

# Diversifying to beat the *downturn*

**Helen Clifton** examines how developing new skills can keep journalists afloat

If you scan through popular freelance forum *journobiz* you'll find journalists moonlighting as tour guides, hula hoop instructors and bed and breakfast landladies.

The economic downturn has forced freelancers to broaden their skill set in ever more imaginative ways to make money.

Yet although teaching and comms work have always provided a financial backup, sole traders are increasingly finding that diversification, rather than being a necessity, can actually enhance journalistic skills and add to that all-important self-esteem.

One of those for whom a portfolio career has delivered more than anticipated is Gemma Briggs. The 31-year-old mother of one lives in Towcester, just round the corner from Silverstone – handy for someone who spent eight years working for a range of motor racing titles.

But in 2008, long hours and a desire to broaden her wings set Gemma off into the freelance world. A weekly motorsport column for *guardian.co.uk* plus regular subbing shifts for the *Observer* kept her going. But as budgets started to shrink, commissions dried up.

By chance, her work live blogging motor sports events on the *Guardian* site led to an offer to teach undergraduates web journalism at City University – a job she did even while eight months' pregnant.

Teaching not only improved Gemma's writing, her confidence also grew enormously. "I did have some confidence – but only with small groups. I'm naturally quite shy, so having to teach larger groups of people has really helped me come out of my shell."

Another unexpected sideline has been PR for racing drivers. Notable successes include one of her clients – 16-year-old Sarah Moore – being shortlisted in the final ten for the 2009 BBC Young Sports Personality of the Year award.

But Gemma agrees that, traditionally, those who take PR work were seen by some colleagues as scraping the barrel.

"Yes, I did it for the extra cash, and to fill up my week a bit more. I would never have thought of doing it before.

"A lot of drivers had asked me to do it, and I didn't like mixing the two. But I said yes for financial reasons. And now, the majority of work I turn down is PR."

She says PR has actually helped her become a better journalist in general.

"I have learnt so much from doing it. I really have to work through whether or not a story is worthwhile. I'd worked a lot with television and radio; but I had never had anything to do with actual broadcasting before."

For some, taking the plunge into the unknown has resulted in a whole alternative career. Former oil trader and scientist Louise Murray ([www.louisemurray.com](http://www.louisemurray.com)) has always had adventure in her blood. But now, several times a year, the science, travel and conservation journalist treks up to the frozen wastes of the Arctic to organise camps for film and documentary crews with Canadian company Arctic Kingdom.

The 53-year-old also leads divers out to swim with walrus – 'far more unpredictable than swimming with great white sharks'. And it all began ten years ago with an invitation to write about the region for the Finnish Tourist Board.

## BOOSTING CONFIDENCE

Last April, the government agency Creative Partnerships commissioned Manchester-based journalist and photographer Ciara Leeming to teach a class of 15 Year Five pupils at St Anne's RC Primary School in Ancoats how to be journalists.

"It has given me more confidence in my skills. And apart from broadening my skill set, it's made me think more about what I am capable of doing.

"It helped me explain more what I do – it's made me appreciate what I do, and understand that what I do is actually quite interesting. I don't normally talk to many people about my work because I feel it's a bit boring; a bit worthy.



CIARA LEEMING

"Trying to find a way to make journalism more interesting to young people made me think more deeply about what I do and why I do it. It fits in with my values.

"I want to stay in journalism very much, but I had wanted to broaden out my offer for a while now. It definitely fits in with my work too – I am interested in anything that is community or people-based.

"I really miss the newsroom environment, and I think it is healthy to mix with different types of people, not just journalists."

[www.ciaraleeming.co.uk](http://www.ciaraleeming.co.uk)

“I do love it – it’s amazing. But it’s a job that I sorted out for myself, really,” Louise explains. “As soon as they asked me to come along on the trip, I thought, I want to work with you. So I made myself indispensable, I was very keen, and I did a lot of extra work on the organisational side of things.”

Although Louise’s exploration earnings pay less than journalism, the work has yielded more commissions. Her most recent trip saw her write for a men’s magazine launch about walrus diving, while the military fitness training she does as preparation led to a feature for the People newspaper. Laura also syndicates her photographs with Rex Pictures.

“You’ve got to be flexible, or die,” she says. “You can’t say, ‘I only do real life women’s pieces’. I am writing, I am taking pictures, I am doing the exploration stuff...you’ve got to do as much as you are comfortable with. The more flexible you are, the more likely you are to get work.

“I love the Arctic and the Inuit people. I have a lot of friends there, and that is something that I value immensely. I would never want to give it up. You’ve got to get on with it, and not whinge. I just wish I’d started this earlier.”

Phil Sutcliffe, a freelance of thirty years’ experience and committee member at London Freelance Branch, agrees.

“Freelancers by their nature have to be optimistic and resilient people able to deal with the bad times. There are a lot out there who don’t have enough work and who aren’t earning as much as they used to.

“Diversification will often come up in branch meetings – everybody understands and everybody knows what it’s like. That is a proper union function, to support people and say we are right behind you.”

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Former teacher and now full-time freelance and assistant editor of the NUJ Freelance magazine Matt Salusbury explains that the NUJ is always there to support journalists with portfolio careers, even if the majority of their income may come from cat-sitting.

“As an FE college lecturer, I could join the UCU (University and College Union), which has a dual membership agreement with the NUJ.

“If you’re forced into such a portfolio career, bear in mind there are such dual union agreements with some unions that let you keep one foot in the journalism camp.”

He says it is crucial that HMRC are informed of any change in circumstances if extra work no longer fits into the self-employed bracket; and emphasises that those who have to take a day job should ensure it’s one that will be useful in journalism.

Phil says the mere act of putting yourself in someone else’s shoes is an important skill for any journalist – and that any prejudices about portfolio careers are slowly disappearing.

For Gemma, diversification means she couldn’t be happier.

“I really love my work now. With my staff job – and the long hours – I had become jaded. But now I never know what is round the corner. Once you are willing to take on different areas and different jobs, you never know what is coming. Which is great.”

[www.journobiz.com](http://www.journobiz.com)

[www.poynter.org/how-tos/leadership-management/what-great-bosses-know/94647/ten-reasons-you-should-hire-a-journalist/](http://www.poynter.org/how-tos/leadership-management/what-great-bosses-know/94647/ten-reasons-you-should-hire-a-journalist/)

