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Anatomy of a Precarious Newsroom: Precarity and agency in Syrian exiled journalism in Turkey

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Abstract

This paper contributes to the ongoing debate on the precarization of journalistic work by looking at the case of Syrian exiled journalists in Turkey, whose professional and personal lifeworlds are underpinned by multiple layers of precarity. The article builds on data collected during a 3-month-long period of participant observations at the newsroom of *Enab Baladi*, a Syrian news outlet based in Istanbul, Turkey. It develops a relational notion of precarity through insights from the growing body of work on precarity in the journalistic field, as well as research on precarity and migration. It proposes a multidimensional understanding of the 'precarious newsroom' that takes into account the people, organization and place, as a way to map how different layers of precarity, and responses to them, are articulated, experienced and negotiated. Our research underlines the complex anatomy of the precarious newsroom as a paradoxical place and an amalgamation of precarity and agency.

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Introduction

Precarity has become a familiar motif in the lives of journalists and media producers today. This is increasingly reflected in academic literature that has attempted to describe labor precarity (Ekdale et al., 2015; Morini et al., 2014), its consequences (Gollmitzer, 2014; Mathisen, 2019) and situate it within broader changes in the journalistic field (Deuze and Witschge, 2018; Waisbord, 2019; Zelizer, 2015). This article aims to contribute to this ongoing debate by training our sights on the seldom-studied populations of exiled journalists whose lives are undergirded by multiple layers of precarity. Our ethnographic study of the exilic newsroom of *Enab Baladi*, a Syrian media outlet based in Istanbul, Turkey, aims to tackle the following key questions: How do Syrian journalists in exile in Turkey navigate landscapes of systemic precarity? How are these precarities experienced in-situ? And how can we account for the paradoxical nature of precarity and its co-existence with agency in these settings?

Inspired by the increased attention to precarity in the literature on journalism—a literature that tends to focus mostly on western journalists in elite settings—and drawing on the growing field of emerging media studies and literature on precarity and migration, we propose to make sense of this phenomenon through the multi-dimensional concept of the 'precarious newsroom.' Precarity, in this kind of precarious newsroom, is a labor regime that is deeply articulated with other areas of precarious life conditions (Millar, 2017). However, before arriving at the discussion of the case of exiled journalists in Turkey and their precarious newsroom, we develop the concept of precarity through a relational and multilayered approach.

Making sense of precarity

Precarity, as a portmanteau of structural volatility and uncertainty experienced by individuals, has taken a prominent place in our attempts to understand and circumscribe today's world. Precarity has been considered as constituting a labor condition of unstable, intermittent or insecure employment. In particular, it has become a ubiquitous nomenclature for the changing labor relations in post-Fordist societies, primarily in the global North (Standing, 2011). Nevertheless, the concept's utility has been expanded to describe other regimes of structural volatility and uncertainty such as that of migration and displacement. In line with Millar (2017), we take a relational approach to precarity that grounds it in a system of labor relations, while at the same time actively seeks to interrogate how labor precarity is articulated with other precarious life conditions. This approach allows us to fruitfully weave complimentary, but hitherto, dispersed insights from several fields. We begin by examining the expanding literature on precarization in contemporary journalism, and how it is mediated and experienced in the newsroom. We also bring insights from literature on exilic and diasporic media organizations, and on precarity from a migration lens. This approach helps us to situate the analysis within a dynamic and expanding understanding of the journalistic field (Deuze and Witschge, 2020) while also taking into account the specific configurations under which 'precarious labor and precarious life' (Millar, 2017: 5) intersect in a particular newsroom.

Precarity, journalism and the newsroom

The attention to precarity in media studies has picked up significantly in recent years, especially after the 2008 financial crisis and its disruption of the stable career trajectories in the news industry. Precarization and casualization of journalistic work is

part of a multi-faceted crisis facing contemporary journalism (Waisbord, 2019). This is represented by the decrease of stable employment in the news industry and the increase in dependence on freelance journalists and the impact this has on journalists' autonomy (Gollmitzer, 2014). Increased precarization of journalistic work leads to concrete changes in the practice and a degradation in journalists' ability to perform their watchdog role (Hayes and Silke, 2019), and contributes to blurring boundaries between journalism, public relations and marketing (Mathisen, 2019; Sherwood and O'Donnell, 2018). The sense of precarization extends beyond freelance journalists as Morini et al. (2014) show how market imperatives are leading to a loss of autonomy and increased instability among employed journalists and media workers.

Research on the emotional labor of journalists allows us to approach the issue of precarity from a more expansive lens (Kotišová, 2019; Richards and Rees, 2011). Emotional effects of professional pressures and how these emotions are managed are important, if understudied, avenues for understanding professional identity formation among journalists (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019: 674). A life history approach that 'pays attention to the lived experiences of professionals' can be helpful in re-centering these issues according to Wahl-Jorgensen (2019: 676). The emotional labor of journalists involves managing a variety of pressures, both professional and personal (Kotišová, 2019). This labor, and its study, are complicated by the dominant understandings of the journalistic profession which are based on 'the suppression of personal, emotional identity for the sake of an ideologically driven, detached professional self' (Hopper and Huxford, 2015 cited in Kotišová, 2019: 6; see also, Al-Ghazzi, 2021). The relationship between emotional lifeworlds of journalists and precarity as a function of changing labor regimes is most clear in studies on trauma and psychological and physical wellbeing of journalists (Creech, 2018).

The newsroom is an interesting site to observe in this context. Classical newsroom ethnographies emphasized its role in shaping and structuring stable routines and rituals which underline journalistic professional identity. These accounts largely approached newsrooms as self-containing and stable sites (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2009). However, disruptive changes in the industry, including rapid technological change and increased precarization, have led to more expansive and open approaches to the newsroom. Newsroom ethnographies emphasize the dynamics of conflict and negotiation in the newsroom as constitutive of the newsmaking process (Aşık, 2019; Ryfe, 2009). They reimagine the newsroom as a key node in the contemporary networked journalistic practice that flows in and out of the physical (Anderson, 2011) and the virtual realm (Bunce et al., 2018; Wall, 2015) while embedding it within its broader urban environment (Usher, 2015). The (expansive) newsroom is an important locus in the changing regimes of labor relations in journalism and where different actors involved in the news industry make sense of these changes (Bunce, 2019; Proffitt, 2019; Zaman, 2013). But it is also an 'inhabited' space (Deuze and Witschge, 2018: 170) made and remade through the social interactions of the different actors and technologies embedded within certain political-social contexts. Thus, it is a space where other precarious parts from the lifeworlds of its protagonists are mediated, experienced and negotiated.

Most of these accounts of the increasing precarization of the journalistic profession draw on the experiences and expectations embedded in the global North, and in elite newsrooms (see Matthews and Onyemaobi (2020) for a counterexample). Indeed, the discourse of the crisis in journalism generally, according to Zelizer, 'continue[s] to center on challenges firmly rooted in the global North' (2015: 902). Challenging the centrality of the global North allows us to shift our vision to the diverse

and varied settings in which much of contemporary journalism is produced today,

including diasporic and exilic media organizations. Hitherto, these have often been

approached as particular cases, embedded in localized political disruptions and

seemingly disconnected from broader developments and trends within contemporary

journalism. However, we would like to argue the opposite. Firstly, we believe our

understanding of the dilemmas facing these organizations will remain limited if we

only, or primarily, focus on their local particularities. Secondly, and consequently, we

suggest these need to be clearly identified as examples of emerging media responding to

the same disruptions and challenges facing the news industry at large including

increased precarization (e.g., Deuze and Witschge, 2020; Konow-Lund, 2020). Finally,

we believe an investigation of how this precarity is experienced and negotiated within

newsrooms outside the global North, often in combination with other local layers of

precarity, can contribute to a more complete understanding of how the journalistic field

is developing globally.

Migration and multifaceted precarity

Making sense of precarity in the context of exilic journalism does not only require us to

disarticulate the newsroom from the research tradition centering on the global North and

elite journalists. It also begs for a better understanding of the precarity experienced as a

result of (forced) displacement. The conceptual lens of precarity features prominently in

studies on migration, displacement and citizenship. Although still primarily understood

in terms of labor conditions and relations (e.g., Anderson, 2010; Chan et al., 2019), the

precarity of migrants is also being articulated with regard to multiple spheres including

the legal (Marsden, 2019), the political (Eberle and Holliday, 2011), the cultural

(Nowicka, 2018) and the spatial (Chacko and Price, 2020; Trimikliniotis et al., 2016).

Through the growing body of literature on precarity and migration runs a clear notion of struggle and liminality affecting the day-to-day lives of migrants. Such studies of layered precarity and migration also highlight the dialectic or paradoxical nature of precarity, allowing instability to go hand in hand with agency (e.g., Gilmartin et al., 2020; Paret and Gleeson, 2016).

Citizenship status is one of the most pervasive drivers of precarity for migrants, as the inability or difficulty to access it can lead to all kinds of forms of waiting, 'for documents, waiting for resettlement, or waiting for authorization to be able to access the tools of a secure life [...]', as Noora Lori argues (2017: 762–763). The lack of certainty about the outcome of that waiting increases migrants' precarity. Although citizenship status alone is a reductive way to categorize types of migration experiences, thinking through precarious citizenship does draw our attention to the variety of regimes of mobility and immobility (see Glick Schiller and Salazar, 2013) and the different forms and experiences of precarity these could entail. Rejecting a universal and essentialist account of 'precarious migrants', or even more specifically 'precarious forced migrants' (see Hodge, 2019, for a discussion), the framework in this study therefore approaches precarity and migration through both its multiplicity (it can come in many guises) and its subjectivity (it can be experienced and tackled in differentiated ways).

One helpful way to break down the essentialist narrative of precarity and migration is to zoom in on a particular group such as exiled journalists, i.e., journalists who conduct their professional activities abroad due to repression and conflict in their homeland. Although sometimes simply incorporated under the umbrella term of diasporic or migrant media makers, exiled journalists are distinct not only because of the repression they face but also their inclination towards more activist forms of journalism that transcend geographic borders (Balasundaram, 2019; Burrows, 2000;

Skjerdal, 2010). Like many other exiled media and creative professionals, such as filmmakers or writers, the professional and personal lives of exiled journalists are strongly interlinked (e.g., Frère, 2017; Naficy, 2001). However, they seem to face a particular type of precarity in the sense that their personal and political vulnerabilities (as regime opponents or as practitioners of a dangerous profession) go hand in hand with existential doubts about their professional role. Some authors question the reliability of exiled journalists who cannot 'be objective' (Skjerdal, 2010), while others show that they struggle to define their professional role at the intersection of journalism and political engagement (Sarıaslan, 2020; Shumow, 2014). This study takes distance from such attempts to fix a normative category of the 'journalist', and instead takes an open approach to investigating how the exiled journalists of *Enab Baladi* ply their trade while navigating precarious circumstances in multiple guises.

Context and methodology

The media outlet investigated in this study, and its team of journalists and administrators, are part of the estimated 3.6 million Syrians who sought temporary protection in Turkey due to the Syrian conflict (ongoing since 2011). Istanbul hosts at least half a million Syrian refugees who are drawn to it for employment opportunities and through prior social and kin networks. The largest densities of this population have settled in the Zeytinburnu, Arnavutköy, Başakşehir, and Fatih districts on the European side, and Sultanbeyli on the Asian side (Danış and Nazlı, 2019). Fatih, a cosmopolitan neighborhood with several migrant communities alongside Syrians, is where the *Enab Baladi* offices are located.

The overwhelming majority of Syrians in Turkey have found work as cheap labor in the informal economy—particularly in the textile, construction and catering

sectors (Atasü-Topcuoğlu, 2019b). As of March 2019, only 31,000 Syrians have been able to acquire legal work permits in Turkey—1,5% of the Syrians of working age in the country (Demirgüç-Kunt et al., 2019). The Syrian presence in the country has also become increasingly entangled in the internal politics of Turkey, and an issue of political contestation and polarization (Atasü-Topcuoğlu, 2019a). This is translated into a hardening of Turkish public sentiments (Saraçoğlu and Bélanger, 2019), and several government campaigns against informal Syrian labor and Syrians without a right of residence in Istanbul. Nevertheless, the lifeworlds of Syrian refugees in Turkey should not be reduced to their experience of precarity. Indeed, as Kaya (2017) points out, many Syrians in Istanbul still manage to find spaces of safety and stability and enjoy a sense of cultural and religious affinity with the city.

It is against this backdrop that the fieldwork for this paper was undertaken at *Enab Baladi*'s newsroom. Our ethnographic approach builds on Kraidy and Murphy's understanding of translocal ethnography's capacity 'to comprehend the articulation of the global with the local' rather than treating the 'local in isolation of large-scale structures and processes' (2003: 304). The newsroom of *Enab Baladi* is an exemplary site to conduct this type of research. *Enab Baladi*[1] was established by a number of activists as an anti-regime pamphlet in the small town of Darayya in the suburbs of Damascus in late 2011. As the Syrian conflict escalated, most of the founders had to leave the city and eventually ended up as refugees in Turkey. Funding from international media development organizations and an open-door policy in Turkey allowed *Enab Baladi*, along with a significant number of new Syrian media initiatives established at the time, to develop rapidly between 2013-2016. The securitization of the Syrian presence in Turkey (2016 onwards) and dwindling funding for media development (2018 onwards) ended that period of flourishing for emerging Syrian

media (Badran, 2020). *Enab Baladi* was one of a handful of organizations that were able to consolidate their operations and later find space for expansion. Their growth has put them in direct competition, for audiences as well as journalists, with state and privately funded media focused on Syria such as Orient News (bankrolled by UAE-based Syrian businessman Ghassan Abboud) and Syria TV (part of the media conglomerate Fadaat Media Group, funded by Qatar). In 2019, at the time of our fieldwork, *Enab Baladi* was organized as a non-profit media organization[2] with high-trafficked Arabic and English websites (approximately 2 million monthly visits), weekly print edition, online video production, an in-house journalism training program and a full-time staff of around 45 people. The content production is supervised by two co-managing editors and the editor-in-chief, while an executive manager oversees the organization's administrative and financial affairs.

Most of the output of *Enab Baladi* is concentrated on the frequently updated Arabic website, and the weekly print issue. Its coverage focuses primarily on developments inside Syria, and to a lesser extent on Syrian refugee communities in Turkey and elsewhere. Its content includes in-depth coverage of political, military and economic developments inside Syria, human-interest stories and investigations, as well as entertainment and culture sections. Its multimedia offering includes a fast-expanding YouTube channel that is used to experiment with different storytelling and reporting formats and shows, and a weekly podcast[3]. Its editorial line is first and foremost informed by its genesis in the civil movement of 2011, and its staunch opposition to the Syrian regime and its Russian and Iranian allies. It has also been critical of radical Islamist movements in the Syrian opposition and of the Kurdish-led Autonomous Administration in Northeastern Syria. Notably, and largely due to its funding model, it has been able to maintain an ambivalent and non-partisan posture towards other

regional actors involved in Syria (in particular, the Turkey-Qatar and the Saudi-UAE axes) in contrast to the pronounced partisanship in other Syrian oppositional media outlets that are financially-dependent on these regional actors. Finally, the organization envisages for itself a model of public service journalism, by highlighting and focusing on issues such as human rights abuses, freedom of expression, and property rights for refugees.

Fieldwork

The data for this paper was collected during a 3-months-long period of participant observations at the newsroom of *Enab Baladi* between October and December 2019. During this period, I joined the organization's English language team and assisted in editing and supervising the translation of Arabic content for the English-language website. I also took part in the morning editorial meetings, and the weekly meeting to plan the print issue, as well as a number of training sessions that journalists attended at the time, and regular townhall-style meetings at the newsroom. I was also granted access to the internal Facebook group chat where a mixture of personal and professional stream of messages was shared.

I had developed a relationship with the editor-in-chief of *Enab Baladi* through previous studies I had conducted on emerging Syrian media going back to 2014 (see, Badran and Smets, 2018; Badran, 2020). This relationship of mutual trust formed the basis for negotiating broad access to the newsroom, on condition of strict pseudonymization of journalists' personal information, non-disclosure of any details about correspondents inside Syria (for security reasons), as well as ad-hoc requests of non-disclosure when more details were discussed or provided on certain contextual

topics (e.g., background of *Enab Baladi*'s relationship with a number of its funders; technicalities of printing and distribution in Turkey and Syria).

The introduction into the newsroom routine was relatively smooth, as my translation work with the English team was largely separate from the main editorial workflow of the Arabic website and print edition. Building confidence with the journalists and editors was a more delicate and gradual process. This required openness on my part (about my political stances, religious beliefs, family background, and personal biography) as well as genuine respect for and curiosity about their lifeworlds. I also endeavored, whenever possible, to assist in different areas beyond my specific tasks in the English team—e.g., helping draft emails in English, translating external sources into Arabic, and facilitating contact with international journalists and experts. This was generously reciprocated by my interlocutors through their willingness to take time—despite their workload—to answer my questions and explain their editorial processes, but also by opening up about their lifeworlds and personal biographies throughout my time at the newsroom and in the interviews.

At the end of my fieldwork, I conducted 18 semi-structured in-depth interviews (7 F, 11 M) with staff journalists, media editors and management of the organization. The interview protocol focused on three particular areas. Firstly, the biographical journey of the journalists on both a professional and personal level. This part also inquired about their life in Turkey and how it relates to their work as journalists. Secondly, perception of the interviewees of the organization itself, the pressures it has to deal with, and its future development. The third part inquired about the working environment at *Enab Baladi*, including potential tensions and conflicts in the newsroom and with the management, their perceptions of the work routines and pressures of the job, the reasons for journalists to leave or stay at the organization and their relationships

with colleagues. The interviews were conducted in Arabic and recorded and transcribed by the author. The names of the participants, and any recognizable biographical information, were pseudonymized for privacy and security concerns.

Precarious Newsroom

In order to understand the multiple, and interlinked, layers of precarity that exiled Syrian journalists in Istanbul have to navigate we propose to use the concept of the precarious newsroom. The precarious newsroom is a paradoxical site in many ways. It is a place where precarious labor and precarious life are organized, enacted and experienced, not as separate spheres but rather in constant interaction and friction with one another. But it is also a place where agentic movement and action are concentrated, both in coping with the various layers of precarity, but also simply as a space where newswork takes place. In this respect, the precarious newsroom is much more than an assemblage of individuals occupying a liminal zone temporally and spatially. Based on an inductive analysis of our interviews and observations we argue that there are three main dimensions where precarity is experienced in the precarious newsroom: people, organization and place. We outline these dimensions in more details in the sections below.

People

Ismail was a first-year student at the Media Faculty in Damascus University when the Syrian uprising broke out in 2011. He dropped out of university soon after due to security concerns and moved with waves of displacement from the countryside of Damascus, to the mountainous regions across the border in Lebanon, to Idlib in the north, before making it to Gaziantep in Turkey in 2017. There, he worked as a

construction worker while attending journalistic training workshops to enable him to

break back into the field of journalism. When we met at *Enab Baladi*, he had just been

hired on a 3-month trial period, to be followed by a yearly contract if all went well.

The broad outlines of this story, if not the exact same trajectory, are shared by

many of the journalists at *Enab Baladi*, much like the organization itself. These

biographical reflections challenge us to understand the way these actors make sense of

their precarity through the lens of this experience and its immediate aftermath: a

significant reduction in their cultural and economic capital compounded by a need to

adapt to a new condition of precarious citizenship in their new exile.

At its base, the sense of economic insecurity for the journalists is linked to the

relatively uncompetitive salary scales at *Enab Baladi*, compounded by a demanding and

strict working environment. Several journalists immediately pinpointed that as the main

impetus for people to leave the news outlet:

> The first reason is financial. Salaries are not competitive. We are at 50-60% of the
>
> salaries outside, and sometimes even lower (ENB14, 2019, personal
>
> communication)
>
> The material side is a reason. People are responsible for their household here,
>
> maybe also for a family back in Syria. (ENB1, 2019, personal communication)

This sentiment was largely reflected throughout the interviews. The low remuneration,

especially in comparison to what journalists could expect in competing, Gulf-funded,

Syrian media in Istanbul, is seen against the backdrop of general insecurity for Syrians

as one editor acknowledged:

> We are in a very extraordinary condition: in terms of stability, in terms of savings,
>
> none of us have anything as Syrians. We all left the country with nothing but our

lives. People have the right to think, and to try to find better-paid jobs. (ENB15,

2019, personal communication)

These pressures seep into different layers of newswork on a daily basis. For example, this can be seen in the competition between journalists over 'hard news' (in particular, political and military developments). Hard news are regarded as more prestigious (professionally), but also, just as importantly, more financially rewarding (in terms of cash bonuses linked, at the time, to article-counts and article-views) as they tend to attract more audiences, are more abundant, and require less time investment than 'soft news'. This particular dynamic also has a gendered dimension to it. Female journalists (with some exceptions) find it difficult to compete with male colleagues in covering 'hard news'. This is partly due to the difficulty they have in gaining access to the necessary sources—in what is still a deeply patriarchal society—who sometimes refuse to speak to a female journalist (for a more detailed discussion see, Matar & Helmi 2020). But it is also due to the fact that male journalists tend to assert their 'claim' to these topics in gendered terms. As one female journalist vented to me: 'Hard political news is dominated by men. Why? Maybe I have interest in that. No, they feel that you should cover other areas.'

The link between these different areas of tension and the sense of economic precarity is palpable. Oftentimes, tensions that are ostensibly over editorial decisions (e.g., article drafts returned with editorial comments, requests for additional sources or context, suggestions for a different angle, or article assignments) were folded into, and expressed to me in terms of, frustrations over high workload and low remuneration.

On the other hand, when reflecting on this precarious labor condition, the journalists will also take other factors into consideration. If the remuneration is seen as

uncompetitive by market standards, and in relation to the workload demanded of them, other aspects of the newsroom seem to be more palatable than elsewhere. In particular, *Enab Baladi* was contrasted favorably with other options in terms of their attention to professional norms, opportunities for skill development and the pleasant work environment:

> I stay here for two reasons: my passion for this organization. I really hate the media sphere out there that's full of hypocrisy and backstabbing. Here, the atmosphere is really wonderful; we are like a family. The second reason is the reputation we have. We go after the quality content. (ENB14, 2019, personal communication)

Indeed, others drew a direct line to these aspects in their calculations. Whether in contrast to the higher salaries on offer elsewhere, or to the high workload they have to contend with:

> The pressure of work here at EB is more than other places. But at the same time, you produce good pieces […] If I get an offer from Orient or Syria TV, I wouldn't leave. Because here I will learn a lot more. (ENB5, 2019, personal communication)

The journalists' sense of professional and creative autonomy also plays an important role in their decision to stay at *Enab Baladi*:

> What motivates you to work here are two things (certainly not the money): Firstly, we are doing what we want. I am always asked why I don't go somewhere else with double the pay—Syria TV or Orient. But there I would be restricted. I wouldn't have the autonomy to do what I want. I wouldn't be able to experiment. (ENB12, 2019, personal communication)

As well as the thick social relationships journalists develop at the newsroom:

> I feel like I'm with my siblings. When I go home, I want to come back here, rather
>
> than the other way around. All of them are very friendly. And it's easy to become
>
> part of the group. (ENB9, 2019, personal communication)

Economic and professional factors are also entangled with the journalists' precarious

lives as exiles and refugees in Turkey; that is, the legal dimension of their precarity. The

inability to acquire work permits has direct implications on their sense of labor precarity

at the workplace. In practice, this means that the contracts the journalists sign with the

organization offer them very little formal legal protection in cases of serious disputes.

Moreover, it also means that the journalists—except the few who hold Turkish

citizenship—are not enrolled in Turkey's social security system, and cannot access such

standard benefits including unemployment, pension or disability.

Precarious citizenship, more broadly, is a systemic condition for Syrians in

Turkey. However, its intensity and implications vary according to the different

residence permits Syrians have come to acquire over the years. Someone with a *Kimlik*

[temporary protection identity card] from another province would be in constant fear of

having their papers checked by police in Istanbul:

> If I am caught [by police] they would return me to that province [...] and I wouldn't
>
> be able to come back. If I return and they catch me again, they would deport me to
>
> Syria. So, I would lose my job, in short. And the same for my [partner] and child.
>
> (ENB5, 2019, personal communication)

The thick social fabric of the newsroom, which is often described in familial terms,

helps mitigate some of the psychological pressures of precarious citizenship and labor

in different and subtle ways. For example, by allowing working parents to bring their

children to the office after school hours, where everyone in the newsroom becomes

partly an uncle or an aunt (collectively helping to replace the traditional family institutions that would have been expected to take on that role). Or through the few fluent Turkish speakers who are always on hand to translate or even accompany colleagues as they try to navigate state bureaucracy, or quotidian services, in Turkish. Similarly, those who have acquired Turkish citizenship who act as shields and first persons of contact for colleagues in more precarious positions.

Organization

Enab Baladi, as an organization, is itself engaged in managing the different layers of precarity of its own as an exilic media organization in addition to those of the people who work in it. The choices made by the management of the organization sometimes contribute to exacerbating these precarities or alleviating them. The uncompetitive salary structure thus is presented by the management as a strategic choice privileging the survival of the organization as a non-profit entity financed through (precarious) grant funding:

> Our salary structure can be supported through small grants. But if we were to raise the salaries 150-200%, that would make our chances of finding funders to cover them far less likely. We also think that our salaries are sufficient for a dignified life in Turkey [...] In our financial strategy, we want to keep salaries within these bounds so that we can keep paying them in case some of the funding streams stop. (ENB10, 2019, personal communication)

Diversifying the organization's grant funding and eschewing large grants that are difficult to renew and sustain gives *Enab Baladi* a measure of robustness in navigating the fluctuations of media assistance flows. The organization's ability to manage

financial contingencies, however, comes at the expense of its employees' ability to manage their own. Furthermore, this choice presents its own set of complications for the organization's continuity as it has to deal with the constant attrition of losing experienced staff journalists to higher-paying positions in competing media outlets. Indeed, during the period of three months of fieldwork at the newsroom, two senior journalists left *Enab Baladi* for a better-paid position elsewhere. Moreover, the lack of opportunities for internal upward mobility is also cited by journalists as a reason to leave. In the example above, it was suggested to me that part of the reason the journalists left was also because they were passed over for a promotion to a newly-created position of co-managing editor in favor of a female colleague.

One of the organization's strategies to stem the outflow of experienced journalists was to offer other forms of incentives. For example, by leveraging its international network with media development funders to provide a constant stream of high-level workshops, collaborations, and skills development opportunities for staff journalists:

> Offering trainings is methodical. Beyond its [positive] impact on the product, it also functions as a great advertisement for EB's reputation: that we always develop our team (ENB11, 2019, personal communication)

Another way the organization has attempted to deal with this high rate of turnover was to invest in an inhouse training program for young journalists. The program trains 8–9 aspiring journalists every two months and often recruits new journalists to the newsroom from these cohorts[4]. The broader strategy is to turn the newsroom into a 'self-repairing' place where there are constantly new journalists being trained on the job (ENB15, 2019, personal communication).

The impetus to create fallback positions for different contingencies also extends to the legally precarious position of the organization. *Enab Baladi*, for example, is registered as a non-profit in three different jurisdictions (Turkey, Germany and the United States). This allows them to access funding from multiple sources more easily. More importantly, it allows them to spread the risk should their position in Turkey become less tenable. Within Turkey, they have also resorted to registering a commercial entity in an attempt (ultimately unsuccessful) to acquire work permits for the staff. Registering as a commercial entity is itself an exercise in contingency planning, as the two entities would fall under two different policy regimes and 'the probability that both would be closed is small' (ENB10, 2019, personal communication). Nevertheless, these multiple layers of precarity at the organizational level and the redundancies put in place to alleviate their risk come at the cost of administrative complexity and ever higher overhead costs.

The organization has found ingenious ways to help its staff mitigate some of the worst aspects of their precarious legal situation. One such tactic that *Enab Baladi* has employed to enhance the legal status of its staff was to send them to perform the *Hajj* (Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca). Management would choose those with the most precarious residency status to support in their application to perform Hajj, after which they would have the right to request a Tourist residency upon their return to Turkey. Another way is to register all the staff as members of the association, so that they would not be considered as illegal laborers in case there was a police inspection at the office. Ultimately, however, the organization has limited power in this area, as one editor reflected:

> When the security campaign against Syrians illegally in Istanbul started, in July
> 2019, we had several people without residencies in Istanbul. All of them could no

longer sleep, wake up or work. At any moment, they could be arrested and

deported [...] The only thing we could do is to say: when it comes to the legal

situation, take as many days off as you need to regularize it. There's nothing we can

do on our side, but we won't stand in your way if you need the time. (ENB15,

2019, personal communication)

Place

The spatial dimension of the newsroom sheds another light on how these multi-layered

precarities are mediated and experienced. The newsroom of *Enab Baladi* is to be found

in a nondescript building in the Fatih district of Istanbul. The offices of the organization

are organized on two separate floors of the building. One of the floors is registered

under the non-profit entity, while the other under the commercial entity. The work

between the two floors is often seamless, but they offer an important fallback position

for the organization in a relatively unstable legal and political environment:

The last [security] campaign for example targeted companies. When they came to

our office—this floor was part of the company. They inspected this floor. When

they went downstairs, they saw it's an association and they didn't come in as it was

not part of their competence. (ENB10, 2019, personal communication)

The front of the building where the offices are located is occupied by a pharmacy,

whose Turkish owner is also the owner of the building and *Enab Baladi*'s landlord. The

editor-in-chief once explained how this arrangement gives the organization a sense of

relative safety. The pharmacy in the façade, and its Turkish owner, function as a layer

of protection for the rest of the building from intransigent municipal inspectors. The

organization's desire to be practically invisible in the public space mirrors a similar

sentiment evoked by some of the journalists:

> In the street: I am very careful, I put my headphones on and walk. Even if someone
>
> insults me, I don't respond. First of all, It's not my country. Secondly, I will be the
>
> one to pay the price in all cases. So why respond? (ENB8, 2019, personal
>
> communication)

This ambivalence to publicness is telling of the changing fortunes and paradoxical
feelings that Syrians have about their stay in Istanbul. It also seeps into the content of
the media, as they consciously avoid reporting on internal Turkish politics.

But the politics of the place always find ways to invade even such a
meticulously orchestrated space. The two following incidents can help illustrate how
fragile the space of the newsroom can be. In early November 2019, during a townhall
meeting at the newsroom, a stranger appeared behind the glass separating the newsroom
from the office of the editor-in-chief and started peering into the newsroom. He was an
employee from the water company who came to collect documents from one of the
journalists—and instead of waiting at the front door, as asked, decided to venture inside
to see what was taking so long. The conversations stopped abruptly, and everyone
looked nervously as their colleague escorted the man outside and returned to apologize
profusely to a visibly agitated editor-in-chief. 'Did you bring him here?' the editor
chided him, 'don't ever do that again.'

The intrusion does not even have to be physically within the walls of the
newsroom. It could also be the noise coming from the opposite street side where youth
from the ultranationalist far-right movement, the Grey Wolves, gathered to welcome a
visiting politician from the nationalist MHP party in an intimidating public spectacle of

loud coordinated chanting. The journalists, in that instance, crowded up the street-facing windows to watch the spectacle with slight bemusement and some visible trepidation.

The two incidents, while benign on the surface, illustrate clearly the deep unease of the newsroom in relating to its immediate geographical and political space. In the absence of clear legal frameworks, most Syrian activities in Turkey are possible only because the Turkish government practices a policy of '"deliberate ignorance" vis-a-vis these informal, if not unlawful, practices' (Danış and Nazlı, 2019: 151). However, this 'policy', which is more akin to a protracted legal limbo, does not provide any systemic protection from ad-hoc enforcement or harassment, nor does it preclude the Turkish government from suddenly halting its deliberate ignorance. The heightened attention of the journalists and the organization to any friction with the place is thus rooted in that generalized sense of threat and unpredictability for Syrians in Turkey. The alarm system, electronic locks and surveillance cameras in every room of the office and on the stairs—installed to make sure the organization would know of any attempts to break into the office—hint at this sense of threats; be they real or imagined.

Discussion and conclusions

Our analysis points to the complex anatomy of the precarious newsroom as a paradoxical place, an amalgamation of precarity and agency. At a fundamental level, the very existence of the newsroom itself—as a site of voice (Couldry, 2010)—is as an expression of the agentic political subjectivity of its exiled journalists. Precarity, as experienced in the newsroom's labor configurations and as a life condition, does not preclude this agency but co-exists with it. Precarious labor and its articulation with precarious life can be seen across the different dimensions of the precarious newsroom, but also through the efforts to cope with, mitigate and resist these conditions of

precarity. These responses lack a unified internal logic or coherence precisely because precarity is unequally distributed and experienced.

Precarious labor and life cannot possibly be disentangled from one another—although the relationship between the two is far from linear. The professional lives of the journalists and the organization are often shaped by efforts to mitigate other layers of precarity (e.g., through ambivalent publicness, legal maneuvering, or by creating different fallback positions and spreading the risk). These carefully orchestrated acts, some of which are more successful than others, provide a minimal sense of stability that allows, and shapes, newswork in the precarious newsroom.

Professional motivations also play an important role in shaping these responses. For the organization, reliance on media development assistance is, at least partly, motivated by ethical concerns about their editorial independence if they were to seek other financing mechanisms (see for example Cook, 2016b). In managing this business model, they make strategic choices on the best route to sustainability, while avoiding being locked into dependent relationships with aid providers—by diversifying funding streams and keeping them relatively small (for similar examples see Cook, 2016a).

For the journalists, they have to balance their sense of economic precarity with their professional motivations and expectations when making their decisions on whether to stay or leave the media outlet. This in particular allows us to question the automatic link between labor precarity and the loss of professional and creative autonomy, at least when we expand our vision of journalism to emerging media organizations. In these settings, some journalists seem to accept some level of precarity as a price to pay for professional and creative autonomy. Moreover, we believe that the dynamics observed in the *Enab Baladi* newsroom should not only be seen from the prism of a particularistic response to local conditions and crises of mediation. Rather, as one among many such

emerging initiatives around the world that are grappling with the key question of how to

make journalism work, to paraphrase Deuze and Witschge (2020). Finally, by centering

the dynamic articulation between labor and life precarities for journalists, we hope to

provoke more reflections on the dominance of the normative construction of journalists

as detached professionals.

Endnotes

1 *Enab Baladi* is Arabic for 'local grapes,' a reference to Darayya's most celebrated

   crop. The town itself holds symbolic significance as a site of an important non-

   violent resistance movement, of which *Enab Baladi* founders were part, during the

   early stages of the Syrian uprising (see Donati, 2013).

2 *Enab Baladi*'s funding comes almost exclusively through grants from international

   media development organizations including: Free Press Unlimited, International

   Media Support, European Endowment for Democracy, National Endowment for

   Democracy.

3 Arabic website: https://www.enabbaladi.net, Print edition:

   https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/category/pdf, English website:

   https://english.enabbaladi.net, YouTube channel:

   https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCfqSMELWF9cQPbiB74gYuWA

4 The program targets female journalists in particular (between 6-8 of each intake), in

   an effort to redress gender imbalances in the newsroom. See:

   https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2019/08/mares-three-new-journalism-

   training-scholarships/

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