

BEYOND THE BOOK

HELPING AUTHORS GO BEYOND THE BOOK

DORESA BANNING

OPERATOR: – the call over to Mr. Kenneally. Sir, you may begin.

KENNEALLY: Well, thank you very much and good afternoon, good morning to all the participants on another Beyond the Book program. My name is Chris Kenneally. I'm the director of author and creator relations for the not-for-profit Copyright Clearance Center. And we're delighted to have you all on here, as well as our special guest, Doresa Banning, who's going to be telling us about the results of a survey that she has conducted of freelance journalists across the United States.

Just because I think it's important to understand how the program will work, let me briefly outline the way we're going to proceed here. We're going to chat some, just alone with Doresa Banning, talk about how the survey was conducted and some of the results that came through when she pored through more than 500 respondents.

And then we will open it up to questions from all of you, so we do hope you will join us. And really, what we want to encourage you to do is to not only ask about the state of freelancing itself, but to tell us a bit about how you see that, what your experiences have been as a freelancer, whether you've been at it for six months or six years.

But first, let me welcome Doresa Banning to the program. Doresa, good afternoon.

BANNING: Hi. Thanks so much for having me.

KENNEALLY: Well we're very happy to have you here. I think the kind of information that you've managed to gather together is something that is pretty hard to come by. It's almost as hard to come by as one of those high-paid assignments that we're all after.

Let me just tell the audience briefly about what you do and what you've done in the past. This survey was conducted while you were researching your master's degree thesis in journalism at the University of Nevada at Reno. Doresa has reported for a number of publications – continues to do so – for the *Reno Gazette-Journal*, the *Nevada Business Journal*, *Frontier*, *Tahoe Quarterly* and *American Writer*, and she is currently the managing editor of *Big Sky Journal*, a literary and arts magazine based in Bozeman, Montana, and that must be something you do by telephone, as well, pretty much.

BANNING: It is, it is. Telephone, mostly, e-mail. Occasionally, I take trips there, but not too often.

KENNEALLY: How far away is Bozeman from Reno?

BANNING: Driving distance, it's about a 14-hour drive.

KENNEALLY: Each way?

BANNING: Yes.

KENNEALLY: Well, out here on the East Coast, that sounds like just about the end of the earth. We think 20 minutes is a pretty long drive.

I should tell people, too, a bit about myself. My name is Chris Kenneally, and apart from being director of author relations for Copyright Clearance Center, I have sat in everyone's shoes. I was a freelance journalist for more than 15 years. As I like to say, I ate what I killed in all that period, and it was never easy. It always seemed to get harder, in fact, rather than easier. I wrote for the *Boston Globe*, and the *New York Times*, and just about everybody else in between. Started writing for the low two figures and wound up getting some pretty important assignments.

So I hope I get an opportunity to share with you my own personal perspective, but first, as I say, we want to talk with Doresa about her survey. And I suppose the place to start, Doresa, is for you to tell us how many people did respond, how you found them, and just a bit about how you spread the word on the survey in the first place.

BANNING: OK. Well, we went after people who were members of three different organizations, ASJA, which is the American Society of Journalists and Authors; NWU, the National Writers Union; and EFA, the Editorial Freelancers Association. And I contacted the heads of those organizations, and they sent out recruitment e-mails to their members to get them to participate in the Web survey. I also posted to two electronic journalism mailing lists. Those are the CARRL, Computer-Assisted Reporting and Research and JourNet, which is more of a journalism educator's mailing list.

And we had 605 responses, but 473 only were analyzed. We were looking specifically for people who primarily wrote nonfiction, who worked in the United States, and considered freelancing their primary job. So, if they didn't fit into those three categories, we did not use their survey responses.

KENNEALLY: You had to knock them out for those reasons. But still, that puts it at nearly 500 qualified respondents, and those organizations that you cited are pretty much the leading trade associations for freelance journalists in this country.

BANNING: Right.

KENNEALLY: And it was an online survey, so pretty easy for people to get to and to answer questions. And apart from “choose one,” you had some open-ended questions, too, where people could offer their opinions and kind of comment on the survey itself.

BANNING: That’s correct. And I feel that the response was really, really good, and people were very interested in participating, so that was definitely a positive.

KENNEALLY: Well, you know, I think that we found that too, because for the people who signed in to the conference, we also gave them the opportunity to see the very same questions you asked and to offer their opinions as well. And we got a great response, but the most important thing, and I think this really stands as a testimony to how – if I can put it this way – reliable your survey is, is that our findings from the pool of people who are sitting in on this call right now almost match one to one with what you found. So I think we can say that what we’re about to talk about is pretty reliable information.

So why don’t we get down to it then? Give us an idea of a portrait of freelance writers today. Who are they? Where are they? What do they make?

BANNING: OK. Well, the average or typical freelancer is about 49 years old, white, female, married with at least one child, highly educated with at least a bachelor’s degree, and many of them had advanced degrees. They live primarily in the mid-Atlantic states, which would be New York, New Jersey, Washington, Delaware, that area. Most of them live in major metropolitan areas that have a population of one million or more. The average income is between \$40,000 and \$50,000 a year, gross income. And –

KENNEALLY: Well, I think those are the major points. Let’s just break that down a little bit. I mean, first of all, did it surprise you that the respondents were so predominantly female?

BANNING: It did not, in a way, because there’s that myth out there that all freelance writers are stay-at-home moms working part time, which turned out to not really be the case. But – so it did not surprise me that most of them were female, but I did expect more males than we had. There was only about 25% male, and I didn’t think there would be as many females as there were.

KENNEALLY: Now, that corresponds rather starkly with what it looks like inside typical newsrooms, right?

BANNING: Yes.

KENNEALLY: You reported on some surveys of newsroom staff, and how does it compare and contrast with that?

BANNING: Very similar. Well, actually, not very similar. Actually, the opposite.

KENNEALLY: That's what I meant. Right.

BANNING: Yes. Primarily men working in newsrooms.

KENNEALLY: So that seems rather interesting to me. What was it that people said they liked particularly about freelancing? They had some pretty strong thoughts on that, why they were freelancing in the first place.

BANNING: They did, and they were actually similar responses to what people said interesting the survey before the call. Number one was definitely being their own bosses. Setting their own hours was the second, and the top third was working at home. Definitely items related to autonomy and flexibility.

KENNEALLY: Now, you mentioned that this sort of typical freelancer is married with at least one child, and I suppose children is an issue. Or not?

BANNING: It seems to not really be an issue, because, interestingly, those three items that I just mentioned were not most important for freelancers with responsibility for children. They were more important to freelancers who had minimal or no responsibility for children. And we found that the average age of the children the respondents had was in the 20s.

KENNEALLY: Oh, well, in that case then. So they're not exactly having to run around when someone's throwing a tantrum. Or at least, we hope not, right?

BANNING: That's correct.

KENNEALLY: But that does point out something else, which is that the average age was – how shall I put this delicately – not young.

BANNING: Right, right.

KENNEALLY: I mean, these are mature people, mature writers, if I can say, mature professionals.

BANNING: That's correct. The average was 49, and again, we had respondents as young as 22 and as old as 86. So, a good span.

KENNEALLY: Now, you did some comparison with a study back in 1995 that the National Writers Union itself conducted. Have there been any changes in the 10 years?

BANNING: Right. There have been two changes, primarily in the profile of the freelance writer. Other than that, the profiles of freelance journalists in their careers really hasn't changed very much. And those two differences were the average age. The average age back in 1995 was 44, and again, it's 49 now, so a five-year difference there. And the other big difference was median income has more than doubled since 1995. Back then, the median income cited on that survey was \$12,500, and the median income on my survey was between \$30,000 and \$40,000.

KENNEALLY: That's good news, isn't it?

BANNING: I think it's excellent news. I think it's promising, and I think it refutes the myth that people can't make money freelancing, which is what we hear all the time.

KENNEALLY: And secondly, now where a tremendous amount of change is under way in the media business itself, and it does leave a lot of people – if I can put it – disheartened about the future, we can at least take some solace in the fact that in the last 10 years, things seem to have improved somewhat. And again, that does go against the grain of what you might expect, and I think that also reflects on the value of this survey.

You mentioned that the predominant group is those living in the mid-Atlantic, and I guess we can call that greater New York City. And no surprise there, because of the concentration of media there, newspapers, magazines, and so forth. How does it sort of fall from there? Where are the other concentrations?

BANNING: Right. The second largest group was in the West. The third largest group was in the New England states. The next largest group was in the Midwest, then followed by the South, and the smallest group was in the Southwest.

KENNEALLY: Now, that's interesting. The population generally has shifted to the South and Southwest over the last generation or so, and yet, it appears the media business has not quite followed it.

BANNING: Well, I'm not so sure, because these results differ a little bit from what people responded in the survey before the call. The South was not as far down on the list as it was on my survey, so it could just be a function of who had answered the survey. Not sure.

KENNEALLY: OK. Well, something for further study, if we could say.

BANNING: Yes.

KENNEALLY: Let's talk a bit more about likes and dislikes. And can you go into that for us? What were some of the factors that you asked people to evaluate?

BANNING: In terms of what people liked least, we asked them to evaluate everything from the financial aspect down to deadlines, isolation, everything that we could think of as being something that might be something that people wouldn't like related to freelancing.

And interestingly, what people liked least were mostly related to money, and the top answer was financial insecurity. And the second answer was rate of pay. People are not happy with the rate of pay that they're getting. And workload fluctuations was the third concern.

KENNEALLY: Well, there again, speaking from my own experience, I can understand that, and maybe you can speak to it as well, as someone who's continuing to freelance. That sort of feast or famine feeling is one that can be a real strain.

BANNING: Yes, it can. And, you know, it's related to the financial insecurity, and it's also related to the rate of pay. They all sort of intertwine, and it can be very stressful when you've got a low period.

KENNEALLY: Absolutely. And when you've got a low period, and you've got all those invoices out there waiting to get paid, you've done the work, and now you'd like to see the money for it.

BANNING: Right.

KENNEALLY: Freedom and being your own boss were the top factors of why people liked the job. What other factors are sort of the positive piece of this?

BANNING: Well, let's see. People like to have the ability to be more creative. They liked the ability to choose the jobs they wanted. They liked to be able to write about things they wanted. They liked not having to deal with office politics and commuting. They liked the – you know, somebody said, "I like the ability to take a nap in the middle of the day."

KENNEALLY: Well, that would be nice to do if you were at work. And I promise everyone on the call that I will not fall asleep during the call.

Well, you know, I think there was an overwhelming number of people who said that despite the stress and the strain and the job pressures, and the work load fluctuations, and getting people to pay you, they were pretty committed to this career, isn't that right?

BANNING: They were. More than 90% considered freelancing a long-term career. And there were only about 12% of respondents who were dissatisfied with it. So –

KENNEALLY: That seems surprising, because again, and I know I had to take the ribbing myself from time to time. People think that freelancing is some sort of

euphemism for being between pictures, if you will. This is a career for people. Did that surprise you?

BANNING: It did not surprise me. And I think that the fact that there were so few differences between the 1995 study and the study I did really speaks to the fact that it is a career for people, and it's recognized in the industry as a career.

KENNEALLY: Well, that is good news. I think the other thing that was interesting was that people chose to leave their full-time jobs, right? What percentage of the group actually chose to leave the cocoon and go out on their own?

BANNING: More than 50%. I think it was under 60%, but more than 50% left a secure staff job to freelance. And interestingly, they most often left jobs working at magazines, newspapers and in public relations to pursue a freelancing career.

KENNEALLY: I wonder what that says about those particular positions.

BANNING: (laughter) I know.

KENNEALLY: Well, Doresa, thank you. I think that gives us a nice snapshot of the situation today, and we'll continue to explore it with the audience. But first, I'd like to turn to a Boston-area freelance writer, Bob Garrett. Bob, welcome to Beyond the Book.

GARRETT: Hi, Chris. How are you?

KENNEALLY: I'm just fine. Bob and I have worked together and known each other for a number of years. And I thought I'd bring you on, Bob, because your situation in some ways is reflective of what Doresa's survey has found, but in other ways, goes against it. You've been freelancing for about 20 years now, isn't that right?

GARRETT: Since the mid-'80s.

KENNEALLY: That's a long time.

GARRETT: It's a long time, but when I was listening in, Doresa was right on target in her survey, in everything she said in terms of why I did it so long, and also why I'm thinking of getting out.

KENNEALLY: Well, in fact, that's why I want you to join us, Bob, because I think if we want to be honest about this, this is a career where you have to evaluate almost on a daily basis whether you're going to continue doing it. As I mentioned at the start, I don't think this ever gets easy at all, and it just does seem to get harder as time goes by. Tell us, then, Bob, what it is that's going through your mind right now.

GARRETT: It worked for many years, Chris. I think we talked about it maybe 10 years – I'm not sure when you went legit. When was that? Was it five years ago?

KENNEALLY: About five years ago, I joined Copyright Clearance Center, that's right.

GARRETT: I've been a happy camper, because I've had the freedom, and I've been able to do a lot of projects that I wanted to. I've been the author of a couple books, and co-author, and edited, I think, four others. Freelanced for a long time for the *Boston Globe*.

KENNEALLY: Did a lot of traveling.

GARRETT: Yes. And had fun. And also was able to be creative. That word resonated with me when Doresa spoke of that, because I've gotten to do what I wanted to do. And I had some chances to come in from the cold a number of years ago. And I actually chose not to, despite the ups and downs.

KENNEALLY: But now, you're at a point in your life, for some personal reasons and others, that are having you reconsider that.

GARRETT: I am, and actually, I wonder how many other freelancers listening to this have gone through similar things. I was talking to you before this conference call about the fact that everybody has crises in their lives, and I've actually had to deal with an elderly parent being sick for two or three years, and having to sell a house. And I think about other freelancers who maybe have had a divorce or sick kids.

KENNEALLY: Or they've gotten ill themselves, even.

GARRETT: Yes, that's right. And, you know, there's not the safety net there is on a job, because when your focus goes away from keeping all these different saucers up in the air, your employers basically just turn elsewhere, as opposed to being able to hitch back up and go back down to the pay cage every Friday.

And I'm 56. And financial insecurity is something I'm familiar with, but at this point in my life, I'm actually thinking that it might be wise to have a steady income for a few years to try to get over the top here, basically.

KENNEALLY: Right. But yet, you admitted to me that all things being equal, freelancing has been a career that you've been happy with up to now, and –

GARRETT: Absolutely.

KENNEALLY: – and even though you are looking around at perhaps a full-time position somewhere, should it turn out a year from now that you still are freelancing, you wouldn't be bothered by that, and you would be happy enough to continue.

GARRETT: I'd do it. I would do it, and I'm ready to do that. I've actually been looking for about a year and haven't landed anything yet. And if it keeps up, basically, I'll just put the body armor on again and go back out.

KENNEALLY: Well, again, what's remarkable, I think, is that your comments jibe very well with what Doresa says. Doresa, you've seen people respond to your survey. Is what Bob's saying familiar to you?

BANNING: Yes, absolutely. Absolutely. And I think there's always that struggle. We're always thinking, maybe I should go back and get a job, but do I really want to? You know, it's difficult.

KENNEALLY: Well, let me ask you before we open it up to questions from the audience. Doresa, you conducted this survey and did your graduate studies work even while you were freelancing. So you had to juggle even one more ball. You had your studies as well as your assignments.

BANNING: I did. I did. I found I could really only take one class a semester, so it was a very long time getting the degree, but I did not want to give up the contacts and the momentum I had going when I went into school, so I could continue throughout, and come out, and still have those jobs that I had.

KENNEALLY: Well, that speaks to a point Bob made, which is, if you aren't ready to take the assignment when the call comes, that editor is going to move along to the next person on his or her list, and you're always afraid to say no. Isn't that the hardest thing?

BANNING: Absolutely. That is true, too. That is true, too. Although, what works for me is that I don't really turn work down that pays at this point. Maybe someday.

GARRETT: I'm sorry. I missed that. You don't turn work down to –

BANNING: Work down that pays. At this point in my career –

KENNEALLY: In other words, right, if there's any money attached, Doresa will do it.

BANNING: That's right.

GARRETT: That's a familiar refrain. Never say no.

BANNING: Yes. Right.

KENNEALLY: And that is, that really is, I think, one of the hardest parts of the job, because it adds to the stress and the concern over time. And yet, if I may offer something, I think you do need to say no, and you need to learn to value your work.

It's a very hard thing, because the first time you get paid for a story, you practically want to frame that check. By the time you've gotten that same pittance a hundred times, you wonder why you're doing it for such little money.

BANNING: Right.

GARRETT: I'd just add, Chris, never say no to your regulars. I do say no if the price isn't right, but with the clients that I work with all the time – I always want more money, but I try to keep them happy. And if something else comes along – I've been offered things where – especially, I hate to say it, because it's my background and my love, but journalism just pays so poorly.

I notice that Doresa has worked with a business journal. That's where the money is, and it's not necessarily where the creativity is. And actually, that's the direction that I've migrated in over the past five or 10 years. And may, actually, be part of my reasoning on thinking about getting a full-time job, because I've had more – when I had it up and running, except for the past two or three years, it was going OK, but the creativity was getting – it's always a balancing act between paying for the creativity by doing business and market research, editing and writing, and not having enough time to do that work, because you're always hunting and in the chase to get the money to support it. And then suddenly, you're not getting either. You're not getting enough money or creativity. Things can sort of get out of whack.

KENNEALLY: Spin out of control. I think that's well put. Well, if we could then take some questions from those people on-line. We have had some people e-mail us questions. We've got a few of those. And I think that, again, if I can ask the conference call moderator to remind people of how they can ask us questions live on Beyond the Book here.

OPERATOR: Thank you. At this time, if you have questions or comments, please press *1 on your telephone touchpad at this time. One moment please while the question – our first question to day comes from Anne Sharp.

KENNEALLY: Welcome, Anne.

SHARP: No, it's Fran. Sorry about that.

KENNEALLY: Fran. I'm sorry. Fran, welcome. Where are you calling from?

SHARP: I'm calling from Alabaster, Alabama.

KENNEALLY: Well, welcome to the program.

SHARP: One of those southern writers that are in the minority, apparently.

KENNEALLY: Well, that is interesting. Do you find it is difficult to work from Alabama? Are you writing for just local publications, or are you writing farther afield, and how difficult is that?

SHARP: I am writing for local publications. I would love to write for more various regions. And one reason why I probably am not doing that is because I'm basically an insecure writer, and a rejection letter just sends me into the bathroom to cry.

KENNEALLY: No! You have to develop that thick skin, Fran.

SHARP: I know, I know. And at my age, you would think it would be thick. But I worked for a newspaper for a very long time, and of course, that, you write. I wrote five stories a day for a local paper, and freelancing is such a different, a whole different ballgame.

I was wondering – First of all, I can't believe the salaries that were listed in the survey. I'm just shocked.

KENNEALLY: In what way? They were higher than you thought they would –

SHARP: Oh, yes. A lot higher. I can't believe people are making that kind of money freelancing.

KENNEALLY: Well, it surprised me, too, I must say. Even on our own surveys, we saw a number of people, it appeared, doing quite well. It was good news, but you know, you wonder if it's sort of a rare event. But ask your question. I'm sorry, Fran.

SHARP: I was wondering – in the survey it asked how people get their assignments, and I was wondering what the breakdown was on that.

BANNING: OK. Most often, people obtain their work through queries. That was loud and clear to be the number one way.

SHARP: I was afraid of that.

BANNING: Yeah. The second way was they were assigned by an editor that they already had a relationship with. And the third way was word-of-mouth and networking.

KENNEALLY: Fran, you said you were afraid of that. Why was that?

SHARP: Well, because I hate to write query letters. And, I mean, you're definitely going to get a response, and it's either going to be yes or no, and like I said, I hate the no's. And too, it's so hard to know how to tailor query letters as far as subject, and even if you research the magazines and know what they're interested in, because it's a query letter, you know, you don't know if they've gotten 15 letters

with the same subject matter, and that kind of thing. And so, it's just kind of makes you feel very – makes me feel very vulnerable, query letters do.

KENNEALLY: I understand that feeling, Fran, and I used to think that I had to be able to read the editor's mind, and that's such a frustrating position to find yourself in, because you don't know what exactly is going to come in there. It's a great idea to you and perhaps to people you talk to, but that particular editor reading the query, it's really up to them. It has to get past them. They're the single gatekeeper, and that's a very difficult position.

You know, over time, the query letter has changed. It used to be something you had to drop in the mail and wait weeks and weeks and weeks sometimes for an answer, but as Bob and I were reminiscing, I mean, those were the old days. Today, you can send somebody an e-mail and get an answer that afternoon. I don't know for Doresa or Fran, or even for Bob, has that change in technology changed much about the business, do you think?

BANNING: Oh, I think so, absolutely. I mean, just in the turnaround time and that more immediate sense of communication via e-mail. I think it's been fantastic. And you don't have to send out manuscripts. You can e-mail them. You can e-mail clips or links to your Web site with your clips. So I really think that it's done tremendously good things for freelancers.

And I would like to offer to Fran, when you get a rejection letter, I always like to think of it as, it wasn't my idea, it just wasn't something that fit with their magazine at that particular time. And that helps me take the rejection a little bit better. It's not me or my idea. It's just that it didn't fit with their picture at that moment.

KENNEALLY: Right. Well –

SHARP: I think that's a really good attitude to take, and certainly a survival attitude.

BANNING: Yes.

KENNEALLY: Well, Fran, thank you for joining us. Please stay on the line. I wonder if we have any other questions from the audience?

MODERATOR: Our next question comes from Vanessa Richardson.

KENNEALLY: Welcome, Vanessa.

RICHARDSON: Hi.

KENNEALLY: Where are you calling from?

RICHARDSON: I'm calling from San Francisco, California, so I'm out West.

KENNEALLY: Well, welcome to Beyond the Book. What's your question?

RICHARDSON: My question is, it's been a really bad week for me in terms of relationships with editors. I've had a few invoices I've sent that are 30, 45, 60 days late and trying to track the money down. And also, when I send queries, sometimes I don't get any response at all, and the advice varies about how, should you wait a week, two weeks, a month, or just assume that if they don't reply, that should just be your answer.

So I guess my question is, from the survey, was there a lot of frustration expressed by freelancers about working with editors who just weren't very receptive, and also, was it very hard for them to get paid?

KENNEALLY: Well, Doresa, in fact, editors came in for some pretty strong words in your survey, isn't that right?

BANNING: They really did, and it was interesting because it came through loud and clear in the open-ended questions where the respondents could tell me what they liked the least on their own. And they pretty much qualified relationships with editors as difficult and unpleasant. And Vanessa, you might enjoy this. They called them everything from unresponsive, incompetent, fickle, self-centered, difficult and unreasonable to unprincipled. You're not alone.

Yes, editors can be a problem. And it's my feeling that if you are spending so much extra time rewriting for an editor, or doing last-minute things, changes that weren't originally in the assignment, then maybe sometimes it's not worth working for that editor. If it's costing you more in terms of all this extra work that you're having to do, then it may not be worth it. And there's no question, editors can be picky. They can be demanding. And unfortunately, we kind of have to be easygoing and go along with it.

KENNEALLY: Doresa, that's a great point. You know, it recalls for me an experience I had where we're usually going for those coveted dollar-a-word stories, and –

(break in tape)

BANNING: Oh, my word.

KENNEALLY: And I said to her, "Well, why?" because I knew that my work was sailing through the *New York Times*, for example, with barely a change. She felt it was part of her job to make you rewrite the story. And so, if, in fact, you're being paid a dollar a word and you're rewriting the story four times, it really gets down a quarter a word.

BANNING: Right. Absolutely.

KENNEALLY: And that dog don't hunt. So I think you're quite right. You need to evaluate it expressly in business terms. And I think a point that comes through throughout all of the Beyond the Book programs that we're conducting here is something that I learned early on, that freelancing is – we've heard about the creativity, and the freedom, and the joy of being able to choose one's assignments and so forth, but the bottom line is, freelancing is a business.

BANNING: It is a business, absolutely. And I think a lot of people don't remember that and don't realize that you need a plan, you need to do marketing, you need to do sales, you need to collect, which, Vanessa, sounds like one of your problems. I would just say, be persistent. Keep trying to get your money and do what you have to do to get your money.

KENNEALLY: Bob, do you –

GARRETT: Chris, I'm actually still on the line here. I wonder if I could just put another two cents in here.

KENNEALLY: Please.

GARRETT: For both the caller from San Francisco and especially from Alabama. You know, the editors choose you as the freelancer, but you can also choose editors. And I would recommend, as somebody who has done it for a number of years, zeroing in on the ones you like and have a rapport with, and getting on the phone. Query letters, to me, that's something. I guess, you have to do it sometimes, I guess. But, follow-ups with phone calls, and if you live close enough to go to the place where the editor is, there's nothing better than pressing the flesh, and developing a relationship, and kind of becoming like a – developing a rapport with an editor so that you're treated like a staff writer without the benefits.

I mean, that sounds kind of upside down, but you become somebody who – it's not a shot in the dark anymore. You're more appreciated, and it's less selling over and over again to these unknown, capricious editors who maybe had a bad lunch and can't recognize a good story when it slaps them over the head like a skillet on their head.

KENNEALLY: Well, I think the point you're making, Bob, is that you begin to develop that relationship with a goal of being treated as a colleague rather than as some sort of vendor. And unfortunately, that vendor relationship, as we all know, if somebody else comes along at a better price or somehow there's a sense the quality is different, you can dismiss that vendor right away. You don't want to be in that position. You want to have that collegial relationship.

And I think the other point there is that while Doresa's right that e-mailing and all the electronic advantages, apart from saving us postage, it's made us think that we

have this communication, and I don't know that we do, really. We're getting our words instantaneously transmitted, but I don't know that we're really communicating in the way that you're describing, Bob.

GARRETT: I have a travel story that's eventually going to run in the *Boston Globe*, and I was getting no response from the editor, who's busy, I guess. But apparently it's maybe not that unusual. What eventually happened was I went there and basically knocked on the door. I had worked at the *Globe* as a freelancer for many years. And she was very happy to see me. She gets a ton of e-mails. E-mails are great, but a lot of editors actually feel swamped by them, and I would, if at all possible, if I'm there laboring in the vineyards in Alabama and I've had all this experience writing for newspapers and local publications, try to cultivate some real people who – even if it's five or 10 minutes, without being an intruder and overly-aggressive. I think it works. The human touch is still in vogue.

KENNEALLY: Right. If I can, and I think that's a really good point, but I'm going to turn to an e-mail right now from Laura Johnston who wanted to ask Doresa about the survey here. "Is there any information about the average length of work in the industry before freelancers left it to go on their own?" Doresa?

BANNING: Good question. We did not ask that question, unfortunately.

KENNEALLY: You would have a sense, though, that if we're talking about freelancers who are in their 40s, on average, they were probably writing for a reasonable period of time before they left.

BANNING: You would think. You would think.

KENNEALLY: Rather like Fran, I think, who said she had been a staff writer for a number of years. I think that helps you build up the contacts. Certainly, you build up your sources, and you get that sense, too, that you're not afraid of the white or the blank page.

BANNING: Right. But I don't think that at the same time you have to work 10 to 15 years at a place before you branch out.

KENNEALLY: You think you can kind of just sort of jump into it and see how the water is?

BANNING: Well, I think there's an advantage, definitely, to working in some sort of media job to understand how the industry works and understand all of the inner workings of it, and then branch out. I would never say just jump in. But if you jumped in, that would be fine, too. You know, I only spent maybe two years working at a newspaper before I took the leap into freelance writing. So it really depends on what's right for the person.

KENNEALLY: I wonder if we have any other calls from the audience.

MODERATOR: Our next question comes from Joan Brose.

KENNEALLY: Joan, welcome to *Beyond the Book*. I'll just remind everybody, my name is Chris Kenneally. We're very happy to have you join us for this conference call with Doresa Banning, who surveyed over 500 freelance journalists from across the United States, learned a bit about their working conditions, and what they like and don't like about freelancing, and how they got into the career in the first place. And it's been terrific to go through that with Doresa and to take your question. So tell us, what's on your mind?

BROSE: Well, thank you very much for letting me be a part of it. I probably would like to get really specific. I'd like to know what the salary range would be for a 900-word piece in a suburban, large metropolitan area.

KENNEALLY: Well, I can speak to my own experience, and Bob, Doresa, if you want to chime in.

GARRETT: Not enough.

KENNEALLY: Yes.

BANNING: Exactly.

KENNEALLY: Sad to say. Here's the sad truth. I began writing for the *Boston Globe*, which has a circulation of about half a million, in 1985. Pretty much ended that run by 1999-2000. And apart from making a leap into longer features on occasion, or writing for the *Sunday Magazine*, the fee never changed in 15 years. You simply had to hope to get more assignments rather than more money per assignment. And at the time, it was between \$250 and \$350 for a story. Does that sound about right, Bob?

GARRETT: In the *Globe* for what length?

KENNEALLY: For 1,000, 1,250 as far as words.

GARRETT: I have – actually – this is a big metropolitan newspaper. I just recently, after freelancing for maybe eight or nine years for the *Globe* back in the late '80s and early '90s, I began to do it again very recently, just for the purposes of getting some new clips, and showcasing myself, and being able to bring my resume up to date to look for a job. And so, I actually can tell you how much I was paid.

It varies from section to section in the newspaper. I wrote a long story for the regional section of the *Globe*, and was astonished at how low it was. It was \$350.

KENNEALLY: Really.

GARRETT: And I wrote a piece for the magazine after it had been reformatted, after a recent reformatting and a new editor came in, and the pay scale was higher. And it was a dollar a word, so for a 1,000-word story, I was paid a thousand bucks.

You know, that's edging closer to what you can make writing for business outlets, and it's not horrible if you can do a 1,000-word piece in two or three days without an overly-insecure editor who wants you to rewrite just for the sake of rewriting so that they know they have a job and a purpose in life.

I don't know what it's to – I can't answer the question of what the average is for suburban newspapers, but I would think if the *Globe* is – if you're getting a few hundred bucks for – that story took me the better part of a week to do, and I basically would not do that unless – what's it called in business? A loss leader? I was basically doing it because I wanted to show that I could still write newsy-type stories, because one of the potential jobs to go after for an old white guy – middle-aged white guy – like me is a copy desk job, so if you want to work on the news copy desk, you write a news story for a little bit of money.

But I would look – if that caller – I'm not sure what her experience was, but I sort of read between the lines that maybe they're breaking in. It's not a bad way to break in, to get clips, and then go to the next step. You're not going to make a living writing as a freelancer unless you get on staff. So I would recommend – the caller probably has already thought of this. Gather ye your clips and then try to get a staff job on a regional paper and you might have half a crack at making a living.

KENNEALLY: Doresa, you're out West, and I wonder whether the fees are different there. The cost of living in Boston, we just found out – it's no surprise for those who are here – that this is the most expensive city in the country. San Francisco – We had a call from San Francisco – we sort of go back and forth fighting over that title. San Francisco is also a very expensive place. I would guess the cost of living is a bit easier to take in Reno. Does that mean that the fee scales for writing for a business journal or something like that might be different, or does that – what did Bob say – kind of match up with your experience?

BANNING: The cost of living here clearly is much better than the Bay Area of San Francisco and other places. However, that's changing. The cost of living is going up and we are seeing low pay, basically. Even a business journal does not pay exorbitantly here.

KENNEALLY: So the only way to solve the problem is just to keep writing more.

BANNING: Exactly. In the middle of the night.

KENNEALLY: (laughter) Exactly. We've been on the phone here for about 50 minutes. I'm enjoying this. I hope the audience is, as well. We'll go for another 10 minutes and try to get in a couple, three, more questions. And we'll take the next one, if we could.

MODERATOR: Our next question comes from Jean van Rensselaer.

KENNEALLY: Jean, welcome to the program.

VAN RENSSELAER: Thank you.

KENNEALLY: What's your question? And can you tell us where you're calling from?

VAN RENSSELAER: Yes. I'm calling from the Chicago area. And actually, I just moved here from Madison, Wisconsin because the market is so much bigger, and it's been very helpful as far as freelancing goes.

KENNEALLY: So you actually relocated to improve the chances for your freelance writing career?

VAN RENSSELAER: Yes, and I'm very glad I did. But my question is, one area you haven't discussed, you've been talking about freelancing for periodicals and that. Does anybody have any experience with commercial freelance writing? By that, I mean copy writing for corporations?

KENNEALLY: Well, Doresa, did your survey break down the kinds of assignments and the kinds of writing?

BANNING: We did ask people what they primarily did. And the top answers were consumer magazines, newspapers and Web sites. But we did have a good number of people who were doing commercial writing, a lot of business writing for corporations, that kind of thing.

KENNEALLY: And Jean, can you expand on your question a bit? Are you talking about how to break in or just some tips, or what is it you'd like us to try to help you with?

VAN RENSSELAER: Well, I have heard it's quite a bit more lucrative than writing for periodicals, and I was wondering how to break in and what the market is like.

BANNING: I have also heard that it's more lucrative. I don't have much experience in breaking in, so I'm not sure I can help with that.

KENNEALLY: Well, I can verify that. My own experience as a freelancer was – it sort of went like this. If I had an assignment with the *Boston Business Journal*, and that brought me in contact with executives at the local utility, or a real estate developer,

or whatever it was, and we enjoyed the interview and so forth, I always gave them my card. And what would happen is, I'd get a call a few weeks later, and he or she would say to me, "I have to give a speech to the XYZ conference. Do you do speech writing?" And, of course, I said, "Yes, I do speech writing." And – or they would say, "We're trying to put together a press kit. Do you think you could write the backgrounder on our company?"

So that was how I broke into it, because wherever I went, whoever I interviewed, I always gave them my card. And they would remember, you know, if the story – if they were happy with the way the story came out, and I spelled their name right, and did all the good things. Enough of those little raindrops started to come in that it grew into a sideline.

I mean, there really wasn't any conflict of interest. I had already moved on from writing about them for the *Journal*, and the kind of work I was doing was not going to impinge on any of the other assignments I had, so I felt reasonably comfortable with that.

Or, I developed an expertise. I had an expertise in things Irish and traveled frequently to Ireland, which brought me into contact with organizations, foundations that were raising money for good causes over in Ireland, and they needed a newsletter written, or they needed something else done, and they were familiar with my name from the byline, and they found me and said, "Can you do this for us?"

So I think it's to the point you made, Doresa. It's about marketing, it's about reinforcing the relationships you do have, and if I can say this, it's about always passing out that card. Bob, does that make sense?

GARRETT: It does make to me, Chris. And actually, for the past 10 years or so, as I mentioned at the beginning, I've done more commercial writing than I have journalism. And for a while, I was doing both, and they overlapped, and one was paying for the other, and the scale is a lot higher. If it took me three days or more to research and do a long, kind of feature-y news story for the *Globe* – again, you develop a relationship with somebody in a corporation, which takes a little bit of doing to get over that hurdle, but once you do, then it's \$300 – in my case, it was about the same amount of money that I made for the *Globe* per day, without – kind of without having to worry about it. And the assignments would just come to me.

The thing you have to watch out for, and I'm sure a lot of freelancers, or more experienced freelancers listening to this who've done both kinds of writing know what it's like at newspapers. In corporations as well, you develop a relationship, and then after two or three years, something happens out of your control in that corporation, and the person you're working with moves on or –

KENNEALLY: The company gets bought.

GARRETT: The company – for a number of years, I worked for Arthur D. Little, a big think tank in Boston. It went out of business.

KENNEALLY: Right. And you weren't at fault for that, were you?

GARRETT: Well, I – I actually was.

KENNEALLY: (laughter) Now, that's for another call. Let's see if we can get a couple more questions in if there's anyone else out there with a question for this program, Beyond the Book. Do we have any other calls from the audience?

OPERATOR: The next question comes from Anne Sharp.

SHARPE: Hi, it's Fran again, Chris. I was wondering if you all have any information on column writing, which is another thing that I do. It does not pay very well. And I wanted to comment briefly on Bob's advice about brainstorming with editors and stuff. I do that. There are three publications I write for regularly, and I meet with the editors, and we talk about story ideas and that kind of thing, and they come back to me on a regular basis. I just don't enough of that kind of business.

KENNEALLY: Sure. So you do do that?

SHARP: Oh, yeah. And that's great advice. They love it when you actually care enough to come and see where they are and what they're doing. But – also, I have – what about reprints? How much of a market is there for articles you've written and you change them around a little bit and try and sell them to somebody else?

KENNEALLY: Well, you know, that's a marketplace that has changed tremendously over time. Certainly before the explosion of the Web, it was a lot more lucrative, I think. Certainly, contracts have changed. You need to be very careful and very aware of what it is you're signing when you sign a contract. Some contracts, the rights will revert to you after a certain period of time, a week or 30 days.

SHARP: Recently, a year.

KENNEALLY: A year. Others, it will be forever. So you do want to think about that. I'll direct you to a site that does, in fact, syndicate freelance writers' works, and it's a terrific organization. We had the founder on one of our programs. It's called featurewell.com, spelled just like it sounds, featurewell.com. And you can submit to them and let them know what markets it's appeared in, and they'll tell you whether they can resell it possibly in other markets. And they take a reasonable fee to do that, but it's a great resource. I think it's worth trying.

SHARP: Sounds good.

KENNEALLY: And as far as columns go, that's a subject area that I would, again, direct you to an organization. Some of you may already know about the National Society of Newspaper Columnists.

SHARP: I am a member. Yes.

KENNEALLY: You're a member. Then you know that there are quite a lot of people offering those columns. Self-syndication is a good way to get started. There are some syndicates out there that will offer material, but the competition is extremely difficult.

SHARP: Yes it is.

KENNEALLY: And, you know, sometimes a local voice that really attracts a lot of attention in one area, it just won't fly elsewhere, so I wish you the best of luck.

We also had a question about rate of pay for that from an e-mailer, Carrie Lavanye (sp?). And they just would vary from absolutely nothing to the sky's the limit, I suppose, if you're George Will or someone like that.

SHARP: Yes, we can all be George Will.

KENNEALLY: Right. I think the sad fact is, particularly with columns, is that you almost have to do it for nothing at the beginning. And that's advice I hate to give. I hate to tell writers to work for nothing.

SHARP: Well, I'm doing it for very little right now. I just would like to do better.

KENNEALLY: Well, always ask for more, would be my advice. Let me just ask if there's one more question from the audience.

SHARP: Chris, are we going to be able to get a transcript of this conversation?

KENNEALLY: Yes.

SHARP: Great.

KENNEALLY: At the end of the call, I will tell everybody about what we're going to do next and how we'll get this information out to you.

SHARP: OK. Because I'd like to forward it on to my writers group.

KENNEALLY: OK. Wonderful. I'm really glad you came on board.

SHARP: Thank you very much.

KENNEALLY: Absolutely. Do we have one more call from the audience?

MODERATOR: We do have one last question from Martine Forresca (sp?).

KENNEALLY: Martine, how are you?

FORRESCA: Hi, how are you?

KENNEALLY: Just fine. Where are you calling from?

FORRESCA: I'm calling from New York.

KENNEALLY: From New York.

FORRESCA: Yes. I'm actually very new to this.

KENNEALLY: OK.

FORRESCA: And my question is, is it feasible to hold, keep a part-time job and freelance part time as well?

KENNEALLY: Well, do you – yup, go ahead. Sorry.

FORRESCA: Or I was going to say, or is that just not a good idea?

KENNEALLY: Well, Doresa, what did your survey tell you about that, people who had freelancing as their primary job, but perhaps had a job on the side?

BANNING: There were a number of people who approached it that way, and I think it's actually a very smart way to go about doing it, to build up your contacts and your work while you have the security of your part-time job. And then, once you get too much work, you make the break. As long as you can work it out with your schedule so you can do interviews during the day and have time for your freelancing, I say do both, absolutely.

FORRESCA: OK.

KENNEALLY: And I think that relates to something else the survey talked about, Doresa, which is the length of time it takes to establish those contacts.

BANNING: Right. The average period of time required for freelancers to become established was four to five years. Certainly, some people did it in less amount of time, but that was the average. And I'd also like to say, if you are working at a media job as your part-time job, just keep in the back of your mind the contacts that you are making and could make from that when you choose to leave, if you choose to leave.

KENNEALLY: Right.

FORRESCA: Oh, OK. That sounds great.

KENNEALLY: Build up that Rolodex, and good luck with your work, Martine.

FORRESCA: That sounds great. Thank you very much. It was great.

KENNEALLY: Thank you. Well, it's been a pleasure to have Doresa Banning on. Doresa, thank you very much for joining Beyond the Book this afternoon.

BANNING: Thank you.

KENNEALLY: I think your survey really has informed us all about the true state of freelancing today. As you say, it kind of exploded a few myths and revealed a few things that hadn't been in the light. And thank you for that. Bob Garrett, thanks for being a pal and giving us your own experiences.

GARRETT: Keep the faith out there, everyone.

KENNEALLY: Right.

BANNING: Yes, definitely.

KENNEALLY: And to answer the question about what we're going to do next, let me just tell you that you will get a follow-up e-mail from us, and we will ask you for some feedback. We want to know what you liked about the program and maybe what suggestions you may have for helping us improve it. We're going to have a survey as well that you can fill in online. And if you haven't already done so, please do click on the link to contribute your answers to Doresa Banning's survey. We have that available. We have recorded the call. We will get a written transcript and we will have the audio portion available. We will indicate in the follow-up e-mail to you how you can obtain a copy either of the written transcript or the audio transcript, so those will be available.

And if some folks in IT come through with what they promise, this may end up being podcastable, and that's the first time I've said that in front of an audience. But we're going to try to turn this into a podcast, so if you want to recommend the program to other freelance writers in your writing group or in the association or the union that you may be a part of, that'll be one way they can access it and listen to this even though they couldn't join us this afternoon.

So again, thank you all for participating in the program. We know your time is important, so we're going to keep this to just an hour. And good luck with your

writing, and we'll see you next time for another Beyond the Book program. Thank you very much.

OPERATOR: Thank you for attending today's teleconference.

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