1 percent). Partly, this has to do with a subset of women leaving the workforce entirely. Nearly all persons of color, though, remain in a communication-related job (96 percent, compared to about 80 percent of whites). Those with advanced or prestigious educational backgrounds likewise tend to remain in a communication-related field. No clear patterns of internal variation appear regarding professional experience or medium differences. See [Table 3](#).

The most common sector in which former journalists gain employment is business, accounting for roughly 40 percent of all individuals leaving journalism. Given the prominent role of technology and aeronautical firms in the Seattle region, such companies are common job paths, with individuals working at Microsoft, Amazon, Boeing and a range of smaller companies (e.g., Redfin, Zillow). Historically under-represented groups in journalism (i.e., women, persons of color) go into civil society and government jobs at higher rates than men and whites: Roughly fifteen percent of women and persons of color take such jobs, compared to about 10 percent of men. Whites and men, by contrast, go into business and consulting jobs at slightly higher rates than historically underrepresented groups.

Slight differences also appear in the sector of employment by education, journalism experience, and medium. Those with distinguished educational backgrounds appear overrepresented in government and education sectors, and constitute a slightly smaller share of individuals entering the business sector. A marginally larger proportion of those with less than 10 years of journalism experience go into civil society or consulting jobs, while those with between 10 and 20 years of experience are the most likely to go into government jobs (e.g., public information officer). Those with more than 20 years of experience tend to go into consulting work. Individuals previously employed in

Table 3. Demographics of Individuals Who Leave Journalism.

		Job Type			Sector					Role		
		Com. % N	Other % N	C.S. % N	Educ. % N	Gov't. % N	Biz. % N	Consult. % N	Other % N	Mgmt. % N	Employ. % N	Other % N
<i>Gender</i>	Women	78.1 (50)	21.9 (14)	14.1 (9)	9.4 (6)	12.5 (8)	37.5 (24)	12.5 (8)	14.1 (9)	20.3 (13)	68.8 (44)	10.9 (7)
	Men	88.7 (55)	11.3 (7)	9.7 (6)	12.9 (8)	6.5 (4)	45.2 (28)	16.1 (10)	9.7 (6)	43.5 (27)	54.8 (34)	1.6 (1)
<i>Race</i>	PoC	96.0 (24)	4.0 (1)	16.0 (4)	16.0 (4)	12.0 (3)	36.0 (9)	12.0 (3)	8.0 (2)	36.0 (9)	60.0 (15)	4.0 (1)
	White	80.2 (81)	19.8 (20)	10.9 (11)	9.9 (10)	8.9 (9)	42.6 (43)	14.9 (15)	12.9 (13)	30.7 (31)	62.4 (63)	6.9 (7)
<i>Education</i>	graduate	90.3 (28)	9.7 (3)	9.7 (3)	16.1 (5)	16.1 (5)	35.5 (11)	12.9 (4)	9.7 (3)	32.3 (10)	64.5 (20)	3.2 (1)
	prestigious	91.7 (22)	8.3 (2)	12.5 (3)	4.2 (1)	25.0 (6)	33.3 (8)	16.7 (4)	8.3 (2)	33.3 (8)	58.3 (14)	8.3 (2)
<i>Experience</i>	<10 years	75.8 (25)	24.2 (8)	12.1 (4)	6.1 (2)	3.0 (1)	51.5 (17)	15.2 (5)	12.1 (4)	33.3 (11)	60.6 (20)	6.1 (2)
	10–20 yrs.	82.0(50)	18.0 (11)	14.8 (9)	8.2 (5)	11.5(7)	44.3 (27)	9.8 (6)	11.5 (7)	31.1 (19)	52.5 (32)	16.4(10)
	>20 years	75.0 (24)	25.0 (8)	6.3 (2)	15.6 (5)	6.3 (2)	40.6 (13)	18.8 (6)	12.5 (4)	28.1 (9)	65.6 (21)	6.3 (2)
<i>Medium</i>	Print	91.5 (54)	8.5 (5)	13.6 (8)	16.9 (10)	5.1 (3)	39.0 (23)	15.3 (9)	10.2 (6)	33.9 (20)	61.0 (36)	5.1 (3)
	TV	87.0 (20)	13.0 (3)	4.3 (1)	0	30.4 (7)	43.5 (10)	17.4 (4)	4.3 (1)	26.1 (6)	69.6 (16)	4.3 (1)
	Radio	60.0 (9)	40.0 (6)	6.7 (1)	6.7 (1)	0	46.7 (7)	20.0 (3)	20.0 (3)	20.0 (3)	73.3 (11)	6.7 (1)
	Online	86.2 (25)	13.8 (4)	17.2 (5)	10.3 (3)	6.9 (2)	41.4 (12)	6.9 (2)	17.2 (5)	37.9 (11)	51.7 (15)	10.3 (3)

Notes: C.S. = Civil Society; Educ. = Education; Gov't = Government; Biz = Business; Consult. = Consulting; Mgmt. = Management; Employ. = Employee. Due to rounding, percentages may not add up to 100.

television, radio and print are overrepresented in consulting, while those employed at online media tended towards civil society.

Just over 60 percent of individuals who leave journalism find work as employees in a firm. About 30 percent take up managerial positions or found their own firms. The remaining individuals consist primarily of those who leave the workforce. Gender differences in these trajectories are prominent. Whereas 43.5 percent of men take jobs as managers or founders of firms, just 20.3 percent of women do. By contrast, women are much more likely to work as employees in firms (68.8 versus 54.8 percent, respectively). Finally, the majority of individuals who leave the workforce are women. Differences in other categories (e.g., race, education, experience) are not substantial.

Discussion and Conclusion

Professional mobility, at least among journalists in one American city over a six-year period, appears relatively limited. Approximately 70 percent of all journalists either held the same job in 2021 as they did in 2015 or exited from journalism entirely. Small numbers evinced clear signs of professional decline, and about 10 percent of the sample retired or are deceased. By contrast, individuals whose careers clearly advanced, while not unheard of, constitute a relatively small proportion of the total sample. At least in the metropolitan case of Seattle studied here, this suggests that the direction of journalistic careers tends to be characterized mostly by inertia or exit.

Drawing on Bourdieu's concept of trajectory, we can note that several demographic patterns correspond to these distinctive trajectories. White men appear more likely than their peers to retain their jobs, while women, persons of color, and those with limited professional experience tend to exit journalism at comparatively higher frequencies. Professional advancement appears to be aided by the possession of a degree from a prestigious university or a graduate program. These patterns are also reproduced within specific trajectories. White men tend to advance to or retain the most prestigious jobs (e.g., editors, beat reporters in politics); women, persons of color and those with graduate degrees gain or hold their ground via softer news beats and functional specializations, especially jobs oriented towards data, analytics and audiences. Demographic patterns among those who leave are complex but highlight differences in where individuals go, with white men more likely to take jobs in business compared to women and persons of color who tend to work in civil society.

These findings support long-standing and recently reenergized criticisms of gender and race-based differences in journalists' career opportunities. While diversification might be somewhat successful in absolute terms, women and persons of color experience less mobility than their white male peers. This highlights the importance of tracking a broad set of individuals over time. In Seattle, women and persons of color have ascended to top leadership positions (e.g., the executive of the main daily newspaper is a white woman; the president and general manager of the largest public radio station is a black woman); however, this data suggests their trajectories are more exceptions than they are part of an emergent rule. It is possible that new entrants into journalism since 2015, who are not tracked in this data set, have further diversified the corps of journalists in the city; however, it seems equally, if not more, likely that gender and race-based differences in both overall mobility and the types of jobs undertaken to pursue mobility will

vary. The fact that no person of color advanced via a traditionally prestigious beat like politics or investigative reporting but instead via race and sports beats signals this difference.

Findings regarding educational attainment suggests a dual role. Graduate degrees and degrees from prestigious institutions do seem to help at least some journalists advance within the profession. Yet these degrees, especially at the graduate level, are also associated with individuals who leave journalism entirely. What differentiates these two trajectories is an area for future research. It may be that degrees from prestigious universities are more useful for individuals seeking jobs in historically prestigious positions within journalism (e.g., beat reporters, editors), as the data indicate. By contrast, graduate degrees seem to be associated more with functional specializations, often jobs that are tailored to analytics, data, and audiences. This should be interpreted cautiously, however, as the percentage of journalists with either prestigious or graduate degrees is slightly lower than labor statistics data suggests.

If journalism has long been a “young person’s occupation,” it can also be noted that the occupation is for most young people a temporary one. More than 70 percent of individuals with ten years or fewer of professional experience exited between 2015 and 2021. This suggests that journalism in a metropolitan city, but probably in the United States more broadly, is relatively open to new entrants but sheds the vast majority of those individuals relatively quickly. Comparative data could shine light on the extent that this is specific to liberal labor markets like the American one, which make it relatively easy and cheap to hire new workers, especially when contrasted with some of the more protective labor policies found in, among other places, Western Europe. Longitudinal data, moreover, would usefully shed light on the degree to which this level of exit is novel or part of a long-standing pattern.

The rapid churn that characterizes employment in many parts of the digital economy appears with respect to journalists at online-only sites. These journalists exit the profession far more than their peers in broadcasting and print. Conversely, while print and broadcast media provide more overall advancement, it is not proportionally higher than the rates observed in online only media. Across all media, advancement is relatively rare, but not trivial. Indeed, its presence is likely important for all journalists, especially those who have not advanced, as it signals the real possibility that such advancement, however fleeting, is possible. Other factors not analyzed here, like ownership structure, might further impact trajectories by making it more or less likely for journalists to retain their jobs over time. At a minimum, the data here suggest that journalism jobs at foundation-funded online news sites are no more protected than those found at commercial news organizations, at least in the United States (Benson 2018).

The data presented here pertain to a single city for a limited time period. As such, they cannot be assumed to be applicable to the broader population of journalists in or beyond the United States. Instead, because of the relative calm in the job markets and the family-owned nature of the city’s largest employer of journalists, they may be interpreted as a “most likely” set of conditions for job stability. In this light, it seems reasonable to posit that stability among 40 percent of the journalists in the sample and departure among 30 percent represent a ceiling and a floor, respectively, for these particular trajectories. Of course, research in other cities and towns and conducted across different time periods is necessary to validate, modify or refute these propositions. Studies of journalists’

trajectories in other national settings, moreover, will be necessary to contextualize these findings. As noted above, the liberal labor market that characterizes US journalism likely weakens job retention, especially in comparison to the more regulated labor markets in Western Europe (Powers and Vera-Zambrano 2018). Careful comparative studies could evaluate the relative prevalence of different trajectories and explore the social demographics that underpin them.

Several implications follow from these findings. Newsroom managers in the United States (and to varying degrees around the world) increasingly express their commitment to “diversifying” their staffs. Analyzing individual trajectories provides one way to examine the extent to which they are successful in meeting this goal. Given very low survey response rates, the approach here provides an alternative method for gathering this data, though it still lacks systematic data on irregularly employed journalists like freelancers. By drawing on the concept of trajectory, this paper also provides insight into *which* individuals are most likely to advance. For Bourdieu, a key point is that trajectories that appear as the result of merit often correspond with social inequalities. This does not deny the work and effort of individuals who do advance professionally or who maintain prestigious positions. Rather, it suggests that demographic inequalities in career mobility can only be addressed to the extent that they are explicitly acknowledged. This is true for both newsroom managers and journalism scholars.

The focus on individual trajectories also provides a different vantage point onto the so-called “crises” confronting journalism. Typically, these conversations tend to focus primarily on the provision of news and information that is assumed to be necessary for democratic governance (Siles and Boczkowski 2012). By looking at trajectories, scholars can see which individuals are able to do this work (e.g., by advancing to prestigious beats). An unpleasant possibility, based on the data presented here, is that the very information that is normatively desired is also an indicator of social inequalities, as it tends to be well-educated white men who produce it. Indeed, it seems plausible to hypothesize that the expansion of journalism to include historically-marginalized groups might also sort those individuals into less prestigious and potentially more precarious jobs. In this way, an analysis of trajectories can lead scholars away from generalized invocations of “crisis” and instead ask crisis for whom (Zelizer 2015).

Future research could expand on this study in multiple ways. Different samples, drawn from locales within and beyond the United States, can specify the extent to which trajectories in Seattle parallel those found elsewhere. When doing so, it will be useful to consider a broader set of variables than those considered here. The social demographics of journalists, for example, might usefully be compared to their audiences (Kosterich 2021). Researchers might also consider variables that are less easily discovered via publicly-accessible data (e.g., social origins as glimpsed via parents’ occupations and level/type of educational attainment) but which presumably are crucial in shaping the extent and forms of professional advancement among journalists (Bourdieu 1996). Different and more extensive data analyses might also attempt to ascertain the relative importance of specific variables in relation to particular professional trajectories. A Bourdieusian approach might utilize multiple correspondence analysis, for example, to explore the concatenation of particular social demographics in specific trajectories. Those drawing on different theoretical resources might deploy alternative statistical approaches, like the mediation/moderation approach, to explore the interaction between specific variables (Hayes 2013).

Whatever the specific approach taken, the study of journalists' trajectories seems ripe for further development. The conditions that supported Ira Henry Freeman's sunny optimism clearly no longer hold, yet sweeping statements about the "death" of journalism miss the variety of careers on offer. The empirical study of trajectories gets at this diversity of possibilities, while offering conceptual resources to explore their social determinants. Given the many ways in which social demographics are invoked in contemporary discussions of journalism, the contribution seems—to use a term on the tongues of many in and around journalism—profitable.

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