

Editors as Entrepreneurs: Reframing Occupational Identity in Publishing

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Abstract This article examines how freelance editors in the twenty-first century book publishing industry develop entrepreneurial identities by navigating rather than resolving inherent professional contradictions. Drawing on 15 qualitative semi-structured interviews with freelance editors, this study identifies three core paradoxes that define contemporary editorial entrepreneurship: risk/stability tensions in business growth, culture/commerce conflicts between artistic integrity and market demands, and editor/entrepreneur identity contradictions between collaborative service orientation and competitive self-promotion. The findings reveal that editorial success depends on developing a paradox mindset: The capacity to simultaneously leverage contradictory demands rather than integrating or resolving them. Successful editors employ sophisticated strategies including diversification, values-based business positioning, and contextual identity performance. Rather than choosing between competing orientations, paradox-mindset editors create business models that provide both risk and stability, make cultural commitments the foundation of commercial strategy, and develop hybrid professional identities that transcend traditional categories. This study contributes to the emerging disciplinary identity of Editing and Publishing (E&P), and these findings suggest that E&P programs should teach paradox navigation as a core competency to prepare students to be editor entrepreneurs. This study contributes to entrepreneurship theory by demonstrating how creative entrepreneurs can transform inherent contradictions into competitive advantages, with broader implications for understanding professional success in the increasingly complex gig economy.

Keywords editors, entrepreneurship, paradox mindset, occupational identity, freelance

Freelance editors in the twenty-first century are entrepreneurs as well as editors, which requires that they manage the contradictions between business and culture. Being a creative entrepreneur is fundamentally paradoxical “because conflicting tensions arise between the market and the arts” (Koch et al., 2023, p. 281). This paradoxical environment, characterized by the tension between cultural capital and economic capital (Bourdieu,

1984), defines the contemporary landscape for freelance editors who must function as entrepreneurs to sustain their careers. However, in this context, editors develop entrepreneurial identities by navigating rather than resolving the inherent professional contradictions of being a creative entrepreneur.

The book publishing industry has undergone dramatic transformation over the past several decades, fundamentally altering the nature of editorial work and career trajectories. Three macro events have been particularly impactful on editors as entrepreneurs: the outsourcing of editorial work and downsizing of publishing companies, the explosive rise of self-published authors seeking professional editorial services, and the COVID-19 pandemic's acceleration of remote work and industry disruption. These shifts have created what Padmini Ray Murray and Claire Squires describe as “a more fragmented and atomized work culture” where “fledgling companies are more likely to be built as lean start-ups” that employ people “only when a need for a certain skillset is demonstrated” (2013, p. 12).

This transformation has pushed editorial work increasingly toward freelance arrangements, creating a professional landscape where editors must develop entrepreneurial mindsets to navigate successfully. The shift represents more than industry restructuring, fundamentally signaling a reorientation of how editorial expertise is valued, practiced, and compensated within the publishing ecosystem. Traditional employment categories blur as editors discover, evaluate, and exploit opportunities to create services (Shane & Venkataraman, 2000), while accepting the inherent risks that define entrepreneurship (Dollinger, 2008; Mokaya et al., 2012; Koudstaal et al., 2016).

However, existing research has largely overlooked the unique challenges facing freelance editors as they construct and maintain professional identities that span both creative and commercial domains. This study addresses this gap by examining how freelance editors navigate and develop their entrepreneurial identities within an industry characterized by persistent contradictions between artistic integrity and market demands.

The Entrepreneurial Turn in Editing

Freelance editorial work has been characterized as entrepreneurship (Akhmetshin et al., 2018), particularly within the publishing industry (Noorda, 2021; Stanworth & Stanworth, 1997). Editorial freelancers qualify as entrepreneurs because they discover, evaluate, and exploit opportunities to create services (Shane & Venkataraman, 2000). Risk-taking, a defining characteristic of entrepreneurship (Dollinger, 2008; Mokaya et al., 2012; Koudstaal et al., 2016), is also inherent in freelance editing work. The entrepreneurial turn

in editing has created a spectrum of entrepreneurial identity for editors, where traditional employment categories blur and new forms of professional agency emerge (Noorda, 2021).

The entrepreneurial imperative facing contemporary editors extends beyond individual career choices, encompassing broader questions about the future of editorial expertise in the publishing landscape. Publishers have traditionally served as gatekeepers in the industry, but self-publishing has disrupted that system, flooding the marketplace, which “creates a problem both for the author and for the potential reader” (Hviid et al., 2019, p. 373). In this context, freelance editors have emerged as crucial intermediaries, providing quality assurance and professional guidance both inside and outside traditional institutional frameworks.

The Feminization and Freelancification of Editorial Work

The contemporary landscape of freelance editorial work cannot be understood without examining its historical context. Editing was originally a male-dominated profession, but by the late 1970s and early 1980s, two-thirds of editors were women (Reskin, 1990). This feminization occurred alongside industry consolidation, creating what Debra Osnowitz (2007) argues were mutually reinforcing dynamics: “Freelancing thus seemed gender appropriate, an arrangement for women, for whom paid work could appear to be a secondary pursuit” (p. 463).

The gendered nature of freelance editorial work has significant implications for how editors construct entrepreneurial identities. Women editors have historically been more willing to accept freelance arrangements and lower compensation rates, often due to having “another source of income, placed low priority on earnings, or lacked better-paying alternatives” (Reskin, 1990, p. 103). This pattern persists today in publishing, illustrated even in the language used in job descriptions. In the UK, for example, Miriam Johnson demonstrated that publishing job advertisements in *The Bookseller* with strongly feminine-coded language earned an average of £34,600 compared to £42,556 for strongly masculine-coded positions (2024).

However, characterizing freelance editors merely as victims of industry restructuring or gender discrimination oversimplifies the story and ignores their agency. As Christine Larson (2020) argues, “To deny the dark side of insecure employment seems disingenuous and short-sighted; to dismiss the potential opportunities of self-entrepreneurism, however, precludes the potential of resistance and resilience in the face of new economic

structures” (p. 1893). This article aims to address both the challenges and opportunities of entrepreneurship for freelance editors, based on the narratives that freelance editors tell about themselves and their occupational journeys.

The Rise of Self-Publishing and Editorial Demand

The growth of self-publishing has fundamentally transformed the editorial services market, creating unprecedented opportunities for freelance editors while simultaneously challenging traditional publishing gatekeeping functions. The introduction of ebooks and print-on-demand technology, particularly following the 2007 launch of the Kindle, facilitated explosive growth in self-publishing (Hviid et al., 2019). According to Bowker data, in 2017, the number of self-published ISBNs topped one million for the first time (Milliot, 2023). By 2023, only six years later, that number was 2.6 million, a 160% increase (Albanese & Milliot, 2024).

This dramatic expansion has created substantial demand for professional editorial services outside traditional publishing houses. Self-published authors increasingly recognize that professional editing is essential for market competitiveness, as one author explained in Henrik Fürst's study: “You have to get filters. I tested my manuscript on friends and family. But I understood that this was not a sufficient test. I hired a freelance editor. I asked her for her tough opinion” (2019, p. 493). This recognition has driven significant growth in freelance editorial services as well as membership in editorial trade organizations, with Editorial Freelancers Association membership growing from 2,200 to over 3,300 in the past decade.

The economic impact of this shift is substantial. For example, the freelancer marketplace Reedsy estimates that in 2025, self-publishing a book costs roughly between \$2,940 and \$5,660, data based on over 230,000 freelancer quotes on Reedsy (Villirilli, 2025). The cost for editing, specifically (for an 80,000-word book) is estimated to be between \$2,000 and \$4,720. Of course, editing costs specifically depend on the length of the book, the type of editorial work needed, and the experience of the editor. Nonetheless, what this data does reveal is that editorial costs are the bulk of the cost for self-publishing a book. Unlike traditional publishing where editors are employed by houses, self-publishing creates direct author-editor relationships that bypass institutional intermediaries. This market structure enables editors to command higher rates while building ongoing relationships with productive authors who publish multiple titles annually.

The COVID-19 pandemic further accelerated these trends, as traditional publishing workflows were disrupted (Guren, McIlroy, & Sieck, 2021) and authors increasingly sought

direct access to editorial services (Greenberg, 2010; Poliakova, 2021). Layoffs and furloughs hit in-house editors hard during the pandemic (Milliot, 2020; Tracy, 2020), and many turned to freelance work as a result (Terrell, 2020). Simultaneously, book sales soared (Milliot, 2021; Curcic, 2023) despite global supply chain issues, demonstrating both the vulnerability and resilience of freelance editors while highlighting their capacity to adapt quickly to changing market conditions (Berliner, 2020).

Paradox Theory and Creative Entrepreneurship

Paradox theory offers a particularly apt lens for understanding the challenges facing contemporary freelance editors. Wendy K. Smith and Marianne W. Lewis define paradox as “contradictory yet interrelated elements that exist simultaneously and persist over time” (2011, p. 382). Unlike problems that can be solved through rational analysis or tensions that can be resolved through compromise, paradoxes represent persistent contradictions that require ongoing management rather than resolution.

For creative entrepreneurs, these paradoxes are especially pronounced. Eric Knight and Will Harvey assert, “by definition, creative industry implies an inherent tension. Creative organizations seek to produce novel, innovative conceptions, yet they are simultaneously called on to be efficient, repetitive, and exploitative” (2015, p. 822). The creative industries are characterized by what Richard Caves (2000) calls “nobody knows” properties: high uncertainty about market reception combined with the need to maintain artistic integrity. This creates an environment where traditional business logic often conflicts with creative imperatives: a fundamental paradox. Research shows several examples of paradoxes in the creative industries. For example, the fashion industry exemplifies tensions between artistic design logic and market-driven business logic in a sustainability paradox as the industry has shifted from art-centered to market-centered production; in this paradox, sustainability ethics are juxtaposed with the push to mass produce fast fashion (Dzhengiz et al., 2023). Arthur De Vany & David W. Walls (2004) demonstrates that successful films follow a Pareto distribution with infinite variance, meaning traditional statistical prediction methods fundamentally fail: This is the “nobody knows” properties that Caves mentioned as marketing and artistic integrity come into tension for high-risk markets. Michael Pokorny, Peter Miskell, and John Sedgwick (2019) explore this tension, noting the central paradox: “The film industry is a creative industry in which novelty is an essential aspect. As a consequence, it is characterized by high levels of uncertainty for both producer and consumer. Yet the firms that dominate global film distribution have remained remarkably stable over the last century” (p. 23).

The concept of paradox mindset is particularly relevant to understanding how successful creative entrepreneurs navigate their professional identities. Rather than viewing contradictory demands as problems to be solved, individuals with a high paradox mindset “leverage experienced tensions to achieve beneficial outcomes” (Miron-Spektor et al., 2016). This approach acknowledges that the tensions inherent in creative entrepreneurship are not problems to be fixed but features to be managed dynamically. Individuals with a paradox mindset have been shown to be more creative than others (Miron-Spektor et al., 2011) and more innovative (Liu et al., 2020), essential qualities for entrepreneurship (Bolton & Thompson, 2000).

Gender also inflects the context of the paradox mindset. Lydia Amaro and Caren Brenda Scheepers (2023) found that women, particularly, faced paradoxical tensions and expectations. In their study of women leaders, the researchers found that authenticity and awareness enabled women to adopt a paradox mindset and that this mindset helped the women adapt to the work environment or curate their own subenvironment. Given the feminization of editorial work over the last 50 years, this gender context is also relevant to understanding the paradox mindset in editors as entrepreneurs.

This study addresses the following research question: How do freelance editors develop and deploy paradox mindset to navigate the inherent tensions of creative entrepreneurship? By focusing on paradox navigation rather than paradox resolution, this study contributes to both entrepreneurship literature and publishing studies.

Methodology

Entrepreneurial identity formation is a complex process that involves what Mats Alvesson, Karen Lee Ashcraft, and Robyn Thomas (2008) term “identity work”: the ongoing effort to construct, maintain, and modify professional self-concepts. For freelance editors, this work is particularly challenging because it requires integrating often contradictory elements: creative and commercial orientations, collaborative and competitive behaviors, service and leadership roles.

This study employs a discursive approach to entrepreneurship, representing what Denise Fletcher has termed the “fifth movement in entrepreneurial research” in which entrepreneurial knowledge is produced “through language and discourse” (Fletcher, 2003). Narrative, as a discursive practice, provides a methodology for investigating how entrepreneurship processes are “socially constructed through language” (Jones et al., 2008). Audretsch and Lehmann argue that all entrepreneurs are storytellers, and narrative serves scholars of entrepreneurship “as an inductive methodology employed to analyse

entrepreneurship ... and everything surrounding and influencing that phenomenon” (2023). Moreover, entrepreneurial narratives “have the potential to influence an individual’s perceptions, intentions, and decisions about the entrepreneurial process” (Dong & Bao 2024), making them both objects of study and active forces in entrepreneurial practice.

The narrative approach is grounded in the understanding that identities are fundamentally produced through narrative (Down, 2006; Downing, 2005; Hamilton, 2014). Narratives perform critical functions in entrepreneurial identity construction: They give meaning and value to events, mediate experiences, and “play a critical role in the process of sensemaking” (Byrne & Shepherd, 2015, p. 376). Crucially, “we are always reinterpreting our identity, drawing on narratives available to us via our culture embedded in our social and historical context” (Hamilton, 2014, p. 706). Identities thus emerge not from fixed characteristics but through ongoing narrative work.

The recognition that entrepreneurial identity is itself a narrative construction (Down, 2006; Downing, 2005; Hamilton, 2014) has led to the increasing adoption of narrative approaches and methodologies within entrepreneurship scholarship. Studies employing narrative methodologies have examined how entrepreneurs construct identity through stories (Bjursell & Melin 2011; Johansson, 2004), how narrative serves as a discursive resource for identity work (Larson & Pearson, 2012, p. 250), and how entrepreneurial innovation is contextualized through narrative perspectives (Garud, 2014). This body of work demonstrates that entrepreneurial narratives “assist in understanding what motivates individual entrepreneurs and how their businesses operate” (Fillis, 2015, p. 432).

The narrative approach has significant implications. Interviews themselves function as a type of narrative, allowing researchers to explore how interviewees rhetorically position themselves, with emphasis on “their description of their practices and processes rather than the practices and processes themselves” (Squires, 2021, p. 205). As Squires argues, “These discursive positionings are both part of their practice ... and [are] actively constitutive of those practices” (Squires, 2021, p. 205).

Interviews thus operate on two levels: as narratives in their own right, and as sites where interviewees deploy discursive practices and rhetorical positions rooted in socially embedded cultural narratives of entrepreneurship. This dual character makes interviews particularly valuable for examining how entrepreneurs construct and perform their identities through narrative resources available within their specific social, cultural, and historical contexts.

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In order to utilize the narrative approach in this study, I employed a qualitative methodology to understand how freelance editors construct and navigate entrepreneurial identities. Given the complex, contextual, and processual nature of entrepreneurial identity formation, qualitative interviews provided the most appropriate method for capturing the nuanced ways editors experience and make sense of their professional roles.

The Institutional Review Board at Portland State University reviewed and exempted this research (Protocol #850). Fifteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with freelance editors recruited through the Editorial Freelancers Association. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure geographic diversity and range of editorial specializations. The sample included editors from across the United States, and a few from outside the U.S.: Arkansas, California, South Carolina, Colorado, Minnesota, Pennsylvania, Connecticut, Montana, New York, Toronto, Serbia, India, and Pakistan.

Participants represented diverse editorial specializations in editorial types (developmental, copyediting, proofreading, etc.) and areas (academic, medical, children's, fiction, nonfiction, etc.). Experience levels ranged from emerging freelancers with 2–3 years of experience to established professionals with over two decades in the field.

Semi-structured interviews lasting 60–90 minutes were conducted via Zoom during 2025. Questions were framed to encourage narrative responses (refer to Appendix A), allowing participants to construct and share stories about their professional experiences. Interview transcripts were analyzed using a grounded theory approach combined with content analysis, with the concept of paradox mindset emerging inductively from the data.

The research questions were designed to explore editors' entrepreneurial identities and experiences through an intersectional, biographical lens along key themes of identity construction and self-perception, sensemaking and defining entrepreneurship, entrepreneurial practice, context and constraint, and career trajectories and decision making. Interviews provided data about whether editors see themselves as entrepreneurs, the relationship between professional identity and entrepreneurial identity, how social identities shape entrepreneurial experience, how editors conceptualize entrepreneurship and negotiate public perceptions of entrepreneurship, daily operations and routines, risk navigation and adaptation strategies, business management and branding, industry-specific challenges and affordances, geographic/location influences, structural changes and responses, pathways into editorial work, and work-life integration choices.

The questions progressed strategically during each interview from general to specific, past to present, and descriptive to reflective, allowing rapport-building while capturing both objective circumstances and subjective meaning-making. The questions were designed to surface tensions between traditional employment and entrepreneurial self-understanding in the creative industries. Thus, the interviews provided a phenomenological inquiry with elements of narrative/life history methods, critical/intersectional analysis, and grounded theory orientation. In particular, the grounded theory orientation was crucial to the methodology and design, where open-ended and exploratory framing could avoid imposing predetermined categories and minimal theoretical presumption leaves classifications open in a process-focused inquiry that surfaces gaps between expectations and experiences to explore where interesting theoretical tensions lie.

Once the interview data was collected, recorded, and transcribed, content analysis was conducted to develop themes. The online free qualitative content analysis tool Taguette was used to organize the content analysis tags and themes. Tags were derived inductively from the data and included personal and demographic characteristics (age, family, location, etc.), entrepreneurial pathway, human capital, brand and business identity, financial management and risk, services and operations, client acquisition and marketing, social capital and networks, industry context and change, and work structure and lifestyle.

Findings

Analysis of the interview data revealed that freelance editors must navigate three core paradoxes to build sustainable entrepreneurial careers: **(1) the risk/stability paradox** in business development, **(2) the culture/commerce paradox** between artistic integrity and market demands, and **(3) the editor/entrepreneur identity paradox** between collaborative service orientation and competitive self-promotion. Rather than resolving these tensions, successful editors develop a *paradox mindset*: the ability to simultaneously embrace contradictory demands and leverage them for professional advantage.

This section examines each paradox in turn, demonstrating how editors with a paradox mindset transform inherent contradictions into competitive advantages through sophisticated navigation strategies. The analysis reveals that editorial success depends not on choosing between competing orientations, but on developing the capacity to hold contradictions in productive tension.

Paradox 1: Risk/Stability Tensions

The risk-stability paradox represents the fundamental tension between entrepreneurial growth and professional security. Risk is a crucial aspect of entrepreneurship, which Ulrich Bröckling characterizes as one of the four main functions of an entrepreneur: risk-bearer (2015). To build a successful business, an entrepreneur must take risks, juxtaposed with measures of stability. Growth and innovation require experimenting with new clients, services, pricing strategies, and market positioning, which are all inherently risky endeavors. Yet quality editorial work demands consistency, reliability, predictable workflows, and stable client relationships. Freelance editors manage this paradox through three primary strategies that enable them to embrace both risk and stability simultaneously.

Reconceptualizing Risk as Competitive Advantage

Editors with a paradox mindset demonstrate sophisticated approaches to risk reconceptualization. Rather than viewing risk as a threat to be minimized, they position uncertainty as a competitive advantage. One editor explained their market positioning: “Send us your nightmares. If you really can't figure out how to get something done, we'll figure it out for you.” By specifically targeting the most challenging projects that other editors avoided, this editor earned premium rates while satisfying their need for intellectual stimulation.

Another editor demonstrated paradox mindset by placing individual risk within broader economic context: “The kind of micro business that we're running... is lost in the noise on that economic curve... There's somebody who can afford our services and wants it.” This perspective acknowledges macroeconomic uncertainty while highlighting the resilience that comes from operating at smaller scale, viewing economic volatility as creating opportunities for nimble, specialized service providers.

Strategic Diversification

Using a paradox mindset, editors employed diversification strategies that embraced rather than resolved the risk/stability tension. These strategies operated across multiple dimensions: balancing steady, regular lower-paying clients with one-off higher-paying clients; maintaining 8–10 clients with intentionally varied payment levels and schedules; and expanding into complementary services while deepening core editorial expertise.

Several editors balanced self-published authors with small publishers and other client types. Generally, self-published authors are higher-paying but less predictable, while

publishers are lower-paying but steadier. As one editor explained: “I try to keep no customers ever more than 30% of my work” to avoid over-reliance on any single revenue source. This approach provides multiple payment schedules that maintain cash flow while preserving flexibility for diverse projects.

Structured Flexibility

Perhaps the most sophisticated manifestation of paradox mindset was what emerged as structured flexibility: the ability to maintain both rigid planning and adaptive responsiveness. One editor described their approach: “I like to have as much of my schedule for the next year planned out as possible” while simultaneously maintaining openings for last-minute work. Rather than choosing between careful planning and flexible responsiveness, they built systems that enabled both through planned time off and predictable project schedules alongside capacity for urgent, premium-rate opportunities.

Paradox 2: Culture/Commerce Tensions

The culture-commerce paradox reflects broader tensions within the publishing industry, where books are simultaneously cultural artifacts and commercial products (Koegler & Norrick-Rühl 2023). For freelance editors, this tension is particularly acute because they must personally embody both orientations within their individual practices. Editors navigate this paradox through values-based business strategies that make cultural commitments the foundation of commercial success.

Values-Based Business Positioning

Editors with a paradox mindset implement business strategies driven by personal values that simultaneously create distinctive market positioning. One editor focused specifically on serving first-generation college students and women writers while running a profitable business, leveraging social commitments to create deep client loyalty rather than viewing values as constraining business potential.

Another editor chose to work with non-native English speakers, finding this rewarding because “I understood [the writers] had to publish in English, and they were at a disadvantage... I knew I was contributing to their career as well as getting paid.” This values-driven positioning created both meaningful work and sustainable competitive advantage in an underserved market segment.

Relationship-Centered Philosophy

Successful freelance editors prioritize authentic relationships over transactional professionalism, recognizing that book publishing is fundamentally a relationship business (Thompson, 2012). One editor noted: “I’ve always felt like we all do ourselves a disservice by not seeing that there’s a human on the other side of the equation.” This relationship focus extends to author development over immediate transactions: “My goal as an editor is to help my authors become better writers.”

Importantly, this relationship orientation coexists with sophisticated business practices. Editors maintain strict commercial boundaries through detailed contracts, kill fees, and immediate termination of abusive clients while simultaneously investing in long-term client relationships and community engagement. As one editor explained: “I don’t promote myself as ‘hire me’ but ‘I can help you,’” demonstrating how cultural values become commercial strategy.

Volunteer work is another way that editors build relationships in their communities. One editor maintains relationships with low-paying clients not for commercial reasons but for cultural and relational ones. Another editor provides free consulting that takes significant time for a volunteer nonprofit organization: “I’ve always treated the volunteer things as being as important as the work things because they achieve what I want to achieve and give me lots of credibility and profile.” This creates a paradox where unpaid work directly fuels commercial success. One editor volunteers extensively in local government and the library, demonstrating a commitment to community values while noting: “I have met people through these opportunities who then refer clients to me or approach me about editing their own manuscripts, which is a nice perk, but it’s something I also enjoy on its own merits.” Thus, this editor maintains genuine community engagement while staying attuned to business benefits.

Strategic Authenticity

Editors leverage personal identity as cultural currency while building professional authority. One BIPOC editor had initially hidden their identity due to bias but recently began authentic self-presentation: “I was flooded with people, and it was amazing.” Rather than abandoning cultural values to attain commercial success, this editor monetized cultural expertise while creating more representative editorial services.

Another editor wrestled with social media feeling “false” while recognizing its purpose for their business. They resolved to find authentic ways to market themselves on social media, focusing “more about my style than about my editing” on Instagram. Genuineness and

make-up free photos on social media are contrasted by other investments in professional marketing materials and web design. In discussing their brand, one editor said, “I just want to be my normal natural self. And I hope that that comes off as very clear on my website that I'm not stuffy and corporate.”

Technology Adaptation

Many technological changes have impacted the publishing industry in the last few decades: ebooks, print on demand, the internet, platforms, and design software. But the large technological shift currently is GenAI.

Perspectives ranged amongst editors. From “I hate AI with every atom of my being” to “you need to understand what it can do ... and figure out how to use it.” In some ways, AI exemplifies paradox and editors struggled with the tensions of both the practical realities and the ethical complexities. While some editors did not use AI at all, others talked about how they or their authors used it: for dictation, generating contract templates, image enhancement, and non-native language editing, for example. Several editors talked about losing jobs and clients to AI. What became very clear was that there is value in a human editor, but that in the age of GenAI, editors needed to work harder to articulate that value to clients.

One editor took a pragmatic approach: “Are you going to pay me my regular rate? Because if you’re going to pay my regular rate, I don’t care [if you use AI].” This stance illustrates sophisticated navigation of technology tensions, adapting services to maintain relevance while preserving editorial expertise.

Many editors have, over the years, adapted their services and offerings to accommodate a holistic editorial experience, incorporate writing, and generally move more toward relationship-building and other aspects of editorial work that are untouched by AI. When AI threatened traditional editing, they invested heavily in learning new editorial skills: structural rewriting, visual abstracts, and translation management, for example.

Regarding technology, particularly GenAI, editors demonstrated paradox mindset by neither fully embracing nor rejecting technological change.

Paradox 3: Editor/Entrepreneur Identity Navigation

The third core paradox involves integrating the traditionally service-oriented, collaborative, craft-focused identity of the editor with the self-promotional, competitive, profit-focused identity of the entrepreneur. This paradox is particularly challenging because editorial

training typically emphasizes self-effacement and behind-the-scenes work, while entrepreneurial success requires visibility and self-advocacy.

Reconceptualizing Entrepreneurship

Freelance editors show significant resistance to identifying as entrepreneurs, instead preferring terms like “small business owner,” “solopreneur,” or “independent service provider.” This reluctance stems from several factors: many associate entrepreneurship with growth-orientation and scaling businesses rather than simply earning a living, while others view editorial freelancing as an established service rather than innovative entrepreneurship.

One editor defined entrepreneurship as “someone who sees how to scale a business,” while describing themselves as “driven to get enough money to live” rather than build a growth-oriented enterprise. Another explained: “I would not describe myself as an entrepreneur. I would definitely say that I have entrepreneurial skills, but an entrepreneur is someone who is starting a business and scaling up.” This distinction between possessing entrepreneurial skills and embracing entrepreneurial identity reveals sophisticated identity work that preserves editorial values while acknowledging business reality.

Hybrid Professional Identity Construction

Editors with a paradox mindset construct hybrid professional identities that integrate both orientations rather than choosing one over the other. One editor described their approach: “I don’t call myself an entrepreneur, although that is what I am.” Many editors preferred terms that captured both service orientation and business sophistication, with one explaining their preference for “small business owner”: “I’m established, and I tend to think of entrepreneurs as people who are still trying to get it off the ground.” This choice of professional terminology reflects deeper identity integration strategies, allowing the editor to acknowledge their business acumen while distinguishing themselves from startup culture’s growth-oriented rhetoric that felt inconsistent with editorial values.

Contextual Identity Performance

Most importantly, editors with paradox mindset demonstrated sophisticated understanding of when and how to emphasize different aspects of their hybrid identities. One editor described positioning themselves differently for three client types: as a knowledgeable guide, a reliable professional, and a systematic expert. This contextual

approach illustrates how editors avoid rigid identity consistency, instead adapting self-presentation to client needs while maintaining core professional integrity.

All interviewed editors could be defined as entrepreneurs and demonstrated clear business thinking: risk management, strategic diversification, client management, and brand building. However, they generally saw themselves as “editor first and business owner second,” while simultaneously acknowledging: “I realize that maybe I am more of an entrepreneur than I give myself credit for.” This real-time paradox recognition illustrates the ongoing identity work required to navigate entrepreneurial editing successfully.

Paradox Mindset as Competitive Advantage

The analysis of interviews with freelance editors demonstrates several strategies that freelance editors use to manage the paradoxes of risk and stability, commerce and culture, and editor and entrepreneur identities. When it comes to risk and stability, editors reconceptualize risk and also diversify clients, payment schedules, editorial areas, etc. to hold both risk and stability simultaneously. For commerce and culture, there are particular business strategies and philosophies that editors use for the paradox, focusing on values-based and relationship-centered approaches in addition to strategic authenticity. Technology adaptation, particularly adaptations to GenAI, illustrate how editors use a paradox mindset to manage industry change. Finally, freelance editors hold the two often conflicting identities of editor and entrepreneur by reconceptualizing what an entrepreneur is and exploring alternate terminology, in addition to developing hybrid and contextual professional identities.

The findings reveal that freelance editorial success is not determined by resolving professional contradictions through skills acquisition or identity integration, but rather by developing the capacity to hold contradictions in productive tension. This capacity (a paradox mindset) represents a fundamental reorientation toward complexity and ambiguity that enables creative entrepreneurs to thrive in inherently contradictory environments. Traditional approaches to professional development often emphasize integration and resolving of tensions and contradictions. The findings of this study suggest that such approaches may be counterproductive for creative entrepreneurs who operate in inherently paradoxical environments.

Editors with a paradox mindset don’t eliminate contradictions; they leverage them. Rather than choosing between risk and stability, they create business models that provide both. Instead of resolving culture and commerce tensions, they make cultural and creative authenticity the foundation of commercial strategy. Rather than integrating editor and

entrepreneur identities, they develop contextual competence in performing both roles as circumstances require.

The findings have significant implications for how editing and publishing programs prepare students for contemporary professional realities. First, education for editing and publishing needs to include and emphasize business skills and entrepreneurship development alongside technical editing skills. Second, building a paradox mindset should be a core competency to aid students in identifying and navigating the contradictions of contemporary editorial freelance work. Students would benefit from activities that help them identify paradoxes and build a paradox mindset, activities such as case studies, experiential learning, and real-world projects that require simultaneous attention to cultural and commercial considerations. Third, identity work is also branding and positioning work. E&P programs might include explicit attention to professional identity construction, helping students develop capacity for hybrid role performance rather than assuming consistent professional identity. Finally, situational awareness and flexible, agile, and adaptive capacity in different professional contexts is crucial for freelance editors, and E&P programs would benefit from working to develop these qualities rather than teaching “universal” business principles.

This study has several limitations that suggest directions for future research. The focus on primarily U.S.-based freelance editors limits generalizability to other roles in the publishing industry or creative entrepreneurship contexts. The interview methodology captures sense-making rather than real-time paradox navigation that could observe paradox mindset in action. Future research might also explore how a paradox mindset develops over time and what environmental factors support or hinder its development. Quantitative research could test whether paradox mindset predicts entrepreneurial success better than traditional measures of business knowledge or personality traits. Additionally, research examining how paradox mindset operates in other creative entrepreneurship contexts (freelance designers, writers, or artists) could illuminate whether these findings extend beyond editorial work to creative entrepreneurship more broadly.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that challenges facing contemporary freelance editors reflect broader transformations in creative work requiring new approaches to professional identity and career development. By applying paradox theory to understand freelance editorial practice, this study contributes theoretically informed, empirically grounded research that strengthens the emerging disciplinary identity of E&P. The shift toward freelance

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arrangements represents not merely an economic phenomenon but a fundamental reorientation of how creative expertise is utilized and valued.

The concept of paradox mindset offers a useful framework for understanding how creative entrepreneurs can thrive in inherently contradictory environments. Rather than viewing tensions between culture and commerce, risk and stability, or editor and entrepreneurial identities and orientations as problems to be solved, editors with this mindset leverage contradictions as sources of competitive advantage. This theoretical lens demonstrates how publishing scholarship can engage meaningfully with contemporary organizational theory while remaining grounded in industry realities, bridging what Andrew Ciofalo (1988) identified as the need for “a deep and meaningful connection” between academic institutions and industry (p.3) while avoiding what Simone Murray (2007) critiqued as the field’s vulnerability to being seen as merely “a fringe intellectual undertaking” (p. 3).

The study’s approach parallels E&P’s own revolution. Just as freelance editors must navigate multiple, often contradictory professional orientations simultaneously, the E&P discipline is learning to productively hold tensions between competing demands: academic legitimacy and vocational relevance, theoretical inquiry and practical application, disciplinary coherence and interdisciplinary openness. Jocelyn Hargrave calls this the “shared vocabulary and editorial understanding” necessary to “connect industry with academia” while contributing original theoretical insights to broader scholarly conversations about creative labor and professional identity (2022, p.3).

For editing and publishing education, these findings suggest pedagogical approaches that prepare students not just with technical skills but with the cognitive and emotional capacity to navigate complexity. The vision of editors as “digitally savvy communication consultants, coders, teachers, mentors and advocates for accessibility and inclusivity” reflects this expanded professional identity (Lee, 2019, p. 17). This study provides empirical evidence for what such preparation must entail: developing students’ capacity to recognize, articulate, and productively leverage professional contradictions rather than seeking to resolve them.

This study contributes to E&P’s disciplinary legitimacy by demonstrating methodological rigor and theoretical engagement. Rather than offering purely descriptive accounts or vocational advice, it employs systematic qualitative research methods and draws on established theoretical frameworks to generate new knowledge about contemporary editorial practice. This approach addresses the field’s historical challenge of being perceived as lacking “theoretical and methodological rigour” (Murray, 2007). By showing how organizational theories of paradox can illuminate creative professional practice, the

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research expands E&P's theoretical toolkit while maintaining focus on the material realities of publishing work, offering a scholarly contribution that is theoretically and empirically grounded and practically relevant. The implications extend beyond publishing to creative entrepreneurship generally, yet the study's grounding in specific editorial contexts demonstrates E&P's potential to contribute distinctive insights to broader conversations about the future of creative professional work.

The path forward for editors lies not in choosing between competing professional orientations but in developing the capacity to embody multiple orientations simultaneously. For freelance editors, this means being fully both editor and entrepreneur, cultural advocate and commercial strategist, collaborative partner and competitive business owner, which is a source of sustainable competitive advantage in an increasingly complex creative economy. For the E&P discipline, this study demonstrates how theoretically informed research into contemporary editorial practice can simultaneously advance scholarly knowledge, inform industry practice, and enrich educational pedagogy: embodying the “industry-relevant research that provides market-ready, employable students with strong industry links” while maintaining academic rigor (Baverstock, 2020). In modeling this approach, the research not only illuminates freelance editorial practice but also demonstrates how E&P scholarship can establish its legitimacy as a discipline that productively occupies the spaces between theory and practice, academy and industry, stability and change.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

Tell me about your professional background.

Tell me about your educational background.

Would you describe yourself as an entrepreneur? Why or why not?

How do you define the terms “entrepreneur” and “entrepreneurship”?

What do you see as the general public perception of entrepreneurs and entrepreneurship?

Have you had any experiences in which you have had to describe, defend, or engage with these perceptions?

Are there particular aspects of your personality that you see as especially well suited (or not) to the entrepreneurship lifestyle?

Tell me about your work/life balance.

How (if at all) has your gender identity, race and socio-economic background influenced you as an entrepreneur?

Why did you become an editor? Talk me through that decision process.

What challenges do you face as an editor that other book publishing professionals do not have to deal with? How have you tackled those?

What advantages are there to being an editor, particularly in comparison to other roles in the industry?

What aspect of being an editor most surprised you?

Tell me about what the business side of being an editor looks like for you.

What does a typical workday look like for you?

How does where you currently live influence your business?

Are there particular networking opportunities that you find especially useful and/or enjoyable as an editor?

What are the power structures and gatekeepers in the industry that both help and hinder you as an editor?

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