

2021 AEJMC Proposal

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Bios

Nelanthi Hewa is a Ph.D. student at the University of Toronto's Faculty of Information, studying journalism, sexual violence coverage, and the digital public sphere. She has published her academic research in *First Monday* and *Journalism Studies* and has produced journalistic work for *The Globe and Mail*, the *Toronto Star*, and the *Hamilton Spectator*.

Nicole Cohen is an Associate Professor at the University of Toronto (Institute of Communication, Culture, Information and Technology and the Faculty of Information). She is author of *Writers' Rights: Freelance Journalism in a Digital Age* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2016), which won the 2017 Gertrude J. Robinson Book Prize from the Canadian Communication Association, and co-author of *New Media Unions: Organizing Digital Journalists* (Routledge, 2020). She researches in the areas of political economy of communication and journalism, work and labour organizing in media and cultural industries, and digital journalism. Her scholarly research has been published in *Digital Journalism*, *Journalism Practice*, *South Atlantic Quarterly*, *The Communication Review*, *The European Journal of Cultural Studies*, and *Feminist Media Studies*.

Abstract

Launched in 2018, Substack is an online platform that hosts newsletters that can be free or paid for, and which is increasingly becoming a site for writers, journalists, and general freelancers to ply their trade. In addition to drawing in big name journalists who have quit their jobs at established outlets like *Vox* (in the case of Matthew Yglesias), or who have expanded to Substack as part of their other work, in the case of Glenn Greenwald and Matt Taibbi, the platform now has over 100,000 paid readers for newsletters written by a variety of freelancers, writers, and journalists. While Substack does not brand itself explicitly as an antidote to the deeper structural issues of the journalism industry as a whole, it does claim to be part of a “better, more worker-centric and reader-friendly future for journalism” (Chang, 2020).

As media theorist Lisa Gitelman told the *New Yorker*, Substack claims to be a democratizing platform but instead puts forward a “democracy of neoliberal self-empowerment” (cited in Wiener, 2020). We thus position Substack within a broader tradition of entrepreneurial journalism and an ideology of journalists who self-regulate and take on the financial risks and responsibilities of media production. Our proposed project aims to explore the experiences of racialized journalists on Substack in order to ask: does Substack offer a possibility for journalists of color to flourish outside the bounds of an industry that poses additional barriers for people of color (Cohen 2015), or does the platform merely replicate the same structural barriers? Building on interviews with journalists writing for the platform, we aim to center the experiences of racialized journalists when discussing the ideology of entrepreneurial journalism, the risks and benefits of subscription-style journalism, and how this new and rapidly growing online platform fits into the larger journalistic landscape.