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Stringers Exploitation in Newspaper Organizations

P. Purnachandar¹, Dr Satish Kumar Thalladi²

Research Scholar (Ph.D.), Dept. of Journalism and Mass Communication, Osmania University,
Hyderabad, India¹

Assistant Professor, Dept. of Journalism and Mass Communication, Osmania University, Hyderabad, India²

ABSTRACT: Examining Stringers' exploitation in Press Organizations. This study delves into the prevalent use of "line accounts" as a compensation method for stringers in numerous press organizations. Stringers, often designated as "part-time workers" and affiliated with "news agencies" according to owners' classifications, receive payment based on the column centimeters their news articles occupy in publications. Stringers frequently voice concerns about their part-time status, asserting that their consistent engagement in news collection, writing, surveys, case studies, advertisements, and efforts to boost newspaper circulation make them full-time workers. Despite these extensive responsibilities, press organizations categorize and treat them as part-time employees. The roles of news agencies as intermediaries between stringers and media organizations serve various purposes, including enabling media organizations to hire individuals at lower wages, effectively outsourcing news collection, and potentially circumventing legal obligations associated with hiring full-time staff. This abstract provides a succinct overview of the complex employment dynamics and compensation practices surrounding stringers in press organizations, shedding light on the challenges and nuances within this industry.

KEYWORDS: News organization, Stringer, Line account, Working journalist, News Agency, Wage Board, Part-timer

I.INTRODUCTION

Today, the competition among newspapers is intense, often requiring media outlets to prioritize publishing news with a political or business focus. To achieve this, press owners seek "creative and skilled yet cost-effective news gatherers" who can collect news with a business-oriented perspective while working for reasonable compensation. Individuals who fit these criteria are referred to as "Stringers."

Stringers are individuals who collect and send information without a fixed salary and are compensated based on the length of the news published. They are called "News Contributors." In short, they are paid a certain amount of money for the news that appears in the newspaper, based on the column centimeter length. Such payment is referred to as "line account" because it is calculated based on the published lines. They are not officially recognized by the press. Apart from 'stringers,' press organizations refer to them by various names such as news contributors, part-time workers, vocational contributors, and mufasil correspondents. Apart from gathering news for the press, Stringers also engage in other activities such as collecting advertisements and newspaper circulation.



Kasula Pratapreddy (Senior journalist) said, Before the Stringer system, there was the Regular Contributor (RC) system, which operated in every division and taluka. That they used to provide fixed compensation to regular contributors and also rewarded them with a line account. However, this system underwent changes with the introduction of district pages and the fallout, leading to its discontinuation.

Stringers play an indispensable role in the press system, despite their low status within news organizations. Stringers, being locals; maintain the competitiveness of newspaper organization through news gathering and the timely delivery of news.

Stringers Exploitation in News Organization

The "GR Majithia Wage Board" recommendations clearly state that anyone working in journalism, regardless of their job title, should be considered a "working journalist." Employees in the press industry are broadly divided into two categories:

1. Working Journalists – This category includes individuals ranging from Editors to Part-Time News Contributors.
2. Non-Working Journalists – Staff working in the Printing Section, Advertising, Circulation, Accounts, Marketing Departments, and other non-editorial roles. These individuals are involved in various tasks, such as collecting news for Stringers, collecting ads for the newspapers, and other miscellaneous duties.

However, press organizations often categorize these non-working journalists as "News Agencies," effectively distancing them from the press organization. They are not typically provided with appointment letters upon joining the newspaper, and this lack of documentation can prevent them from asserting legal rights. Press owners often take precautions to safeguard against potential legal actions by Stringers.

Stringers Face Two Primary Challenges

1. Lack of Job Security: Stringers often have precarious job security, making them vulnerable to termination with just a phone call.
2. Absence of Fixed Salary: Some Stringers do not receive a fixed salary through line accounts, and legally due remuneration may not be provided in certain newspapers. Many newspapers do not offer line accounts, further exacerbating their financial challenges.

Due to these issues, Stringers have been vocal about their problems and have sought government intervention through various unions. They lack job security, a defined position, rank, and fixed salaries within the press industry, making their work conditions challenging and uncertain.

Stringers have continued to protest against the challenges they face within the press industry. In response to these concerns, the government established a wage board. According to *the Working Journalist Act*, the Central Government appoints the "Wage Board," which is responsible for determining the wages and allowances of both working journalists and non-working journalists. The Central Government then acts on the recommendations made by the Wage Board, and the State Government's Labor Departments are responsible for enforcing these notified wages with employers. State governments often form tripartite committees comprising officials,



employers, and representatives of journalists' associations to oversee the implementation of wage recommendations.

However, employer representatives who are members of the Wage Board have consistently opposed increases in wages. Many employers have introduced a contractual system to avoid complying with the Wage Board's wage enforcement, and Stringers are often categorized as news agency personnel rather than press personnel.

Committees and Recommendations

There have been several Wage Boards established over the years, each with its own set of recommendations and notifications:

1. First Wage Board: Formed in May 1956, with recommendations notified in May 1957.
2. Shinde Wage Board: Established in 1963, with recommendations notified in October 1967.
3. Palekar Wage Board: Formed in 1975, with recommendations notified in 1981.
4. Bachawat Wage Board: Established in 1985, with recommendations notified in 1990.
5. Rajakumar Manisana Singh Wage Board: Formed in 1994, with recommendations notified in July 2000.
6. Majithia Wage Board: Notified on 24th May 2007, making it the most recent board.

The Shinde Wage Board was notable for accepting the argument of providing wages to rural journalists. Subsequent wage boards have continued to address issues related to wages and compensation for part-time journalists. For example, the Majithia Wage Board confirmed two slabs for part-time journalists, specifying the percentage of full-time reporters' salaries that should be paid to part-timers based on their level within the organization. Additionally, part-timers may receive compensation based on the centimeter rate (line) for their work.

Dr K.Rajaram, Associate Professor (EFL University, HYD) has pointed out several important recommendations made by various Wage Boards, including the Bachawat Wage Board and the Manusani Wage Board, which have not been effectively implemented by newspaper owners. These recommendations pertain to fair wages, seniority-based pay, and other considerations for journalists, including those at senior levels.

Narender Reddy, (The Ex-Secretary of the TWJU Union), has emphasized the importance of providing fair wages to rural reporters, suggesting that they should receive 30 percent of the salary of a regular staff reporter along with a line account. He also encourages stringers to work with self-respect and without expecting favors from anyone.

At the state level, unions like the Andhra Pradesh Union of Working Journalists (APWJ) and the Telangana working journalist union, TWJU have been actively advocating for the rights and issues of stringers.

The Working Journalist Act plays a crucial role in regulating the rights and conditions of working journalists. It consists of four chapters, 21 sections, and a schedule. Chapter 2 addresses working hours, holidays, and wages of working journalists, as well as procedures for job modifications, ensuring that journalists are protected by specific labor laws.



Efforts are being made by monitoring committees to ensure the accurate representation of journalists working for press organizations. These committees are focused on correcting records and ensuring that stringers are treated fairly and receive just compensation.

It's clear that there is a need for better implementation of the recommendations and regulations designed to protect the rights and interests of stringers and journalists in general.

Chapter 3 of the Working Journalist Act encompasses the regulations and provisions applicable to press organizations and others related to journalists. This chapter likely includes specific legal requirements and responsibilities that press organizations must adhere to concerning the treatment and rights of journalists.

Chapter 4 appears to cover a range of rules and regulations related to contracts, job security, and methods for collecting dues from employers to employees, maintaining records and attendance lists, the role of inspectors, and penalties for violations. Unfortunately, many employers in the press industry seem to neglect or disregard these provisions of the Working Journalist Act.

The responsibility for enforcing these labor laws and ensuring that press organizations comply with them rests with the labor department officials of the state government. To oversee the implementation of the Wage Board's recommendations, a tripartite committee, comprising representatives of management, journalist unions, and labor department officials, plays a crucial role in monitoring and ensuring that journalists receive their due rights and compensation.

These laws and regulations are designed to protect the rights and interests of journalists, including stringers, and provide mechanisms for addressing disputes, ensuring fair wages, and establishing job security within the industry. However, their effective enforcement appears to be a challenge in some cases, as employers may not always adhere to the stipulated rules and provisions.

The use of "**line accounts**" to compensate stringers is a common practice in many press organizations. Stringers are often considered "part-time workers" and are categorized as such by the owners. They may also be affiliated with "news agencies" as per the owners' designation. Line accounts are a method of payment where stringers are compensated based on the number of column centimeters (or column inches) their news articles occupy in the publication.

It's important to note that the Majithia Wage Board recommends that the "column centimeter rate" should be determined through mutual agreement between the employer and journalists. However, this mutual agreement is often lacking in practice.

The Majithia Wage Board recommendations stipulate that part-time and full-time reporters should receive a significant portion of the wages of full-time reporters at the district center or below, along with payment according to the centimeter rate for their contributions. However, many press organizations do not adhere to these recommendations, effectively ignoring the law.

Stringers are not getting proper income from news organizations. To make ends meet, many stringers seek additional sources of income. They may take on part-time jobs such as LIC agents, finance work, chits, real estate, Mee Seva Kendra's, Xerox and Internet Centers, among others, to supplement their income. This



diversification of income sources helps them maintain their livelihood beyond what they earn from the press organization.

Stringers often express their grievances regarding their status as **part-time workers**. They argue that they are essentially full-time workers, as they are consistently engaged in news collection, writing stories, conducting surveys, case studies, advertisements, and working to increase newspaper circulation. However, they are hired and treated as part-time workers by the press organizations.

The situation raises concerns about the financial motives of the owners, who benefit from this arrangement. Stringers work intensively, with rural reporters attending multiple assignments every day, publishing several news items, capturing photos, and traveling significant distances for news gathering. Despite their demanding workload, they are classified as part-time employees, which mean they do not receive benefits like Provident Fund (PF), Employee health services, pensions, casual leave. Employers argue that there are no specific rules or obligations for part-time workers.

Newspaper organizations classify their workers as part-time to avoid the legal responsibilities and obligations associated with full-time employment. While newspaper organizations are aware of the substantial contributions made by stringers to their organizations, they continue to label them as part-time workers to minimize their legal responsibilities and wage commitments.

Allam Narayana (Press academy chairmen, T.S) also mentions the role of news agencies in this context. News agencies serve as intermediaries between news contributors and media organizations. Some media organizations employ fewer regular employees under their own news agencies and rely more on part-time workers associated with external news agencies. This practice may help reduce salary expenses for the organization.

The practice of media organizations, including newspapers and press companies, setting up news agencies to engage stringers while avoiding direct employment relationships raises concerns about the exploitation of stringers' labor rights and job security. Stringers often find themselves in the role of part-time workers, and this classification allows organizations to pay them lower wages and benefits compared to regular employees.

The roles of news agencies are intermediaries between stringers and media organizations serve several purposes. It allows media organizations to hire more people at lower wages, effectively outsourcing news collection and reporting to external networks. This practice helps reduce salary expenses and may also allow organizations to circumvent the legal requirements and obligations associated with hiring full-time employees.

Union leader Narendhar Reddy's (Ex Secretary TWJU) mention of news agencies can be used to avoid providing appointment letters to stringers and to fix wages based on the size of the organization, as per the recommendations of the Wage Board. By channeling their employment through news agencies, media organizations can create a division of personnel within their structures, preventing stringers and other staff from forming unions and advocating for their rights collectively.

It's important to address these issues to ensure fair and equitable treatment for all individuals working in the journalism industry. Recognizing the contributions of stringers, providing job security, fair compensation, and opportunities for career advancement, can help create a more inclusive and supportive work environment in journalism.



II. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study has brought to light the intricate dynamics surrounding stringers' compensation and employment in press organizations, revealing not only the prevalent use of "line accounts" but also the exploitation faced by these essential contributors. Stringers, often categorized as "part-time workers," find themselves in a challenging position where their actual contributions far surpass their official recognition. Despite playing crucial roles in news collection and reporting, stringers contend with being treated as part-time employees, raising concerns about fairness and acknowledgment within the industry.

The added layer of exploitation emerges when examining the intermediary role of news agencies. While this arrangement allows media organizations to cut costs and outsource news-related tasks, it also raises ethical questions about fair compensation and the potential circumvention of legal obligations associated with hiring full-time staff. Stringers, facing financial challenges and job insecurity, find themselves at the mercy of a system that often exploits their dedication and hard work.

In essence, this research highlights the urgent need for a more nuanced understanding of stringers' contributions, fair recognition, and the eradication of exploitative practices within the news industry. Addressing these issues is paramount to creating a more equitable, transparent, and respectful working environment for stringers, aligning their roles and contributions with just and ethical treatment within press organizations.

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