

Desperately seeking news

As a young journalism graduate, he tried to earn his living doing the work he loved in his home country, but soon became disillusioned. But he did not give up. He has now spent 10 years in Brussels, doing bits of freelance work here and there. As a multi-platform reporter, he juggles languages as he juggles his pen, his microphone and his camera. Even so, he struggles to pay the rent. Anonymous report by a journalist of the 'precarious generation'.

Anonymous report

A protest action in front of the Paris broadcasting station called by *Génération précaire*, a French movement upholding the rights and positions of trainees in France.
Image: © Belga



Starting out

I left for Brussels at age 25, with nothing, to seek my fortune. I dreamed of being a star reporter. I thought: 'Brussels is where it's at, let's be there at the heart of things and let's go for broke.' Back in my home town, I'd spent three years working for the biggest local daily paper. Three years on the road, in search of stories, paid 20 euros a piece. 'You are brilliant, but it's a long, hard road, and I'm afraid it'll be 10 years or so before you get taken on permanently', I was told one day by the editor-in-chief. Ten years, that was too long. I didn't want to find myself still on the editorial staff aged 40 and worn out. At home, I had no bigwig to look out for me, I ain't no fortunate son, I didn't go to a school whose name opens doors – I couldn't afford it. Time to move on, then.

Working for peanuts in Brussels

I arrived in Brussels when the euro crisis was at its height. The print media and public opinion were discovering suddenly how important Europe was. Better late than never. Moving here was a smart move. I got to work straight away: I studied the workings of the EU, Community law and languages, because I needed to learn English and French fast. The only possible way of acquiring experience of Europe lay in getting a few euros together and doing internships. But my dream remained the same – a career in journalism. I pursued that dream as soon as I could, after my eight-hour daily grind of working as an intern, studying the workings of the EU and learning my languages.

I wrote my first articles for the foreign pages of the daily paper in my home town. Thirty euros or so per article wasn't huge, but it was a first step towards making it into print in Brussels. There was little room for self-expression in these pages, since the editors preferred to cut and paste agency releases. I took my courage in both hands and sent off a first e-mail offering my services to online publishers and websites. Obviously, quite apart from monetary considerations, that was not done, a dim view was taken of such approaches. Even though I talked big, there were those who realised that I was young, and took advantage of the fact: 'We can't pay you the going rates for Brussels, but if your articles are good, we'll publish them. With exclusive rights for us, of

course.' I was not prepared to write for nothing, which would have devalued the professional reputation I was keen to build through my hard work. But I was prepared to work for low rates, 15-20 euros gross per article, which was better than nothing, and at least it allowed me to save face.

Communications and rip-offs

Meanwhile, the months went by. I was now fluent in English and French, and I was comfortable moving around in the 'Eurosphere'. Little by little, I was developing useful contacts and finding relevant information. All I had to do was make some money. Thanks to my knowledge of languages and Europe, and thanks to my own dedication, I found a few small communications jobs: newspaper clippings, newsletters, press releases, posts for social media and speeches written for a number of leading public figures.

As journalism, however, that still wasn't enough. I wrote 20 or so articles a month, which earned me about 400 euros gross. It wasn't enough to live on, or even to survive, and you got ripped off in so many ways. A new website contacted me. They dangled the prospect of mind-blowing money and a promising future. To start with, I would be paid not in euros but in shares which would turn into real money – big bucks – after six months. I agreed. Every week, I wrote two in-depth articles on European policy, the euro crisis, the Greek bailout and a lot of other things as well. After six months, the financial promises were halved. After a further six months, all they were prepared to pay me was my expenses. In two years, I didn't receive a single euro. In the end, they stopped answering my e-mails, and I was even insulted on Twitter. A few months after ending my collaboration with this site, I learned that they were looking for a new collaborator in Brussels, to whom the same promises were being made. I hope he will fare better than I did. But it didn't end there.

A 'leftist' weekly for which I wrote occasionally went bust and disappeared only to resurface in a different corporate form, without paying me what I was owed, namely several hundred euros. Thank goodness this was a weekly that 'stood by the workers', otherwise I hate to think how things might have turned out.

I wrote 20 or so articles a month, which earned me about 400 euros gross. It wasn't enough to live on, or even to survive.

A golden opportunity

My luck seemed to be turning, however. After two years, a great opportunity came my way: the chance to work with the new online editorial team of a national daily. This paid 30 euros per article – not huge, but this was a daily publication. I put everything I had into this venture, at the same time continuing with my other tasks, without which I wouldn't have been able to pay my rent. I wrote every day for this site, complex articles, I did research, I made phone calls, visits, always at my own expense. When I was about to give up my work in communications and devote myself 100% to journalism, I asked for a minimum contract – a set number of articles for a set sum per month – only to be told that I still had to prove myself. Unlucky again.

Budget videos

After four years in Brussels, I was still learning my craft. The world of information was evolving, and videos were gaining ground over the written word, on the Web more than anywhere else. I realised that, if I didn't learn this new language, I might as well change my occupation. In the end, in the little free time I had, I got to grips, self-taught, with video recording techniques and an editing

programme. My first videos were flops, but once again, with tenacity and sacrifice, I mastered the subject. A year later, I was able to use a professional TV camera, a microphone and editing software. I paid for the equipment myself, nearly 5 000 euros in total. It hurts to think about it. My videos were screened on the Web, but what I got paid was always the same: 50 to 70 euros for a 2 to 3-minute video. Some clients asked me quite simply to submit a script of the content before they accepted it. In other words, I sometimes found myself going somewhere, filming and writing for nothing. But I hung in there. All in all, I was earning a bit more than for written articles.

TV on the road

I haven't said this yet, but I did so well making videos that, after a few years, I began working for television. I started collaborating with a national network. It paid better, but the work was complicated, and I had to do everything on my own: filming, adding the journalistic content, editing, dubbing, adding the music and voice-overs. I wasn't paid expenses, not even my travel and accommodation costs. Anyway, I began covering major European events, sometimes far away from Brussels. I car-pooled with BlaBlaCar, I slept on friends' sofas or travelled for several hours to avoid the cost of a hotel. I did the editing work at home, at night. One day, when I was doing a feature on the Calais Jungle, I hitchhiked from the migrants' camp to the Channel Tunnel. If it hadn't been for the TV camera I was holding, I might have been taken for one of those hapless souls myself. To complicate matters still further, central editorial departments are disorganised: they ignore e-mails, order services at the last minute and make ridiculous demands. But how can you say no when you are paid by the job?

Above all, stay healthy

By virtue of making videos, I have managed to make a living solely from journalism, dropping my communications work, but it has not been easy. Above all, one must not be ill. A day lost to flu is a day's lost income, and I can't afford that, it would be disastrous. So

far, I've been lucky, I've never had any health problems. I went to a physiotherapist for treatment of pain in my left knee. 'When did you injure it?' he asked. 'I haven't injured it, but prevention is better than cure and I can't afford to be on crutches for two weeks.'

In praise of quality

The problem with piecework – and its costs – is that there have to be so many 'pieces'. Some days, I write articles on the economy, politics and agriculture, and, at the same time, I am working on one or more videos. I envy those correspondents who write one article a day, or two at most, who have the time to read, to inform themselves, attend briefings and have a coffee with their sources, whereas I am obliged to work non-stop. I like to think I am infallible, though I often have the feeling that I don't deal with information as I should – unfortunately I don't have the time.

Brussels attacks

On 22 March 2016, there were two terrorist attacks in Brussels. The army moved in, followed by battalions of 'VIP journalists', special envoys, big names. They stayed in hotels costing 200 euros a night, ate lunch and dinner in restaurants, took taxis, moved around accompanied by their cameramen, sound engineers and drivers. But they needed us freelancers to get about in Brussels, because they didn't know the city, had no local contacts and didn't speak the local languages. In short, all they had was money, that's the least one can say. So these VIP journalists paid freelancers like me to guide them like sherpas in a city they knew nothing about but wanted to

talk about. They contacted me, but I said no. I preferred to report on events myself rather than act as their flunkey. Apparently, CNN sent nearly a hundred journalists to Brussels during the period of the attacks. As for me, I worked on my own for 18 hours a day, for three national media. I did my best.

Fortunate Son

Journalists in Brussels fall into two categories: those who have it all and those who have nothing. There are freelancers like me, who have to work through thousands of contacts and links in order to make ends meet at the end of the month, and there are the correspondents, journalists earning salaries of up to 3 000 euros, with their housing, cars and their children's schooling all paid for. This category includes children of politicians, journalists, ambassadors. Some of them are brilliant, others far less so. 'Why didn't you pursue a career in politics, Dad? I might have been a leading journalist today...'

To be honest, after nine years in Brussels, I gave up trying to find permanent employment. That's the honest truth. It is especially hard for a freelancer to get hired. Not impossible, but extremely hard. The freelancer is an ideal 'stopgap' for media departments that do not want to employ a correspondent. A collaborator of whom they can demand anything, a foot soldier to be sent into battle, information 'cannon fodder'. If you are unfortunate enough to be not only a freelancer but young as well, it is even worse: plenty of editors rub their hands in glee and make you the most ridiculous offers. For freelancers, there is only one rule: don't think about tomorrow; stay firmly focused on the here and now, because tomorrow is another day. ●

Some days, I write articles on the economy, politics and agriculture, and, at the same time, I am working on one or more videos.
