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Arena Papers

The invisibles: Why we need to talk about work

Abstract

Work shapes almost every aspect of people's lives, but journalism about labour has been quietly disappearing from European newsrooms for decades. In this paper, Brigitte Alfter and Jose Miguel Calatayud from Arena for Journalism in Europe examine the state of labour journalism across the continent. The authors draw attention to the near-total absence of cross-border reporting on what is, in legal and economic reality, a transnational phenomenon. Drawing on academic literature, semi-structured interviews with 13 journalism practitioners across nine European countries, and a survey of 46 respondents from 16 countries, the paper maps the structural forces driving labour journalism's collapse in mainstream media.

This paper describes how dedicated labour desks have all but vanished from mainstream newsrooms across Europe. Coverage of labour issues is scattered across economy, business, society and other sections of publications, producing a fragmented picture. This situation has been compounded by growing job insecurity and declining class consciousness among journalists, the shrinking public presence of trade unions, and a widespread editorial view that labour is not a "sexy" beat. Meanwhile corporate PR departments have grown their influence and strengthened their resources. Most significantly, the cross-border dimension of labour – fundamental to EU law and to the daily reality of millions of workers across Europe – is often lost in coverage, despite being identified by practitioners as the single greatest gap and opportunity in the field.

The paper concludes that this is not an inevitable decline but a reversible one, and sets out a practical agenda. Cross-border collaborative investigations, modelled on successful examples from across the continent and from Arena's other networks, offer an established methodology for producing labour reporting with both analytical depth and broad impact. Further opportunities include dedicated training and fellowship programmes to lower the high threshold of specialist knowledge, the development of accessible resources for practitioners and the cultivation of relationships between journalists and relevant scholars and researchers. Underpinning all of this is the case for a sustained, well-resourced Europe-wide network of journalists covering labour – one capable of generating original investigations, building editorial confidence and keeping the beat alive between major projects. At a moment of rising inequality and dangerous political polarisation, putting labour back on the public agenda is not only important to address the systemic changes that have diminished the beat – but an essential project to bolster European democracy.

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Introduction

This Arena Paper sets out to look at journalism about labour in Europe, particularly with a focus on transnational perspectives. When there is a regular traffic of buses carrying Croatian women to Germany to work in elderly care, this affects the individuals and their families as well as the Croatian and the German labour markets. When Italian contractors under EU law win a bid to build a new bridge in Denmark and hire Albanian workers via a subcontractor that does not pay its workers properly and where security breaches occur on the Danish construction site, this is a matter of public interest in Denmark, Italy, Albania and ultimately the EU as a regulator. When large groups of workers move from Romania to Italy or Spain, leaving a void in Romania that is filled by legal or illegal labour migrants from Asia, there are human stories to be told and policies, organisations, regulations and consequences to be discussed.

However, there seems to be a void when it comes to journalistic coverage of labour stories. The starting point of this paper is anecdotal: observations from practitioners indicating that the coverage of labour is too little, too patchy and lacking the crucial transnational perspective.

The purpose and scope of this paper is not an exhaustive analysis of the situation. It is meant to start a discussion and to suggest steps that practitioners could take to improve coverage. Our review of literature provides an understanding of the situation and the larger context for reporters and publishers.

Ultimately, the paper includes recommendations for practitioners to revitalise journalism about labour topics in Europe and boost the cross-border mindset. The authors are journalism practitioners, so the paper can be considered a reflection on practice.

Why

We need to talk about work. In this Arena Paper, we focus on the current status of reporting about labour topics in European media, how this fits into the longer arc of historical labour journalism and – because work happens in an international context – we zoom in on cross-border reporting. We seek to identify when and how journalists stopped reporting on a topic that affects most people during their lives. Then, explore how can we develop a new editorial strategy to revitalise this important but neglected field.

Every now and then, work conditions are shown to be so outrageous that they hit the news. But most of the time, labour issues, though they can destabilise society, barely make the news or do not make the news at all. The occasional reports include slave-like work conditions, wages too low for a decent living standard, survival-of-the-fittest competition for labour in legal grey zones and systematic use and abuse of illegal migrants for the black labour market. This pattern of journalism about labour is only a small aspect of a much larger problem.

During the Covid-19 crisis, public attention moved to migrant workers in, for example, Germany, working and living under inhumane and humiliating conditions while working for the giants of the meat industry there. Advocacy organisations and the occasional journalist over the years had reported about terrible conditions and exploitation, often facilitated through use and abuse of the EU's services directive. It was an open secret that jobs in the meat industry were moved from highly unionised Denmark to less unionised Germany, where workers from Eastern Europe or beyond were fulfilling contracts under the EU services directive and employment agreements were with non-German companies. Charitable organisations such as the Catholic church had to step in to help. They also tried to draw attention to the "System Billigfleisch", the cheap meat system and its victims. Only during the pandemic, when the inhumane

working and housing conditions posed a risk to wider public health in the region, did these conditions get public attention. But after the pandemic, attention faded.

It is possible to trace good, regular, in-depth reporting about labour. We find heartbreaking stories, we find hard-hitting statistics, we find major investigations. But these stories are rare in mainstream media, often they are published in niche media and few journalists are specialising in the field. When mainstream media do not seem particularly interested, large parts of the population in Europe are unlikely to be informed and thus able to participate in a democratic debate about labour.

Labour conditions for migrant workers are among the most outrageous, but lousy labour conditions affect anyone. Underpaid, understaffed care workers in our elderly homes affect the everyday of the elderly with poor care, including impatient or insufficient assistance. Badly paid postal workers have little incentive to deliver parcels or letters securely and on time. Illegal migrants keeping entire industries running are forced to live in parallel communities. In other words, there is lots to write about and good reason to write about it. The subject offers broad scope to reporters. It takes in European legislation, pushed to its limits. Beyond initial legislation exist legal grey-zones that trap workers in limbo, poor enforcement of existing rules, and the hollowing out of supervisory entities, at the same time as trade unions are suffering from dwindling membership. Without dedicated media coverage, much of this goes unnoticed.

We see public outrage surfacing across Europe and have seen it over the past years, leading to unrest, for example the yellow vest protests in France. We also face the danger of polarisation, where we see a move towards the extremes among political parties.

Ultimately, societies are groups of human beings. In interpersonal relations, 'withholding' is the term for stopping a conversation about tensions. Withholding is categorised as verbal abuse. In the education of children, such silences are considered traumatising. In societies with a democratic vision, we have a duty to report about problems to make them visible and to allow for a democratic debate about them, in order to improve.

Focus of the paper

First of all, we need to establish the situation. What is **the status of labour coverage in Europe**? This paper is not an academic paper and does not provide the frame to address the details of labour coverage across an entire continent.

Given the heterogenous structure of European countries, a detailed study of labour coverage would include studies of not only actual coverage but also the given context. Context features include at least the following points:

- Is this country receiving or sending migrant workers or both?
- What is the level of trade union membership and trade union influence in political life?
- Are trade unions grouped by sectors or are they divided along political parties/movements?
- What are unemployment rates, what were they in the past decade and what are they estimated to be in the years to come?

- What is the status of freedom of expression?

- What is the type of media system, including journalists' role in society and media ownership?

Even though this paper is not the space to dive deeper into these aspects for even just a few European countries, basic awareness of these aspects in national contexts is integrated into this report. An initial attempt at such categorisation analysing a selection of countries can be found in Annex I.

The second question concerns the **role of journalists in covering or not covering labour questions**. As journalists, we have agency to select topics we deem societally important to focus on, but in a heterogeneous setting like diverse European countries, we also face a number of journalism and media cultures. This affects how journalists perceive their own role in society, and it affects the media publishers' overall vision and priorities. Ultimately, these considerations translate into which kind of journalism we embark on, what can be published in established media, and indeed what publishers and editors would pay journalists to spend time on. In the first decades of the 21st century, freelance journalists and new media structures – often supported through philanthropy, or through national, European or foreign government funding – do play a role. However, these structures are still small: their strength lies in digging out trusted information that other actors can multiply.

The third question is more specific than general coverage of labour topics, it concerns **the status of cross-border reporting on labour issues**. The free movement of labour is one of the key pillars of EU and EEA structures, it is regulated by a number of EU laws and the resulting structures affect countries within and outside the EU, as the heterogeneous economic situation leads to moves of labour from the South and the East of the EU to the North and the West, thus creating new opportunities from outside Europe – be that legal or illegal.

Together, these questions would give us a first impression of the status in Europe of the labour beat practice. Also, it will help us understand the inclusion (or lack of inclusion) of a transnational and supranational perspective on labour and economy of labour.

A future perspective could be a more in-depth analysis of journalism covering labour. The above cited context questions for labour journalism on national level merit deeper analysis, as does a study of journalism, including a perspective on the interaction between national, international and transnational regulation and economy affecting journalism in the field.

Given that this is not a scientific paper, the above questions should be considered guiding questions for this present paper.

Structure of the paper

This paper has a practice focus and purpose. It is written by practitioners and thus should be considered part of the tradition of reflection on practice. The paper includes both a section inquiring the above questions and a forward-looking section suggesting ways for practitioners to develop.

We approach the questions in three steps:

1. Literature review

We offer a screening of existing literature studying the coverage of labour related questions including

also literature on labour migration. We draw on European and international scholars prioritising research as specific to the topic as possible.

2. Interviews

We interviewed European journalism practitioners in the field using semi-structured interviews. This included 13 journalism practitioners across nine European countries, and a survey of 46 respondents from 16 countries. Participants were selected through the snowball method.

3. Reflection and outlook

We look at selected cases of journalism practice, particularly reporting where a European / transnational perspective has been included. Given the nature of this paper, this review cannot be a comprehensive approach, the purpose is to illustrate and inspire. Based on these preparations and the experience within the Arena for Journalism in Europe team and network, we write up a number of suggestions for ways forward.

Literature in the field

Can journalism today still function as an "inclusive social practice"? So asks Christopher R. Martin in his 2019 book *No Longer Newsworthy – How the Mainstream Media Abandoned the Working Class* (Martin, 2019, p. 5). In times of increasing and painful societal polarisation in large parts of Europe and North America, this question is more urgent than ever.

The purpose of this literature overview is to understand context and status of journalism about labour in Europe. It is intended to help journalism practitioners navigate the field and understand challenges to their specialisation both when it comes to publication, professional support and relations between target groups and media.

Martin's work is comprehensive in time and space: His work covers the decades from WWII to the late 2010s, he addresses not only the journalism itself but also the context: Financial conditions for media publishers as well as the general societal developments. Martin's work solely focuses on the US and thus cannot be translated immediately to the European situation. However, the questions he addresses, the mechanisms involved in the developments as well as the overall political developments allow for learnings relevant well beyond the US. The trends he observes seem to be confirmed by scholars in Europe, though with slightly different angles of their research.

In this paper we open the literature overview with a summary of Martin's comprehensive book, then dive into a selection of aspects such as journalists' specialisation in European newsrooms and framing of news related to labour. We conclude the literature section summarising remaining open questions.

History of the labour beat in the US

Diving deeper into Martin's work opens a list of useful topics for understanding labour journalism also in Europe. Martin opens with a history of the "labour and workplace beat" in the US from its beginnings in the 1830s as the US economy grew. In the 1870s he traced "regular reporter assignments to a labor beat", noting that they became a "standard element of all the newspapers in New York" (Martin 2019, p. 47 ff).

However, already early on and throughout the 20th Century, the labour focus comes under pressure, not least connected to media ownership and publishers siding with employers rather than trade unions.

In the 1970s, "as newspaper companies transitioned from independent ownership to publicly traded corporations, their focus changed". Some of the companies even dropped home delivery to working-class readers in both urban and rural areas, thus cutting off entire sections of society (Martin, 2023, p. 132).

Change in ownership and new marketing methods emerged largely at the same time. In the post WWII era, business and not least advertising and marketing underwent a major professionalisation development. For media marketing this meant a new consideration on target groups. What had been a diffuse "mass audience" was now analysed and divided in segments, and marketing departments followed the money. "Prior to the 1970s, when the labor beat was well established in the United States, newspapers were interested in gaining as many readers as possible and selling those readers to advertisers. (...). 'Paper sales meant circulation, and circulation meant advertising, and advertising meant profits.'" (Martin, 2019, p. 69). With new marketing methods, this logic changed. In a meticulous analysis of the development of media advertisements in the 1960s and 70s, Martin documents the change towards addressing "the right kind of readers, those who were 'well-to-do', 'affluent moderns', 'influentials' and people with plenty of 'effective buying power' and 'giant-size household incomes'" (Martin, 2019, p. 70). As media marketing became more sophisticated in order to strengthen the media business, it had unforeseen side-effects on the editorial line.

Imagine a rainy day. Transport workers are on strike and hundreds of thousands of commuters in New York City are affected. In 1941, the New York Times ran a full front page and half a page inside the paper covering the strikes. It was mentioned briefly that the riders had been warned well in advance and found alternative ways to get to work, while the focus was on the substance of the struggle and negotiations in question. Some forty years later, another strike in 1983, the story had shifted from the conflict between workers and employers to the commuters: now those affected by the strike had become 'consumers' and more central to the coverage than the parties in the labour conflict. The example is part of Martin's analysis of narratives about transport workers over the years. Martin observes several shifts in narrative frames: from collective workers' solidarity to an individual-oriented consumer focus, from workers' actions to lifestyle-oriented features on workplaces, and not least the narrative that people had to take care of themselves and a focus on personal finances, petit-investors and an interest in businesses rather than work.

This had an effect on the circulation. "As it turns out, people are not interested in subscribing to a newspaper that does not address their community and their interests", writes Martin, quoting other scholars, among them journalist turned scholar Philip Meyer, who observed 'cultural differentiation', the breaking up of society into smaller groups (Martin, 2023, p. 132).

These editorial shifts created a gap: according to Martin, two thirds of US adults do not hold a bachelor's degree or higher (Martin, 2019, p. 45), constituting a large group of people in the US not truly represented in the media the way they had been. At the same time as media marketing and newsroom narratives were moving away from the classic collective narrative, conservative media were on the rise, ultimately calling for "culture wars" rather than real life "economic problems for the working class" (Martin, 2019, p. 131). While inequality rises in US society, journalists' ambition to provide news of interest to the "widest possible audience" dropped from 39 percent of journalists in 1971 to 20 percent in 1992 and 12 percent in 2013 (Martin, 2023, p. 133).

These developments in journalism and media happen more or less simultaneously with a shift in political-economic ideology, in the US colloquially called "Reaganomics" after the US president Ronald Reagan, in office from 1981 to 1989. Neoliberalism or free-market economics are other terms, in the UK "Thatcherism" is used, too. In the same era, Martin observes a move away from the idea of class in public discourse, and some topics simply are not reported on. "The gap between rich and poor is the least reported story in the last 25 years," Michigan State economics professor Charles Ballard is quoted as saying in 2011 (Martin, 2019, p. 151). By the beginning of the 2010s, Martin observes an increasing polarisation in the political-economic discourse with the Tea Party movement on the one side and Occupy Wall Street on the other as well as with an urban-rural divide.

Overall, Martin observes that large groups of people in the US have lost their political voice. "Political voice took a commercial turn in the late 1960s toward valuing a more exclusive, upscale audience." As conservative media mostly serve "'real' Americans: the mostly white, male, Christian, heterosexual working-class audience… the majority of Americans' political voice is fractured; mostly ignored by mainstream news media and actively split along class, racial, gender, ethnic and religious lines by conservative media". A fraction that also defines politics, Martin concludes (2019, p. 162).

In sum, the developments have led to thematic news deserts and to large groups of people in the US being without a voice in the democratic sphere. Martin therefore issues a call to action and urges classic media to rethink news about workers: "If the mainstream news media want to talk to workers, they need to find them, give them a voice and include them in their audience," (Martin, 2019, p. 208).

Encouragingly, Martin observes a reinvigoration of labour coverage in the early 2020s. In 2023 there were "at least 65 full-time labour reporters at legacy media, digital news outlets and non-profits" and strikes at major companies as John Deere, Starbucks or Amazon were covered (Martin, 2023, p. 135).

In Europe, the situation is different on a variety of parameters, however similar trends seem to be prevalent. The following comparative categorisations could thus be included as questions for further explorations:

- How are journalism and media funded, and how does funding and media ownership affect journalism and narratives about labour?
- How is journalism affected by changing political and economic ideology, and what does this mean for reporting on labour?
- Do we have thematic news deserts on labour, inequality, class and other labour related questions in Europe, too?
- What is the status of labour journalism in Europe, including specialised knowledge among journalists?
- How are labour topics and workers framed in mainstream media, and are there alternative bubbles for information sharing?
- Martin focuses heavily on workers' political voice – what's the status in Europe?

Understanding the situation in Europe will allow us to rethink and adjust the role journalism is playing in

that field. However, at first sight, literature seems to be scarce or fragmented.

Literature overview

For the purpose of this paper, the literature overview should give insights into the status of labour coverage in Europe, particularly with an outlook beyond the immediate national spheres. Such background knowledge, frame of thought and indeed indication of coverage or lack of coverage can help journalists focus their work.

The overall question is, do we have a thematic news desert comparable to the one described in the US, and what are the underlying mechanisms? Is such research available on European or only on national level, if at all?

As indicated above, a thorough analysis of the situation in Europe would also include a comparative approach, including not only a literature overview on national level but also a comparative contextualisation scheme, including parameters such as media systems, journalists' working and living conditions as well as questions on trade union organisation or whether a country is sending, receiving or both sending and receiving migrant workers. The size and purpose of this paper do not allow for such an analysis, however it is recommended for consideration to both journalists and scholars to dive more deeply into these structures.

In this review, we thus limit our focus to three questions:

1. The conditions of and thinking about journalism on labour in times of neoliberal economies

2. Is quantitative and/or comparative information about journalism on labour available?

3. Is there a European and/or transnational perspective?

Context and conditions

Since "Thatcherism" and "Reaganomics" really began to shape mainstream political thinking in Western Europe and Northern America in the 1980s and even more so after the fall of the wall in 1989, media and journalism in general have been more and more exposed to market mechanisms and affected by market thinking more than in previous eras, for example in times when they were connected to political interest groups. In the era of party affiliated newspapers, there was a tradition of workers having their own voice in their own media. In the course of the 20th Century and with the professionalisation of journalism, journalists turned themselves into observers rather than loyal political partners. In the US, Martin documents how in the era of journalists as observers, mainstream media did cover a labour beat until that particular editorial priority started fading, not least in the time of the rise of neoliberal economic thinking. Are both the labour beat, as US journalists call it, and thorough journalism collateral damage of a larger economic development?

Robert W. McChesney is an American professor specialising in the political economy of media and communication. In his 2008 book about the political economy of the media, he described three widely accepted purposes of journalism in democracies: A watchdog role to hold power to account, detecting truth from lies, and providing a wide range of informed positions on the important issues of the day. He argues that all three aspects are failed in US journalism (McChesney, 2008, p. 25).

He, too, connects the decline of the labour beat in the US to the move to target more affluent middle and upper classes (McChesney, 2008, p. 47). The labour beat had to give space for more "lucrative" beats. Business journalism, "pitched to the top quarter of the population (...) has become so widespread that it has in fact become part of general news" (McChesney, 2008, p. 95), thus leaving large parts of the population without news of relevance for them.

Internationally renowned economist Joseph Stiglitz has argued, "The media market is rife with market failure" (Stiglitz, 2021). Stiglitz, who won the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences for his theory of markets with asymmetric information, has been a leading voice in analysing information in markets and societies as well as intra- and transnational inequality. Stiglitz takes part in the wider ongoing discussion on funding for media and argues the media should be considered a necessary public good in line with existing economic theory.

The description of marketing and ownership priorities as documented by Martin and McChesney seems to connect with the market failure analysis: When ideals of public interest and journalism are weighed against market mechanisms, the latter may easily win. The interests of simply running or even making money with classic media – cables, print, online or broadcast – may lead to decisions that are contrary to journalism with an ambition to serve an entire population – including workers. Publishers' interest is one aspect; the digital developments affecting all classic media is another cited by scholars for having affected journalism in general.

The labour beat in Europe

In 2012, Marcel Garz, a scholar from Hamburg in Germany, set out to measure the impact of media coverage on individual perceptions of job insecurity in Germany. His empirical findings were clear: "that these perceptions generally increase in years with a greater amount of news coverage about labour market policy" (Garz, 2012, p. 541). The sheer volume of reporting had the effect of "drawing employees' attention to a badly performing labour market marked by mass unemployment and deregulation policies, which leads to increased insecurity perceptions". Further he found, that the effect varied across sociodemographic groups. While not addressing what kind of journalism this "media coverage" included, Garz's effect measurement could indicate a European parallel to Martin's observations in the US, where large parts of the population were not represented in mainstream media thus losing their democratic voice. This could – logically – lead to insecurity. This is another wake-up call for journalists to act and improve labour coverage.

This section does not, however, look into effect measurement but into academic work on the development and status of journalistic specialisation on labour. The generalist versus specialist question has been addressed in recent years including a variety of aspects. In 2005, French scholar Dominique Marchetti identified six major variables to study specialisations in journalism, including the professional hierarchy of a given specialisation and the intellectual and commercial position of the media outlet (Marchetti, 2005, p. 4 ff). He explicitly observes that "since the 1980s, labour and other social movements have been covered increasingly in a more distant manner by journalists with an expertise (rather than a political engagement) in the topic. At the same time, a special 'social issues' section has been progressively dismantled at most French newspapers and news weeklies, generally subsumed within the 'politics' or 'economics' pages", (Marchetti, 2005, p. 6). While calling for further research, Marchetti emphasises that such research should take into account the context and "specific logic of the sub-field" (Marchetti, 2005, p. 14).

This is in line with the initial suggestion by the authors of this paper to consider a number of parameters when it comes to labour reporting across Europe, including national journalism as well as labour related contexts.

Several scholars analyse the division between specialised and generalist journalists in news media. “Beat journalists have a higher potential to initiate original news stories, scoops even, to provide unexpected angles and perspectives rooted in more expert historical and economic-political contextualization,” while at the same time being at risk of “symbiotic relationships with sources”, of becoming too absorbed in a specific beat or even to experience a “perceived vulnerability for commercial pressure” (van Leuven, Vanhaelewyn & Raeymaeckers, 2021, p. 4). In their paper focusing on the effects of cost-cutting in newsrooms on journalism beats, they analyse developments from 2013 to 2018 in Belgian newsrooms, where the ratio of beat reporters remains stable at about two thirds, though they have to cover more different topics. Over the same time period, the number of freelancers rises notably but unevenly. “Whereas most beats are increasingly covered by generalist reporters for cost-cutting reasons, the ‘prestige’ political news beat seems to escape from this strategy and is even strengthened,” (van Leuven, Vanhaelewyn & Raeymaeckers, 2021, p. 6). The labour beat is not mentioned explicitly. Categories include economy and finance, society and politics.

Reich et al. (2026), in their comparative study of news beats across 13 countries, distinguish between hard and soft news beats, where “politics, economy, international conflicts, and social issues are usually associated with hard news,” (Reich et al., 2026, p. 5). Yet even within so-called hard beats, they observe that business and economics, foreign and politics desks are significantly larger than social issues desks with 9.8 percent of articles dealing with business and economics, 14 percent with foreign affairs, 12.5 percent with politics and only 2.3 percent with social affairs. Social affairs is the section where labour seems to hide. Reinemann et al. (2012), referred to by Mellado et al. (2024, p. 11) categorise social affairs as “protests, education, human rights, housing, migration, and labour issues”.

If these studies are indicative for the general status of the labour beat in Europe, it is worth noticing that labour is one among many topics under the social affairs desks, and that though social affairs are considered hard news, these desks are comparably small within newsrooms. The well documented trend from the US of the labour beat declining to almost being invisible thus seems to be an issue in Europe, too.

While the general labour beat is in decline, journalists have found themselves pushed into the precariat. Schnedler (2020) in his dissertation about the journalism precariat identifies at least four dimensions affected, namely income, protection, disintegration and meaningfulness. Of relevance for this paper is the indication, that ”precarious work in journalism can lead to a brain drain and the loss of qualified and experienced journalists – and thus reinforce trends towards de-professionalisation.” (Schnedler, 2020).

The European and/or transnational perspective

In the early years of Romanian EU membership, a Romanian journalist initiated a cross-border investigation documenting a chain of labour trafficking: Ukrainian gangs were recruiting workers in Moldova and Romania to work in asparagus fields in the Czech Republic producing vegetables for a Dutch company. Each of the countries had its own angle: Workers in Romania and Moldova were warned of the traffickers, Czech authorities were confronted with the workers’ treatment and a Dutch court followed up on the company’s involvement in the slave like conditions (Mogos, 2010). That story connected a chain of national angles and did not focus on the EU regulation, which could have added a supranational angle with the purpose of addressing regulation and implementation of EU law. Here, an anthology discussing

journalism as such but in an overall context of labour, politics and the public sphere should be mentioned. In one contribution, two senior practitioners lament "a Europe without European fourth estate". National clichés are replicated and – even worse – superficial and even false coverage is far too widespread, argue Schumann and Simantke (2022, p. 228), due to lack of insight and education, and due to lack of contacts with critical journalists in other countries.

While literature about cross-border collaborative journalism is on the rise (Arena, 2025), we are not aware of any academic work analysing the transnational outlook of labour reporting. However, a considerable amount of literature deals with journalism about migration.

Migrant workers in the media

There is a body of research on how media cover migrants in different parts of Europe. This type of research was in almost every case conducted as part of migration studies, and generally not as part of media studies or research on journalism practice. Most of the research focused on countries that were clear migrant senders (e.g. Poland, Hungary, Romania) and countries that were clear migrant receivers (e.g. the UK, Germany). Two particular issues seem to have prompted and conditioned this kind of migration research in the last decade: firstly, the whole Brexit phenomenon, of which one of the issues was regulating the arrival of migrants and secondly, the so-called "refugee crisis" of 2015, in which a high number of asylum seekers and migrants arrived in Europe, mostly from Central and Western Asian and North African countries. Despite the relevance of the latter for many countries across Europe and for the EU as such, we found that the UK was by far the country most studied.

When focusing on the issue of economic migrants or work migrants, almost all the existing research we could find dealt with the issue of Eastern European nationals migrating into richer Western European countries (namely Germany and, especially, the UK). As part of that research, some studies looked at the media coverage of such phenomena, usually by carrying out text analysis of online and printed newspapers to try to reveal the conceptual frames used by the media and, in some occasions, the impact of such particular way of covering the issue on public opinion.

When looking at all the reviewed papers, some general indications start to emerge. It seems there is not a distinct overall category of "EU labour migrants" in the mainstream media narratives across European countries. While technically migrants, many EU citizens living and working in other countries than their own are generally not referred to as work migrants, or even as migrants at all. And that is most clearly the case when these are high-skilled or white-collar workers, and that is often also the case when migrant workers are regarded as individuals, including when they are based in a richer country than their own (e.g. a Polish architect in the UK will often be referred to as an architect, not as a migrant worker).

On the other hand, when work migrants are considered as a group and when they are employed in blue-collar jobs, they are generally portrayed as migrants from country X (e.g. Polish construction workers in Germany), sometimes even explicitly referred to in the media as "poverty migrants" from "poor countries". In those cases, the focus of the media coverage tends to be on the migrants' real or perceived impact on the receiving country's economy and labour market. Here, and very generally speaking, more sensationalist media (e.g. tabloids) tend to use nationalistic frames that may blame work migrants for having a negative impact on the economy, and more high-quality media (e.g. broadsheets) tend to use a more contextualised approach that tries to account for the whole complex picture that is labour migration.

Having such different – and sometimes even conflicting – narratives, often aligned with opposing partisan views, may contribute to political and social polarisation, and stand in the way of our societies being able to have a well-informed and shared public conversation about migration, both at the national and the European levels.

An EU-supported research project by the University of Oxford and the European Journalism Centre in Maastricht, REMINDER, addressed the issue of intra-EU mobility. A comparative report on cross-country media practices, migration and mobility was published in August 2018 (McNeil & Karstens) and covered Germany, Italy, Spain, Sweden, UK, Hungary, Poland, Romania and Slovenia. When it comes to "intra-EU mobility", which is clearly associated with labour and the welfare system in the receiving country, the report found that the topic was "of only marginal interest in most countries with the exception of the UK, Poland and Romania" (McNeil & Karstens, 2018, p. 4). In the UK, the focus was on migration from the EU as a whole and as a topic connected to Brexit, while in Poland the focus was also on Brexit's potential impact for Polish migrants in the UK. In Romania, the focus was on Romanian migrants in other countries. Interestingly, in Germany, the focus was on so-called "poverty migrants" arriving in Germany from the new EU member states from Eastern Europe (particularly Romania and Bulgaria).

More underlying work summaries and references can be found in Annex II.

Conclusion: A thematic news desert

Our literature review shows a useful body of academic work giving practitioners an overview of the field and context we work within, when we want to cover labour related topics particularly in Europe. A short summary:

US scholars such as McChesney and Martin provide comprehensive overviews including history of the labour beat in US media and context, they address aspects such as media ownership, marketing mechanisms, cultivation or neglect of certain target groups as well as general political and economic context, including shifting economic ideologies, unionisation and indeed work conditions for journalists themselves. While the research is limited to the US, mechanisms and developments resonate beyond that country.

In Europe, scholars have focused on national analysis as well as transnational perspectives, not least in academic research collaborations. We found research on labour journalism related aspects such as newsroom specialisation studies including prevalence and status of related beats, where the question of labour was absorbed in other beats such as social affairs (and potentially business) but generally did not seem to be central as a topic. The newsroom analysis also took into account the increasingly precarious work situation of journalists – specialised or not.

We did find analysis of the effect of journalism related to work, with potentially polarising framing on labour migration, and with potentially unsettling coverage of labour market insecurity.

This research thus confirms the lack of coverage of labour related topics as perceived by practitioners in the Arena circles and starting point of this paper. What US scholars dubbed a "thematic news desert" also seems to exist in Europe.

Practitioners' experiences covering labour in Europe

Labour should be an essential beat, particularly in times of increasing polarisation across Europe. However, scholars observe a thematic news desert, where this thematic specialisation of journalism practitioners is not prioritised by legacy media. Further, the European or international outlook seems to be weak. In the tradition of practitioners' reflection on practice at an explorative stage, we have conducted a survey and a series of semi-structured interviews with practitioners across Europe to gather their insights. We do so with a double aim: A practitioners' contribution to mapping journalistic coverage of labour topics across Europe, and giving these same practitioners agency by asking for help to identify needs and opportunities for labour reporting in general as well as a special focus on journalism on labour with a cross-border perspective.

With those two aims, we conducted interviews with 12 journalists and one editor with experience in working on labour topics in nine different European countries (11 journalists currently covering the country where they are based, and the editor and one journalist covering the international dimension), and with five other professionals who are experts on the topic of labour. Those interviews were carried out in 2022 and a selection of four interviewees were contacted again in 2026, and they confirmed their initial observations, in some cases indicated additional aspects or in one case the observation of a worsening of polarising narratives.

Additionally, also in 2022, we produced an online questionnaire with the purpose of gathering more views on how the media cover labour topics in different parts of Europe. It has no ambition of scientific thoroughness but merely serves to complement the interviews and collect relevant further considerations. We shared the questionnaire in dedicated online forums for journalists (mailing lists, chat channels) and we also sent it to individual journalists. We received 46 answers from 16 European countries, most of them (31) from journalists, 15 of whom identified themselves as "specialised in labour". The other respondents were from trade unions, academia and think-tanks or policy-oriented organisations.

We also found it surprising and interesting, and worth mentioning here, that a number of journalists and other professionals declined to be interviewed or to fill in the online questionnaire. They explained that they did not think they had enough or any knowledge at all about how the media in their country covered labour – in part because labour is mostly absent from such media coverage.

Based on our documentary research, the interviews and the answers to the online questionnaire, we identified a number of salient issues, related to the media coverage of labour around Europe, in which most or all interviewees agreed and which were supported by the answers to the questionnaire.

Lack of dedicated desks

While in some countries there are specialised publications covering labour topics from different perspectives (e.g. media outlets being funded by trade unions or trade magazines), interviewees and 91 percent of respondents to the questionnaire said that there are no dedicated labour desks or sections in the mainstream media in their countries. One of the very few exceptions is the Arbeit ("work" or "labour", in German) section at German newspaper Zeit (2026).

In many cases, there is at least one journalist covering labour as a topic (as said by 52 percent of respondents to the online questionnaire), most often in the economy or business desks. But journalists whose beat is exclusively labour are very rare and, we were told, tend to be from the older generation and on the

brink of disappearing. One reason for that, as mentioned by one of the interviewees, is that in the last few decades it has become more prestigious to cover business and finance, focussing on stock exchanges and companies from a corporate point of view. This includes personal stories of CEOs, corporate millionaires and other people considered personalities.

The fact that few mainstream media have a dedicated labour desk has several consequences for the media coverage of labour topics. One interviewee noted that when journalists with no expertise on labour do cover such topics on the odd occasion in which media cannot avoid it (e.g. during the annual collective bargaining negotiations), they often get things wrong, for example because they do not know the relevant labour regulations. Such flawed media coverage results in the public lacking a proper understanding of labour issues, including their own rights as workers, as mentioned by several of the journalists interviewed.

Different labour issues are covered by different thematic desks, with economy or business being the ones most cited by interviewees and respondents to the questionnaire. There we find, for example, news about wages, employment figures and strikes or other organised actions by workers (actually often covered from the point of view of the consumer). Other sections that cover some particular labour issues are politics (labour regulation, collective bargaining), society (migrant workers, labour issues related to social services), finance (annual company reports, share prices) and technology (the start-up scene). One interviewee noted that stories related to work and workplace health and safety are normally published under health in her country.

When Norwegian journalist Ingeborg Eliassen and her then colleagues at Investigate Europe were investigating the working conditions of truck drivers on international routes, the journalists sometimes found it hard to sell the story to the editors at their media partners: “One of my colleagues said that ‘This is such an unreported issue that editors didn’t even understand it as a topic.’”

Besides, in economy or business, the focus tends to be on the macro level, and the point of view that is normally favoured by the media is that of the employer. “I was at the economy desk when I was covering labour topics, which have always been considered the poor sibling of the economy or business desk,” one interviewee said, recalling how news about the economy by a big bank would be given higher priority than a report by a trade union – unless there was a scandal.

When there are no dedicated labour desks or sections in mainstream media, labour issues are reported on separately and often as independent news items, in different sections, instead of being covered as one comprehensive topic.

Lack of systematic coverage

The lack of dedicated labour desks is interlinked with the fact that, generally speaking, there is very little dedicated coverage of labour as a topic at mainstream newsrooms across Europe. This appears to be particularly problematic as it leads to a lack of continuity in the reporting, and a lack of addressing structural factors behind our labour reality. Instead, particular events connected to work are reported as news items in the daily cycle or as seasonal news (e.g. the bad working conditions of foreign workers picking asparagus in Germany or strawberries in Spain and the lack of waiters during the tourist season are reported once a year). There is no attempt at producing a continuing coverage of labour that joins the dots between the different labour issues and accounts for the complexity and the structural factors that make up how labour markets really function and the realities of workers’ lives. Covering labour as part of

the quick and disposable news cycle also means that there is not much in-depth reporting or investigative journalism about labour, nor is there a follow-up of those particular events and individual newsy issues that do get reported. Because there are almost no journalists whose dedicated beat is labour, there are also almost no journalists who can spend enough time and develop the necessary skills and resources (including access to relevant sources and data) to become experts on covering labour.

As a result, some particular issues connected to labour get covered as news in different sections, while other labour issues may go completely underreported. According to our online questionnaire, the two particular issues connected to labour that are generally covered in most countries are "employment and unemployment figures" (mentioned by 87 percent of respondents as normally covered by mainstream media in their country) and "wages, minimum wage" (78 percent). The next most commonly reported issues are "people migrating into your country for work" (57 percent), "the start-up scene" (54 percent), "trade unions presence and activity" (48 percent), "organised actions by workers" (48 percent, and most often covered from the point of view of consumers), "working conditions" (46 percent) and "labour regulations in your country" (41 percent).

The absence of proper labour reporting from mainstream media means that it is generally also absent from the public conversation and debate, which instead also focuses on single issues, often failing to interconnect them (minimum wage, workplace health and safety, unemployment figures, strikes and other organised actions by workers and so on). Additionally, several interviewees blamed this absence for the fact that many people do not know their own rights as workers.

The top issue missing from media coverage, according to respondents, was "working conditions" (63 percent), which 46 percent of respondents had also mentioned as being normally covered in their country. When talking to our interviewees, they explained that overlap by saying that, while "working conditions" as a particular issue may be covered every now and then, it is not covered regularly enough nor is it covered thoroughly enough. After conditions, respondents mentioned "wrongdoing by corporations and other employers" (61 percent), "organised actions by workers" (50 percent), "workplace health and safety" (46 percent), "labour regulations in your country" (46 percent), "EU labour regulations" (39 percent) and "collective bargaining" (37 percent), as the labour issues they missed the most in the mainstream media in their country.

The remaining issues listed in our poll, which interestingly were not selected by many respondents in either question, were "life-work balance", "quarterly and annual reports of corporations", and "people migrating from your country to somewhere else for work".

There is also very little or no reporting about the structural and systemic factors that make up labour as a complex, historical and circumstantial reality. From national legislation and institutions to EU and other international norms, from movements of population within countries and Europe to immigration from third-party countries, from university education to vocational training to internship schemes, from macro-economic and financial issues to technological constraints to algorithmic management, from historical reasons to long-term changes and future limitations: the lack of continuing and systematic reporting of labour as one topic means that the mainstream media fails to account for the structural reasons why people work the way they work. Interestingly, several interviewees explicitly said that the mainstream media have implicitly assumed the neoliberal narrative – in which individuals are expected to compete against each other within a capitalist worldview and with very little state intervention – as the one frame explaining our world, including the world of work, instead of questioning why things are the way they are and whether they could be different.

On the other hand, interviewees agreed on the fact that mainstream media never fail to report on any scandal connected to the labour topic, from a shocking death in the workplace, to the uncovering of human trafficking, to a big company going surprisingly bankrupt. However, interviewees also agreed that such scandal-based coverage often still failed to prompt a more in-depth and continuing reporting of the particular labour issue or of labour as one comprehensive topic.

In short: the fact that there is no systematic coverage of labour as one comprehensive topic means that mainstream media fail to produce a continuing reporting of labour, and they instead report reactively on independent news related to labour issue, and that often they also fail to investigate and produce in-depth reporting of the structural and complex factors behind our current labour reality.

Job insecurity among journalists

All interviewees mentioned the fact that most newsrooms have fewer human, financial and material resources than some time ago, yet they are expected to produce even more content than before. In such a situation, journalists and newsrooms are very strategic and picky about which issues and topics to invest more time, effort and money in. The lack of dedicated labour desks and of a systematic coverage of labour mean that journalists and newsrooms rarely choose to invest the necessary resources in producing a properly contextualised and comprehensive reporting of labour. Journalists' lack of time to focus and work properly on one topic does not only affect labour, but one effect of that lack of resources that may affect labour particularly is that journalists now lack the time to do field reporting, i.e. to go and see the work places and talk to workers in person. A related effect of that lack of time and resources is that, in the case of labour, journalists end up favouring corporate and employers' views on any issue, as those are most visible and their public relations departments more easily reachable than anyone talking on behalf of the workers. In fact, 89 percent of respondents to our questionnaire asserted that workers' voices "are underrepresented" in the mainstream media in their country, while 11 percent said they are "fairly represented". On the other hand, 65 percent said that employers' voices "are overrepresented", while 30 percent thought they "are fairly represented" and 4 percent said they actually "are underrepresented".

All that also happens because, as several interviewees noted, labour is quite a complex phenomenon and, in order to cover it as one comprehensive topic, journalists and newsrooms should be able to apply knowledge about public spending and international financial markets, the education and the pension systems, technological developments and societal trends, among other themes, and these days very few media are able or willing to invest the necessary resources to develop such comprehensive expertise in their newsrooms. As one interviewee put it: "The increase in job insecurity has affected journalists and newsrooms so much, that the media now can't properly cover the increase in job insecurity."

In short: ironically, the fact that job insecurity among journalists and newsrooms has been generally increasing in the last few decades means that those same journalists and newsrooms are now not well equipped to produce a comprehensive and in-depth reporting of labour issues like job insecurity across many fields of work.

Class consciousness

A lack of class consciousness among journalists was a point brought up by several interviewees, who noted that many or most journalists consider themselves liberal professionals and do not identify as working-class, even when their own working conditions have been steadily decreasing in the last years. Indeed, among the older generation many journalists consider themselves members of the intellectual

elite in their countries. While that may very well be true and is not a problem in itself, it also may have the effect of blinding journalists to the realities of most workers, or of making it harder for journalists to empathise with the different lived realities of most workers. In fact, several interviewees mentioned that, these days, many young journalists go straight from university or journalism school to the newsroom or to work as freelancers, without having had any other job or without having lived experience of other job realities.

“There’s a lack of class consciousness as workers among journalists. If you consider yourself a liberal professional who does their own thing or to whom the realities of workers’ class don’t apply, then how are you going to adequately cover the difficulties workers face?” asked one interviewee.

In short: despite such increase in job insecurity among journalists and newsrooms, for the most part journalists seem to not identify as working-class but consider themselves independent liberal professionals and lack a common class consciousness, which in some cases could make them more receptive to employers’ views on labour issues than to those of the workers.

The role of unions

While it may be hard to pinpoint which one caused the other, most interviewees agreed that two trends have gone hand in hand during the last few decades: a decrease in visibility and relevance of trade unions almost everywhere and a corresponding decrease in visibility and relevance of labour as one comprehensive topic, both in mainstream media and in the public conversation and debate.

Several interviewees thought it is the unions’ loss of public relevance that has contributed to labour not being properly covered in the mainstream media. They offered practical reasons why that could be the case, starting with the fact that, in the past (the timing varies by country, though the trend appears general), unions were much more proactive than today when it comes to reaching out to the media with data, information and contacts that led to stories about labour issues. Besides, unions also used to be more reachable and reactive when approached by the media, in no small part because unions – like the media themselves – had more staff and resources in the past.

“One story that’s missing and that’s important is re-explaining the importance of labour unions, they’ve been demonised around Europe. I don’t think many people around me know what ‘collective bargaining’ is. Unions did work in the past that still affects today’s situation, but people don’t know about that. In Belgium, unions are seen as a ‘service provider’, as a place to go to learn about unemployment benefits”, said Bryan Carter, freelance journalist and documentary-maker based in Brussels focusing on labour and other social and political topics, and author of the award-winning documentary EUtopia, about the exploitative working conditions of truck drivers. “It’s also the fault of the unions, they are not transparent, there’s been a loss of mutual trust between the unions and the media, in part because the media have maligned or misrepresented the unions, and that has affected the way most people think of the unions. And often the little coverage there is about the unions is in newspapers funded by the unions, which is very one-sided. We need an honest coverage of the unions, what they do well and what they do badly.”

In short: journalists consider the reported decrease of visibility and relevance of trade unions during the last decades as a key factor that has contributed to the parallel decrease of visibility and relevance of labour as one comprehensive topic in the media and generally in the public debate.

The cross-border dimension

Collaborative cross-border journalism is a methodology and journalistic approach that grew rapidly in popularity in the 2010s, with more and more cross-border investigations, big and small, making it onto newspaper print and online front pages (in fact, the authors and editors of this report are all active in cross-border journalism). Yet, interviewees agreed that the cross-border dimension is either lacking or not properly accounted for in the mainstream coverage of labour in their countries – despite that trend in journalism and the fact that the EU member states, and to different degrees some of their European neighbours, share a common normative and regulatory frame and a single market. One of the most important pillars of the EU is the free movement of labour, which means that in the EU labour is even more clearly a transnational reality than in other world regions.

One practical reason mentioned was that such common EU reality is actually quite a complex issue on its own, which requires expert journalists, and such expertise is often restricted to Brussels correspondents who report mostly about the political side of everything related to the EU institutions. Besides that, the fact that within the common EU frame there are still not only multiple layers of competence between EU and national level, but also big national differences in terms of labour legislation and culture, also makes it quite hard to produce labour reporting with a European perspective or indeed cross-border reporting of labour topics in Europe.

"When I started reporting about Europe [in 2011, after having been reporting on global affairs] the first impression was, 'Oh, this is one and the same thing, us Europeans'. But I learned that there are significant structural differences, the welfare state, the rules, the social safety nets, the unions... In the north of Europe, there are complex public systems that are supposed to keep you safe from when you are born until you die. And when I went to the south, I saw that that wasn't the case there," said journalist Ingeborg Eliassen, who for a decade focused on the cross-border dimension as a member of the journalism cooperative Investigate Europe.

The topics that are most commonly covered from a cross-border point of view are work migration, normally reported on as a migration topic by the desk covering social issues, and financial and corporate crime, which is usually covered by the Economy or Business desks, or by international investigative teams specialising in that one topic, and is rarely framed in terms of labour. In fact, in our questionnaire a little over one third of respondents, 35 percent, said "there is generally no international or cross-border dimension [in the coverage] of labour topics in my country". When the cross-border dimension does form part of the coverage of labour, 46 percent of respondents said "cross-border movement of workers into (my) country" is the one salient cross-border issue in mainstream media, and 35 percent said that "EU or other international labour regulations" is also normally covered as a cross-border issue.

This lack of proper cross-border reporting on labour topics was noted by interviewees as the single biggest need and an opportunity to revitalise journalism about labour in Europe. "Labour is as any other issue today: very quickly it leads you beyond municipal and national borders, and that naturally leads to collaborations; it's very hard to do reporting all the way to the bottom on your own", said Eliassen.

In short: despite the undeniable fact that these days labour is – like many other phenomena – a transnational reality, such cross-border dimension seems most often missing from the mainstream media coverage of labour, and there is still very little cross-border journalism about labour issues.

Focus on ‘migration’ rather than ‘work’

Interviewees generally agreed that work migrants and migration are most often covered with a focus on the migration part of the story, rather than on the labour angle itself, which is also reflected in academic research as mentioned above. As with any other topic, these days work migration is mostly reported through news items rather than through in-depth and long-term reporting. However, and possibly due to the so-called “refugee crisis” of 2015, many media outlets and journalists did invest time and resources in following up on stories of migrants and on producing long features in addition to the usual short news pieces. Still, in most cases, those stories and reporting projects were focused on people claiming asylum and on refugees, and less on those considered or labelled as economic migrants or work migrants.

“The discourses around migration and class are deeply intertwined. British people abroad are framed as expats, people coming here as migrants; and then you have international students. But a French banker working in the UK is not a migrant, he is a ‘French banker’”, said Emiliano Mellino, senior reporter at the London-based Bureau of Investigative Journalism.

In our questionnaire, 78 percent of respondents noted that, when it comes to work migration into their country, “mainstream media fall into simple narratives like, ‘poverty migrant / expat’, ‘cheap labour / foreign investors’, or other such narratives”. And only 13 percent said that “mainstream media make an effort to account for the complexity of work migration into my country”. On the other hand, when it comes to migration from their country into somewhere else, 48 percent of respondents said that that was an issue “generally not covered by mainstream media in [their] country”, and 41 percent said that “mainstream media cover it as a unidimensional issue (e.g. “brain drain”, “our people are exploited as cheap labour abroad”, “remittances”…) but don’t go into the complexities of the issue”.

As noted by several interviewees, work migrants are often at the highest risk of being exploited, and European companies have also been accused of abusive behaviour in other regions. Reporting on work migration as part of a comprehensive and continuing coverage of labour as a topic is indeed one of the most pressing needs and opportunities for cross-border journalism on labour in Europe (and elsewhere).

In short: work migration as covered by the mainstream media most often seems to focus on the “migration” side, and as such would be covered by the society desk or the migration desk, rather than on the “work” side. When migration is indeed framed as a labour issue, most media seem to produce an overly simplistic narrative, in which migrants are “good” or “bad” depending mostly on each media outlet’s political alignment.

Labour not considered ‘sexy’

Several interviewees spontaneously complained that, while they themselves considered labour a very interesting and relevant topic to work on as a journalist, in most other cases labour is generally not considered a “sexy” topic among journalists and newsrooms: labour coverage is low status in newsrooms these years. That means that many journalists do not like and do not want to cover what they considered are labour topics (using “sexy” to describe a topic or an issue is common parlance among journalists). The same judgement can likely be extended to many editors. There is a vicious circle in which the media and journalists do not focus on labour issues because they think their audience is not interested. And because there is not much good and comprehensive reporting on labour, audiences do not get interested in that topic.

“When we look at the statistics of our articles, we see that many stories about labour issues do not get

many clicks, but as our budget does not depend on those numbers we continue to invest in coverage of those issues. If I were to go by the numbers alone, i.e. commissioning stories on those topics that work best (in terms of readership), we would stop covering issues that are essential (and of public interest)", said Marta Checa, at the time Spanish-language chief editor at Equal Times, a multilingual medial outlet focusing on labour, politics, the economy and other issues from a social justice perspective, which was funded from 2012 to 2025 by the International Trade Union Confederation and the International Labour Organization, among other supporters.

However, we also see a contradiction or perhaps a lack of awareness by journalists who say they are not interested in covering labour. For example, many journalists these days do look forward to covering the tech start-up scene, which has a very clear labour dimension, or – as noted previously – stories of migrants coming into Europe or moving within Europe, which is another topic with a clear labour dimension. With a growing focus and journalistic interest on issues connected to the climate crisis, there is also a clear labour angle to much of the reporting to be done about that (beyond the usual political talk of creating 'green jobs'). Even the worlds of sports and entertainment, which do attract a fair number of reporters and wannabe journalists, have intrinsic labour dimensions that can be covered as such.

The same can be said of private and public health issues, which again are often connected to labour. An exception happened during the first months of Covid-19, when people discovered the importance of low-paid workers who until then had been ignored: care workers, supermarket workers, truck drivers, immigrants picking up our favourite fruits and vegetables from the fields. The media did report on that issue back then, in some cases actually falling back on simplistic narratives that treated these workers as heroes sacrificing themselves, instead of investigating the structural factors that had allowed for essential workers to be so poorly treated. Interestingly, these conversations about working class heroes have all but disappeared from the media.

Apart from moments of crisis, labour is indeed not considered a "sexy" or attractive beat for many professional and aspiring journalists. Issues like labour law and regulation deter journalists from becoming "labour journalists". Digging into the different sets of issues that drive the labour markets does not appeal to many journalists. On the other hand, and as noted previously in this report, anything connected to scandals, corporate crime or high-scale corruption is considered "sexy", whether the main angle is about labour or politics or sports. And the challenge, when those big reveals are indeed about labour, is to make it interesting and professionally worthwhile for journalists to follow up on those stories, to draw up narratives that also shed light on the deeper and structural factors affecting how labour works. Again, we believe cross-border collaborative journalism offers a good opportunity to make that happen.

In short: the fact that covering labour as a topic is generally not considered "sexy" (i.e. interesting and attractive) by journalists and editors means that few reporters invest enough time and effort to become experts on labour reporting. Adding the cross-border dimension to labour, while being able to connect it to the impact on people's daily lives, could help make labour more interesting and relevant.

Practitioners' views: a conclusion

Our research, both the interviews and the answers to our online questionnaire, provides a grim picture of the status of labour reporting around Europe, both as a national topic and as cross-border journalism into the transnational dimension of labour. But our research also points towards some ways to promote journalists, editors and generally the media to pay more attention to labour as a very relevant theme that needs to be covered as one comprehensive topic, where journalism with an international perspective

comes in as one of the most pressing needs and opportunities to revitalise the mainstream coverage of labour issues.

To summarise, we find that, around Europe, there generally seem to be few or no dedicated labour desks or sections in mainstream media. Instead, labour issues are covered mostly as separated news items across different desks (especially economy and business, but also finance, society, technology and health, among others) failing to provide the public with an overall big picture that joins the dots and reports on the patterns, both in interconnected labour issues and across borders. There is a lack of systematic coverage of labour in two senses: no sustained reporting on labour as a comprehensive topic, and no reporting on the structural factors behind the labour reality.

Another factor of influence is ironic: we also find that job insecurity among journalists, which seems to have increased greatly since the 2007–08 financial crisis, is itself hindering coverage of labour issues such as job insecurity. Connected to the former, our interviewees also noted that, despite such increased job insecurity across newsrooms, journalists themselves seem to lack a common class consciousness and do normally not identify as working-class. While that should not necessarily have to be a problem, it could contribute to the fact that mainstream media generally cover labour issues from the points of view of employers and of consumers, rather than from the workers' perspective. In relation to that, interviewees also noted that the decrease in unions' visibility and relevance is associated with the decrease in visibility and relevance of labour as a topic in the media and in the public debate.

Finally, despite the fact that labour is more and more a transnational reality, and especially across Europe, it appears that the cross-border dimension is usually missing from reporting about labour issues. When it comes to issues that are explicitly transnational, like the coverage of work migration, we find that it most often happens with a focus on the 'migration' dimension rather than on 'work'. Yet, we also identify this lack of cross-border journalism into labour as one comprehensive topic, along with reporting that clearly links to the everyday life of people in the general public, as the biggest opportunity to make labour a topic that journalists, editors and audiences can consider "sexy" again, i.e. interesting and relevant, and something they need to be properly informed about.

The interviews and the survey among journalism practitioners in Europe largely mirror the findings by scholars described in the above section on literature about journalism about labour. The decline of the labour beat as a separate specialisation is reflected in our interviews and survey. One difference seems to be the categorisation of labour under the social affairs beat (based upon Reinemann et al., 2012), where our interviewees see labour as integrated under business and economy in their contexts, however that is a minor question compared to the confirmation of labour having comparably low status within newsrooms.

Throughout, there seemed to be consensus that the field of labour, particularly labour in a trans- or supranational context, is complex and even impenetrable.

Mapping the publication landscape

The task of gaining an overview of journalism about labour by actually collecting and documenting publications on national and on European level is way beyond the scope of this paper. The purpose of this section is thus explorative and to be considered as potential first step towards a collection of examples for inspiration.

The above cited story about workers in the asparagus fields (Mogos, 2010) sheds light on different aspects in the supply chain of labour: in the sending countries, publication warns other workers against trusting this particular job agency; in the country where the abuse happened, it alerts authorities; and in the country where the profits were reaped, it could contribute to legal proceedings. A similar chain-story was initiated by two post-graduate students of journalism from Belgium and the Netherlands in 2018 about slave like conditions in elderly care in the Netherlands and Belgium with caretakers being brought from Bulgaria (Brugnera et al., 2018). This team not only brought the story to the attention in the sending country and the receiving countries (where the story got attention in a parliamentary debate in Belgium shortly after publication), but it also addressed the European level regulation – and how to circumvent it (Merrigan & Brugnera, 2018).

Another series of stories was produced by Danish trade union magazine Fagbladet, which unveiled slave-like conditions for Philippine nationals working as truck drivers for about 2 USD per hour for a Danish company and living in a fenced container village slum on Danish ground. The story was not only quoted around the world, it also led to a court case against the company and to a change in EU-legislation (Halskov, Havstein Eriksen, 2018). While this story was published in Denmark and predominantly focused on Danish employers and a slum on Danish ground, the reporting was carried out internationally and the story carefully integrated the transnational angle.

On a quest to actually find a medium in Europe that cultivates a labour beat, German newspaper Die Zeit comes to mind. With a mix of news, analysis, in-depth reporting and comment, it offers an entire section on the topic, a low-key day-to-day coverage with the occasional award for investigative pieces (Fuhrmann, Meckler, 2026). Here, the target group is obviously German, and stories have German or occasional transnational aspects.

In the era of online media and investigative journalism initiatives, a few such entities are worth mentioning as they dedicate time and space to labour related topics.

In 2017 and again in 2018, investigative journalism collective Investigate Europe dedicated time to look into Europe's precariat and into the conditions for truck drivers. Both investigations combined the national and the European angle and were published in national media across Europe as well as with the European angle. Though the team thus gathered significant insights into labour market questions, in the tradition of investigative journalism, they moved on to other topics since. The above cited chapter by Schumann & Simantke (2022) suggested collaborative journalism efforts as a potential solution to surmount the lack of reporting on European affairs, and turned to explore the practice of the suggestion, including journalism on the topic of labour.

Dutch initiative Lighthouse Reports for some years cultivated the topic of migration including labour migration. (Lighthouse, 2024). Publications were with media partners, the perspective clearly transnational.

Another intense but time-limited project with in-depth journalism on labour and with a transnational outlook should be cited here, in that it allows for considerations on ways forward. In the academic year 2023/24, Arena was partnering on an education project between the universities of Gothenburg/Sweden, Paris & Lyon/France and Leipzig/Germany. Students of journalism at MA level learnt to do cross-border collaborative journalism practice, the topic at hand was labour and migration. Students followed the task of publishing to local or national audiences while including the European angle (Crossborder Journalism Campus, 2024). Here, the collaborative, European and educational aspects suggested by Schumann &

Simantke (2022) were combined.

Finally, it is worth mentioning individual journalists specialising in labour topics. These journalists might publish stories about occupational health in a newsletter, or write freelance articles on labour migration, or conduct investigations into platform workers – each can be considered a labour journalist with a stand-alone publication.

These cases allow for a suggestion to categorise publications on labour in an international setting:

A scale from national to international outlook:

- National coverage about labour related topics with a one-country publication (with or without a transnational outlook)
- European angle coverage, typically in specialised media
- Collaborative coverage in larger projects with multiple-country and multiple-media publications

A scale on level of specialisation:

- Stand-alone (in-depth) journalism on labour – be that one or a series of articles, by freelancers or within a medium
- Time-limited or project publications – steady coverage but time limited to project periods
- Labour beat

While we – via Arena for Journalism in Europe's networks – are aware of some publications on national, transnational and European level, a systematic mapping of the European landscape on labour journalism could be helpful. Understanding the mechanisms of national, multiple country and EU-level publications could be of interest for practitioners and scholars alike, not least when it comes to understanding news supply chains, interactions between citizens and policy makers, accountability and ultimately to effect in society.

These examples of publications also raise the question of funding for this kind of journalism. While few mainstream media appear to invest in systematic day-to-day as well as in-depth journalism on labour, we see a landscape of idealistic journalists in more or less precarious or entrepreneurial set-ups as well as publications maintained by trade unions or supported by philanthropy. Funding is an indispensable question to address in order to revitalise the labour beat.

Ways forward: Cross-border and the "power of publication"

Why revitalise the labour beat

Our literature review and interview series have confirmed journalism practitioners' perception: journalism about work is an underreported topic, or a "thematic news desert". The reason to revitalise that particular specialisation is the fact that work concerns almost all people, and a lack of focus on work

seems to be an element that deprives parts of the populations of their voice in democracy, contributes to uncertainty and ultimately polarisation in society. Labour, economic inequality and polarisation are closely interlinked.

Preventing polarisation can be considered central to editorial decision making, in that polarisation has an excluding effect and can ultimately lead to civil unrest. Also, we live in a democratic society and slaves or slave-like work conditions are simply unacceptable and not in line with the European committment to respect the dignity of each human being. Enough reasons to revisit the labour beat. And in a transnational legal and economic reality, a cross-border perspective on labour is essential.

The tasks at hand

So, let's sum up the tasks observed as our starting point by practitioners on anecdotal level, confirmed by scholars and by practitioners for this paper's survey and interviews:

Lack of coverage:
The coverage of labour is patchy at best, the number of specialised journalists has been in decline and the topic is often buried in the business or social affairs sections, altering the frame and focus of the reporting.

High threshold of competence:
Covering the field of labour requires insights into a complex bundle of knowledge including national and international labour law and practice as well as insights into the national or local societal, political and economic realities. In other words: The threshold to embark on labour journalism is high.

Europe:
The labour market in Europe is even more complex than other locations as national and transnational legislation and the interaction between them has to be taken into account for journalistic research and publication.

Lack of support for an "unsexy" beat:
The labour beat seems to have slid into a low status position in newsrooms across the US and indeed across Europe.

One of our interviewees, Marta Checa, former editor of Equal Times, a global trade-union funded medium on labour, emphasised "the sheer complexity and multidisciplinary nature of everything that falls under the umbrella of 'labour' or 'world of work'. What are we actually talking about? A sector facing cuts (education, for instance)? Workers in the global supply chain? Labour abuses in the fishing industry? The future of work? Algorithmic management that strips working people of their humanity? Legislation catching up with new working realities? Labour migration, or health and safety in the workplace? What do we even mean by 'decent work'? What counts as 'labour exploitation' — can we talk about 'modern slavery'? Should labour coverage also extend to disability in the workplace, menopause, maternity, ageism, and workers with caring responsibilities? Are trade unions equipped to represent gig economy workers?" Checa herself turns to history and even philosophy in her quest to deal with the role of editor of this complex field. She, too, emphasises the transnational nature of the topic and the need to understand the various countries' perception of work. "That means also learning from each other's knowledge and insights. In short: to cover labour topics properly, you need to be able to tackle questions that cut across economics, business, geopolitics, technology, sustainability, equality, equity, public policy, labour

law, human rights… and philosophical, sociological, political, and historical perspectives too," says Checa. Quite a call to arms!

Further, the current situation particularly calls for journalistic coverage of the field of labour and the intersection of labour with other major developments. We already mentioned the problem of polarisation. However, our societies further face two challenges of a scale that inevitably make history: The technological development of digitisation including AI, and the environmental and climate crisis. These affect all fields of society and life well beyond labour questions, but threaten to deepen existing societal divides, not least in connection to labour.

Inequality:
Inequality has been mentioned as "one of the most urgent concerns in the world today, generating many other problems in economies, societies, polities and the environment" (Stiglitz et al. 2025) leading to concerns that it undermines social and political cohesion, undermines trust and ultimately leads to political instability. Together this hampers our capacity to deal with other major challenges in the world today. Labour is central to this question.

Digitisation:
Major technological developments – such as the invention of the steam engine and the emerging use of fossil fuels – have affected all aspects of human life and historic developments across the world. The same is happening with the digitisation development since the late 20th century. We are in the middle of these developments, and while legislators talk about regulating platform workers, we are likely only at the beginning of the effects this technological development will have on all parts of society, including labour.

Climate crisis:
Thinking about labour and climate crises brings to mind heat waves and how they affect workers. However, the intersection between labour and the climate crisis is significantly more complex and merits journalists' attention. The energy transition and climate adaptation bring major tasks and changes to societies, affecting the workforce and communities. Here, too, thorough journalism and a voice to those affected will be a necessity for decades to come.

What we have

Indeed, it's not all bad. There are encouraging indications that a cross-border collaborative effort could revitalise labour journalism. In 2023, Arena at its flagship European journalism conference Dataharvest (2023) offered a full thematic track on labour with topics such as labour law, slave labour in farming or how to cover closed groups when it comes to labour abuse. At the 2023, 2024 and 2025 editions of the Dataharvest, which annually gathers some 500 journalists from across the continent, we had networking round tables attended by 20-30 journalists, and at the 2026 Perugia Journalism Festival a networking café had about the same number of guests. The Arena Labour chat group – a lightly vetted online network – currently has 170+ members, who use it to communicate between in-person gatherings.

Furthermore, there are a number of committed individual journalists and the occasional collaboration to cultivate the beat, article by article. A university collaboration, the Crossborder Journalism Campus (2024) brought together 75 MA-level students of journalism to learn collaborative investigations on the topic of labour and migration. Also, in Denmark (just to mention one case on national level), the association of labour journalists is currently experiencing renewed interest, including gatherings for journalists

to share news and ideas.

These activities indicate interest and awareness, making it a good moment in time to consider the revitalising efforts through further developments of the network.

A bottom-up approach

The funding and functioning of media are typically beyond the reach of journalists (if we define media as the structures carrying journalism from journalists to audiences). In this paper we thus solely focus on what is within the agency of journalists: The analysis guiding editorial priorities, thorough research, and publications targeted to relevant audiences. This also guides the suggested activities to revitalise the labour beat.

Newsroom priorities are partially beyond the reach of journalists, as publishers and editors define the overall direction. However, experience shows that journalists are excellent at driving professional development, with enthusiastic pioneers spearheading innovation and themes. This could be observed in the field of data journalism or CAR, Computer Assisted Reporting as it was called in the generation of early movers in the 1980s and 90s. Today, data journalism is an integrated element in newsrooms and journalism education. Similarly, a decade later with cross-border collaborative journalism, pioneers pushed the method in the late 1990s and through the 2000s. Come the 2010s, a field of collaborative journalism emerged. Data journalism and collaborative journalism are about mindset and method, but the practice also often coalesces around themes. Specialist climate journalism networks have emerged across Europe, formed by journalists themselves. When it comes to particular topics, we repeatedly see individual journalists or small networks drive public attention.

Informal structures of like-minded journalists have proven to be strong. In cross-border settings this seems even more obvious, since groups are large enough to avoid potential competition which can still be an issue on national level. Whether they ultimately bring their knowledge and commitment into day-to-day reporting, investigative work or even to editorial decision making – they'll be aware of the issues at hand, capable of producing journalism and have the network to get support from peers.

In the following, we suggest steps to revitalise labour journalism in Europe, but first a short intro to cross-border collaborative journalism.

Cross-border collaborative journalism as flywheel

A German colleague once described cross-border collaborative journalism as a way to take back "the power of publication": connecting the local with the transnational perspective and bringing necessary topics back to the political agenda at all decision-making levels. In Europe this means both the national and not least the EU agenda. Collaborative journalism as a way forward is attractive in that it offers added value to those journalists partaking in it – ultimately, they each bring journalism for publication in their respective media, often with unique or otherwise hard to obtain information.

Generally, collaborative journalism has gained traction in the 2010s and 2020s. In cross-border collaborations, teams of journalists from different countries select a topic or story idea, they research together and share their findings within the team, where they usually have an agreed publication date before which no information is published. When the research is done, each partner publishes to their own audience, adapting the shared findings to different target groups. Often, the team also prepares a summarising story to address higher levels of administration. In Europe, this could be a national publication or a

medium specialised in European affairs.

Cross-border collaborative journalism is recognised as a way of working with multiple added values for those stories, where cross-border aspects are relevant:

- In the research phase, journalists can pool time and competences, at the same time the team work allows to fact check national biases and bust myths
- In the production phase, resources can be saved for example by carrying out one interview with a hard-to-get-source for all partner media, or a digital visualisation that can be done once and merely adapted to the participating news outlets
- In the publication phase, the various partners can each target their audience and thus get a wider and more in-depth reach and impact
- The more or less simultaneous multiple country publications bring topics to the public agenda in these countries as well as on a transnational level
- In some countries and contexts, the international network can provide additional security

A specialised Europe-wide network

Journalists tend to avoid conferences or trainings unless they can bring something valuable back to their newsroom and their own practice – they simply don't have time for anything else. This might include new skills, of course, but also a data set, a path forward to obtain relevant documents, a story idea or even trusted colleagues to collaborate with. Above we observed four tasks to address: Lack of coverage, high threshold of necessary insights in this particular field, high level of complexity not least due to a mix of national and trans/international rules and practices and finally the lack of support from editors and publishers for an "unsexy" beat.

Lack of coverage and lack of support are interconnected – both can be addressed through simple, good old-fashioned encouragement. Such encouragement is hard to measure but seems to have been successfully practiced in the above-mentioned development of data journalism as well as in a number of journalism networks, for example the thematic Arena Climate Network, or as part of cross-border teams, such as Investigate Europe where two long-term labour investigations were produced to be published on national level.

The high threshold of competence can be addressed through trainings or indeed collaborative journalism projects, where less experienced and more experienced journalists collaborate. Trainings or fellowships, which are more intense and focused, addressing labour issues in Europe could be a way forward. A guidebook on labour journalism practice in Europe may be worth considering, to supplement and update the globally focused Covering Labour (Schiffrin & Featherstone, 2007), which has a global trade angle while not taking into account more recent changes to the EU and its relationships with EU-neighbouring countries. Experience from other topics – for example housing, climate – indicates that it would be meaningful to produce cross-border investigations, not only to demonstrate the extent of what is possible with better resources, but to inspire others.

Once labour journalism activities are functioning, it is possible to cultivate relationships with scholars

and researchers from outside journalism. These scholars and researchers feed into the network as sources, speakers and trainers for conferences, fellowships and trainings. Ultimately, as we've seen on recent major publications, they can become collaborators on an investigation themselves.

Annexes

Annex I: Jose M. Calatayud: Country profiles and section on "how media cover labour by country"

Annex II: Jose M. Calatayud: Literature review on migrant journalism framing, bibliography and interviewees

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