

The pros and cons of working from home: Newspapers illustrators' views on remote work during the pandemic of Covid-19 in Brazil

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Abstract

In July 2020, a group of illustrators were contacted so we could hear if their views on remote work and professional collaboration had changed, in light of the covid-19 pandemic scenario. These illustrators participated in a previous research conducted with Brazilian newspaper illustrators between 2016-2018. The main research objective was to understand how illustrators were fitting in newspaper's routines and production, considering the multiplatform publishing trend led by the rise in mobile and digital readership. As it was observed then, illustrators were already used to working remotely. The investigation focused in assessing how these professionals viewed the pros and cons of face-to-face working way compared to working remotely. Also their views on the interaction with other fields' professionals, in projects involving Illustration & Design were considered. Illustrators of Brazilian newspapers answered a query and an interview with open questions. Although the original research had not been motivated by a pandemic scene, we believe that by renewing the subject with new data collected in 2020, the study can contribute to the ongoing broader discussions over reorganizing workflows for remote work, especially those involving designers and projects with multidisciplinary teams. This paper aims at presenting and discussing qualitative data regarding these issues.

Keywords: News illustration, remote work, multidisciplinary projects, work experience

1. Introduction

The study conducted with Brazilian newspaper illustrators between the years 2016-2018¹ had as main objective to understand how production for multiplatform environments was impacting newspaper

¹MITCHELL, V.; NOVAES, L. (advisor). **A ilustração jornalística e os desafios para sua experiência em smartphones**,

illustration and the work of the illustrator. There were signs, at that time, that traditional illustration and cartooning were losing ground and waning from their usual editorial niches in the newspaper. Professionals and researchers from the field expressed this tendency in recent years such as Ary Moraes (2010, 2013), Orlando Pedroso (2016), Nannette Hoogslag (2013) and Jorge Pedro Sousa (2005). This motivated us to investigate the possible challenges for the insertion of illustrations in the mobile versions of newspapers, which had become the priority for many publications. Therefore, considering the reorganization that newsrooms underwent to adapt for multiplatform publishing, it was important to understand how the illustrators were fitting in the newspaper's new routines of production.

Since the 1990s, technological changes from desktop computing to digital culture led to a growing importance of graphics and visual journalism in newsrooms. The popularization of these resources supported the rise in importance of Design itself, with more credit given to News Design and a larger number of visual projects in which designers lead or participate with great involvement (Moraes, 2010, 2013). The need for different professional collaboration reflected on a more multidisciplinary composition of the Art Departments. To generate multimedia content for different platforms, Art teams were no longer structured around graphic design and illustration. They had increasingly hired staff able to design and code digital content with motion, animation, data visualization and interaction. Producing illustrated content for the new media required adaptations to incorporate the possibilities of digital technologies (Hoogslag & Sherman, 2019).

In the 2016-2018 research, professionals from "Art Departments" of 13 Brazilian newspapers were consulted through a survey. Traditional illustrators were found to be only 9,6% of those working "in office." By *traditional*, we meant the professionals not involved with cartooning, designing graphics or data visualization. When considering staff members who were able to produce illustrations in their routines, the number rose to 38.9%. Other data collected were with respect to the working way adopted. Traditional illustrators and cartoonists were mostly working from home: 63% as regular freelancers and 71% doing sporadic freelance work. Also of notice, 42.8% of respondents were Design graduates.

Later in the fieldwork, 31 Brazilian illustrators were interviewed, sharing their vision of the ongoing professional transformations. Two questions concerned organizational matters: how they viewed the pros and cons of working in person and, in comparison, to work from home. Also, how was their interaction with colleagues, designers, editors, journalists and professionals from other disciplines? We hoped the questions would shed light on related topics moving our speculations. If illustrators without design skills were being removed from the newsroom, how was their interaction when involved in multidisciplinary projects that demanded illustrations, such as digital and interactive content? Were they feeling isolated from editorial decision making? Did they actually prefer to work from home, not wanting larger involvement in such projects? What unseen possibilities may come from work-from-home arrangements for designers and artists? Their contribution provided some unpredicted observations and, we hope, valuable insight on this matter, two years before the Covid-19 pandemic emergency has forced most of us to learn how to work, study and interact from a distance. In July 2020, the same illustrators were contacted

again to assess if their views on the matter had changed. This paper aims to discuss the qualitative results of these objectives.

2. Methodology for the interviews

The interviews were planned and conducted as described in the following sections.

2.1 Criteria for invitation

A professional under the designation of "Illustrator" may carry out different tasks in the newspaper business: illustrating, designing graphics and cartooning. Also, by reverse reasoning, many nomenclatures are used to refer to drawing specialists: cartoonists, comic artists, infographics specialist, visual journalists, designers and graphic artists. In his study on newspaper illustration, Gilmar Hermes (2005) observed that the designation "illustrator" had become broad and vague in journalism. Sometimes, the same professional performs more than one of these tasks in the work routine. For research purposes, our study invited Brazilian professionals if they fit two criteria: 1) Subject had a job as "Illustrator"; 2) Subject published work in daily news. The invitation was open to illustrators regardless of contract status and career experience.

2.2 Interview application method and theoretical support

Potential subjects were approached through the Internet. Upon agreement to participate, an email was sent with the interview, with 5 open questions, and a link to an online query. The *interview* provided for qualitative information. The *query* was structured with resources such as checkboxes and multiple-choice in 33 possible items, supporting quantitative investigation. The survey was held between 6/2/2017 and 11/5/2017. In total, 40 professionals responded to the query and 31 completed both interview and query.

For the purpose of discussing remote work and organizational issues in Design and Illustration work, this paper will focus on the answers to the following interview questions:

Question B: Let us consider two distinct working relationships: the illustrator who works in person at the newsroom's art department (daily with other illustrators, designers and journalists) and the illustrator who works remotely (with no duty to be in the newsroom), developing work from e-mail orders and conference calls, for example. How do you see the pros and cons of the illustrator's experience in each of these situations or environments, in your perception?

Question D: In your role as an illustrator, how is your relationship with editors, designers and journalists, in the process of designing and making projects involving illustrations?

During July 2020, the same group of illustrators was contacted. They were asked to consider the period in which Brazil has been through the Covid-19 pandemic and discuss, in two open questions, formulated as to resonate questions B and D from the 2016-2018 study. Seven professionals responded, whose visions inspired some reflections.

Question 1: Were there any changes in your view about the pros and cons of remote work in relation to face-to-face work?

Question 2: Were there changes in your work interaction with other professionals involved in the process of designing and carrying out projects with illustration (designers, journalists, programmers, editors, etc.)?

The "Underlying Discourse Unveiling Method (UDUM)", by Ana Maria Nicolaci-da-Costa (2007), or "MEDS", as it is abbreviated in Portuguese, provided the framework for the qualitative research. The method is interdisciplinary and exploratory, allowing for in-depth investigation in context, with flexibility of procedures and techniques. Our process of interviewing was informed by the MEDS methodology in the following procedures:

- Semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions;
- Natural or comfortable settings for the interviews;
- Piloting interviews, exploratory, conducted with the purpose of "testing the adequacy of the interview outline to the research objectives" and "training the inexperienced interviewer" (Nicolaci-da-Costa, 2004, free translation by authors);
- Invitations in the most natural way possible;
- Avoidance of unnecessary interruptions, leaving interviewees free to express their thoughts;
- Recording of interviews, avoiding that technological apparatus interfere with subjects' posture.

The "MEDS" method favors the emergence of unexpected themes in qualitative responses. Theme labels were created based on recurrences and similarities identified in the discourses of interviewees. The full qualitative material was reread and reworked to the point of "saturation", when the appearance of new relevant themes became scarce. Transcriptions were codified and analyzed with the use of spreadsheets. As suggested by the MEDS method, themes were extracted in two directions, intersubject and intrasubject: 1) in the total set of responses of various subjects, to a specific question; and 2) In all the responses to various questions from one specific subject, the same Illustrator. This was useful in mapping themes that brought points of interest to a specific objective that was supposed to have been explored in a different question from the one it appeared in. Considering that the objective was to understand the vision of the interviewees on certain topics and elaborate reflections, in addition to the fact that the identification of each illustrator contacted wasn't really necessary for our mental exercise, we decided to assume the answers as representative of the group, keeping the illustrators anonymous.

3. Collected data

The findings showed in the collected data were as follows. The interviews were held in Portuguese. Fragments presented were freely translated by authors.

3.1. Remote work, favorable opinions, 2016-2018

Autonomy

Greater autonomy was seen as the best advantage of remote work, with the possibility of working for more clients and increase earnings. One illustrator reported working for "dozens of newspapers at the same time." Another illustrator's home state had "very few publications that hire illustrators". Working remotely allows her to work "from anywhere in the country". Another mentioned that the transition to working remotely opened new career opportunities, allowing him to start illustrating books of children's literature.

Work interaction viable

Interaction from a distance was seen as viable, with "no loss" in communication. Some believed interactions are better, more "concise" and "objective." One illustrator described negotiating via e-mail and video calls as "simple and efficient", working both for Brazilian and international newspapers. Another observed that this dynamics favors "editorial" illustrations jobs, as "what matters most is the delimitation of space for the illustration and the text."

Immersion

Isolation as immersion was perceived positively and associated with a more "comfortable", "peaceful" and "quiet" environment at home or at a studio. This "solitude", without the "madness" of the newsroom around them, is seen as beneficial for concentration, deep thinking and research.

3.2. Remote work, unfavorable opinions, 2016-2018

Worse work coordination

Interaction was impaired in arguments concerning trust and non-verbal communication. As one illustrator said, "knowing people and perceiving the tone of voice and their reactions" helps to understand the level of trust and "equality" in the professional relationship. Another believed meeting personally could attenuate communication troubles that commonly arise. In his view, ideally, illustration and text should "work almost like a third discourse, joining forces as if they were conceived together from the first draft". Remote work, for him, "has an impersonal character because it is not a process of exchange but a delivery".

Loneliness and isolation

Isolation was associated with loss of focus, lack of self-discipline and alienation from decision-making. The lack of incidental conversations and peer review that may help advance work and solve problems was observed. At home, one illustrator expressed concern about straying from the news mindset and information awareness of the newsroom, which is important in the newspaper work. Another was emphatic: "This isolation and loneliness – typical of *draftsman* and *designers* – is *counterproductive* and something we must fight against."

Devaluation of occupation

Remote work was associated with a devaluation of the profession and economic vulnerability. In contrast, a regular job represented expectations of a salary, health insurance, vacation and other indirect advantages. There was the belief that these opportunities were supported by the business model of the print era, with illustrators expressing skepticism as to the viability of supporting a career, in Brazil, exclusively as a freelancing illustrator. Others observed that illustration might become a "secondary activity", done by designers in the newspaper staff, improvising on press deadlines.

Other themes

Also observed were the ideas that remote work demands "**Higher self-discipline**" and professional maturity; that "**Office work is good for beginners**", with the newsroom seen as the ideal workplace for young, developing professionals, and the "**Constant availability**" experienced when working online, remotely, which may create professional stress.

3.3. *In Office work, 2016-2018*

Shared knowledge and richness of interactions

Many illustrators recalled beginning their careers inexperienced and learning skills by working together with experts of their time. For them, the collaborative environment of the Art Departments favors the passing of knowledge from one generation of professionals to the other. One illustrator recalled this aspect from his early days at work: "A wonderful thing was the exchange of experiences, ideas and techniques that we illustrators shared". Others recalled guidance they received from older or more experienced colleagues in their staff. For an experienced illustrator, the ideal work environment should "bring together a mix of young and veteran professionals".

Chaotic and stressful environment

The newsroom was associated negatively with "stress", "pressure", "chaos", and "madness". A "heavy and claustrophobic" environment, perceived as tumultuous and demanding. This wears the professionals physically and mentally, impairing concentration and the work process. Dealing with daily deadlines and last minute requests isn't uncommon, and may "create a repetitive and tiring routine, daily or frequent closings tend to be stressful". Limited space to draw was also mentioned.

Other themes

Also observed in the answers were: "**Better work coordination**", representing the belief that participation and feedbacks are better in office; "**Infrastructure and stimulating work environment**", where the office atmosphere is perceived as work-inducing; "**More control, less autonomy**" and a "**Higher economic security**" associated with a steady job.

3.4. *Remote and freelance arrangements as trending or inevitable*

Regular jobs for illustrators were perceived as rare or inexistent. One illustrator thought the position "practically does not exist anymore." Another believed "Illustration has lost space," regardless of the sector. A cartoonist thought the "collapse of the press" and its business model prompted cuts of things considered "superfluous."

3.5. *Remote work, favorable opinions, 2020*

Better quality of life

Working from home was associated with a gain in quality of life. One illustrator said he felt "more focused and relaxed to develop the most creative parts of the projects." Time factor was also mentioned: "Time can be better spent (...) without commuting time, which in my case varies between three to four hours a day." The same illustrator remarked feeling more safe, since security and city violence in Rio de Janeiro are critical matters: "I think there is a significant gain in quality of life." Another observed that it allows for "flexibility of schedules", and "autonomy over productivity", by "freeing work progress from corporate protocols."

Remote work unchanged or more efficient

Three illustrators believed their routine was unchanged and the production of traditional illustration unaffected. One observed: "I don't think there were any significant changes in the creative process itself. It

consists of reading the text and trying to create a visual narrative to it." Another believes "remote work has proven to be as efficient as face-to-face", adding that productivity may actually rise.

Illustrating is naturally a lonely job

"The illustrator works alone whether digitally or on the drawing board," said one respondent. Another said, "The illustrator's creation is already very lonely in its nature." Being alone was not viewed as good or bad, but part of the job.

Good for artists' unique development

One cartoonist believes working remotely favors the development of an "intimate atmosphere and idiosyncratic vocabulary."

3.6. Remote work, adverse opinions, 2020

Worse infrastructure

Having worse "infrastructure" at home is viewed as a disadvantage: "computer, chair, table". An illustrator remarked that the "implementation of remote work was done on an emergency basis due to the pandemic," which was a new experience: "I ended up having to improvise and set up a workstation that would be used for months on a daily basis. The company's computers and chairs are more suitable than my personal ones." Another made similar observations about his home equipment being inferior technologically and ergonomically: "I had to adjust my space to make it more comfortable and not suffer from neck pain". His computer being of an older generation was incompatible with the installation of applications needed to access the company's network remotely. Also, there are more general concerns: "There can't be a power shortage."

Uncertainty about future impact on work

One illustrator expressed missing the "ambiance" of the Newsroom, having worked in office for 20 years and fears that it will eventually impact his work: "I don't know what psychological effect this will have on the final process, in the short or long term. I'm not an expert in the field to answer. My impression is that some change will happen." Another, considering the Covid-19 pandemic, reported having lost opportunities due to uncertainties: "I was going to share a studio with another artist in a collective and everything is adjourned." He was also unable to release a publication in a comic fair: "Everything was canceled, with no plans to reschedule."

Slower response time

Difficulties using The Virtual Private Networks ("VPN to access files and digital publishers on the company's computers") were mentioned. An illustrator observed: "Access is usually much slower." Another said that Internet service at home is not enough for the whole family, especially in the evenings, when "everybody is locked inside, using streaming applications." This becomes a concern for delivering on time: "There are days I have trouble sending a 2 megabyte file." To solve this, the illustrator reported sharing files from computer to phone through Bluetooth, and then sending it through the smartphone's data plan.

Time management

A professional observed: "The biggest challenge is in managing one's own time, but since personal progress depends on it, I believe that remote work is also a stimulus for own organization and work optimization."

Loneliness

One illustrator believes working remotely "has the setback of extreme loneliness."

3.7. Illustrators' views on interactions with other professionals, 2016-2018**Creative freedom concerns**

Many responses were concerned about creative freedom. It is considered normal for the illustrator to receive general guidance, but the illustrator shouldn't feel forced to make the drawing exactly as suggested. One illustrator exemplified: "The best relationships between editors and designers are those when they present you with a project, guiding you what they expect but not tying up a pre-conceived and completed idea, allowing freedom for your creation." This relationship may mature in long-term collaborations, with responses mentioning the importance of "knowing" what the editor expects. This reliance works the other way around, when editors trust the illustrator's "talent and knowledge" to take a different path. One illustrator, for example, explained his work process as listening to suggestions on briefing but not necessarily executing them, saying he should have the "final word" if he is signing the work. Another supported a similar stance: "There is always a 'suggestion', which is no longer made by art directors, but by the columnist who thinks of images as if they were text. Everything is always very explanatory and obvious. I steer away from it and present what I think is best, but there are youngsters being formed under this workflow, and they won't draw without a briefing".

When a preconceived idea is imposed on the illustrator, trouble arises. One illustrator referred to experiencing the problem as a "tug of war". Some suggestions are viewed as "bad" or "cliché." An illustrator saw this situation as a "dangerous distortion" of the craft and occupation, "an exercise of power and subjugation."

Partnership and mutual trust

The idea of "listening to" and being "heard" was important. One illustrator emphasized "mutual agreement" as both editors and designers can give constructive feedback to illustrators and vice versa. Notions of "integration", "dialogue" and "collective effort" were also identified. One interviewee remarked that, in his work experience, "editors and designers always admired teamwork" and that "selfish professionals were rare." Another observed: "The best jobs invariably came out of a relationship of mutual trust."

Few interactions as freelancer

Freelancer working remotely have less interaction. Most dialogue takes place through e-mail. Voice conversation and face-to-face meetings are rare. One illustrator believed there is a higher risk of misunderstandings in Internet communications. Others believed less interaction is good, when there's mutual knowledge and trust between the illustrator and the clients. An illustrator described it as a "buy and sell relationship." Another exemplified: "The best customers are those who come to you because they know your job well, know what to expect, interfere little, pay on time. The worst are those who do exactly the opposite."

Creative freedom is contextual

Some illustrators correlated creative control with conflict with the newspaper's editorial guidelines. Most find this understandable, since the company's position is known in advance, making its reactions to certain topics predictable. Notions of journalism are helpful in understanding and negotiating such context. A comic strip artist explained that he knew "how far" he could go and avoided "minefields" like "politics, football and religion." A cartoonist believed collaborations were "increasingly guided and monitored." Another recalled having a cartoon not published for "its political content" and thought that a newspaper's "commitment to political forces" was "depressing".

Good relationship, pragmatic

A "good relationship" between professionals was mentioned, though in a more generic and dismissive, viewing collaboration simply as "positive", "easy", or "effective, no frills".

Special projects demand more involvement

"Special" projects are believed to demand higher involvement and "longer conversations". This would be the case when the illustration was "an intrinsic part of the content" such as having "the function of interactive menus, for example."

3.8. Illustrators' views on interactions with other professionals, 2020**Traditional illustration unaffected**

Illustrators observed no meaningful changes in the process of producing a traditional illustration remotely.

Work experience as facilitator

It was observed that the experience of the professionals involved attenuated the effects of adaptation to remote work. In an illustrator's words: "Luckily, most of the people I work with are very experienced in their tasks and can see the project as a whole. In this case, the individual effort of each professional made it possible to carry out projects without any major trauma." Another interviewee mentioned that, when facing unexpected technical problems, the support and shared knowledge of colleagues allowed him to continue working, improvising a collaborative network to send illustrations. Another said: "We've been adapted to the so-called remote work for a long time."

Worse interactions

One illustrator reported that the workflow of "setting up, making and editing work" has become more "costly" as communication takes place in multiple channels: "Each step "requires" a different tool. *Teams* for meetings, phone calls to arrange deliveries for those who were not at the meeting, messages on *WhatsApp*, email to send references and receive the work, *Slack* to communicate with the rest of the team." In his view "Comments, guidelines, expectations alignment end up being harmed." Another interviewee also believes that personal interaction is "greatly impaired". In his view "Feedback from other professionals, the exchange of ideas about the job, although it can also happen online, I think it loses a lot." A third illustrator also prefers networking in person: "I am not very fond of lives, nothing against it, but I still prefer to wait and see how the face-to-face meetings will be rearranged."

Better interactions

Interactions were perceived as more "direct", "objective" and "no frills." The way "everything is registered in the chat by the applications" was seen as positive, inducing more "attention" at collaborations.

Experience could encourage mindset change

One illustrator believed that the emergency change in working environments was felt mainly by those who hire Design & Illustration works, as professionals providing these services were already used to working remotely. In his words: "Communication and advertising professionals such as Art Buyers, creative directors and planning managers, as well as direct customers (traders, business owners, and other professionals), who have now been forced to work from home, have been able to review their routines. They've realized the time wasted with urban commuting, especially in large cities, the inefficiency of meetings that could be summarized in an email, or if necessary, videoconference as an important work tool. It was like unmasking corporate, mechanized and counterproductive behaviors that have always been criticized by freelancers and creative professionals, but the situation has made it obvious to those who have never rethought their own lifestyle."

Specific illustrated projects may have process impacted

The illustrator remarked that he believes that for specific illustrated projects, that demand more involvement with other professionals, communication may be "more difficult", such as getting "feedback from editors, designers and reporters about the theme addressed and the content design, its relation to the text."

4. Conclusions and afterthoughts

When comparing results, some topics addressed in the answers from the query and interviews conducted in 2016-2018 resonated in the answers of professionals that recently went into a remote work situation. They expressed similar feelings and views as their colleagues who already were experiencing the daily routine of working from a distance, back then. In this sense, regarding the organization of remote work, the similar themes observed were: "worse interactions" in workflow and collaborations; questions of "infrastructure", as home equipment was not up to par; "better quality of life" with time and safety gains, and the importance of "work experience and previous training as a facilitator" to adapt teamwork to a remote scenario. Also, the idea that isolation is "natural" or even beneficial for the illustrator came up, as it allows for "immersion" and higher focus on the job.

As far as the collaboration of Design & Illustration on projects, it was mentioned that while "editorial" and "traditional" illustration was unaffected, "specific" or "special" illustrated projects might have a harder time in adjusting communications. This corroborates with the general data findings collected during the 2016-2018 study, in which illustrators believed the job of producing a traditional illustration was perfectly viable from a distance and, given creative freedom and mutual trust, matured in working relationships with art directors, journalists and designers. On the other hand, it appears that for "special" projects demanding greater involvement and interdisciplinary interactions between a team of professionals from different fields, collaboration is seen as harder or uncertain. Unfortunately, the few responses received until now addressing this issue – five mentions in 2016-2018 and one in 2020 – make us unable to arrive at conclusions on this topic, indicating that it needs further studies.

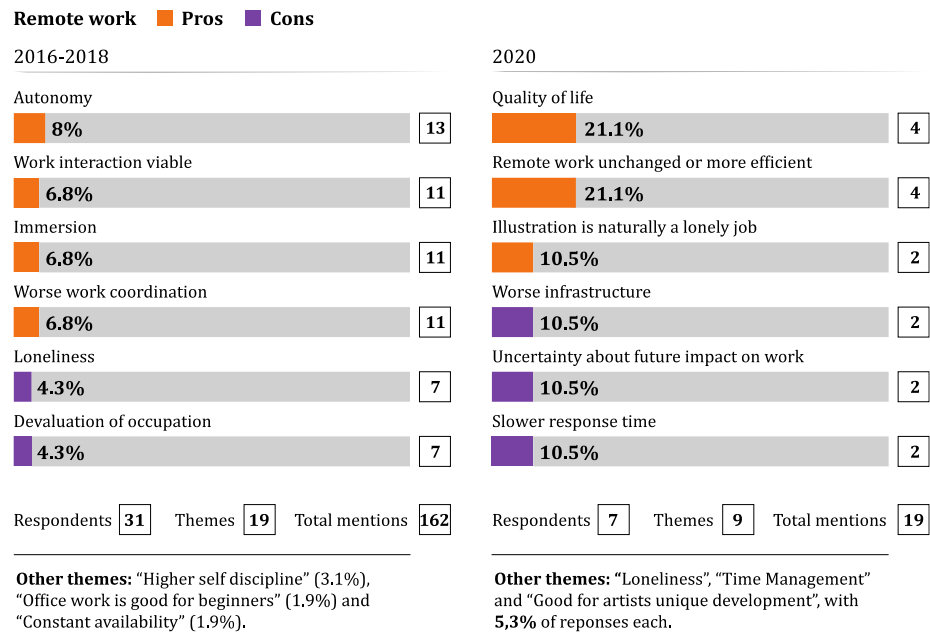


Figure 1 – Summary of results.

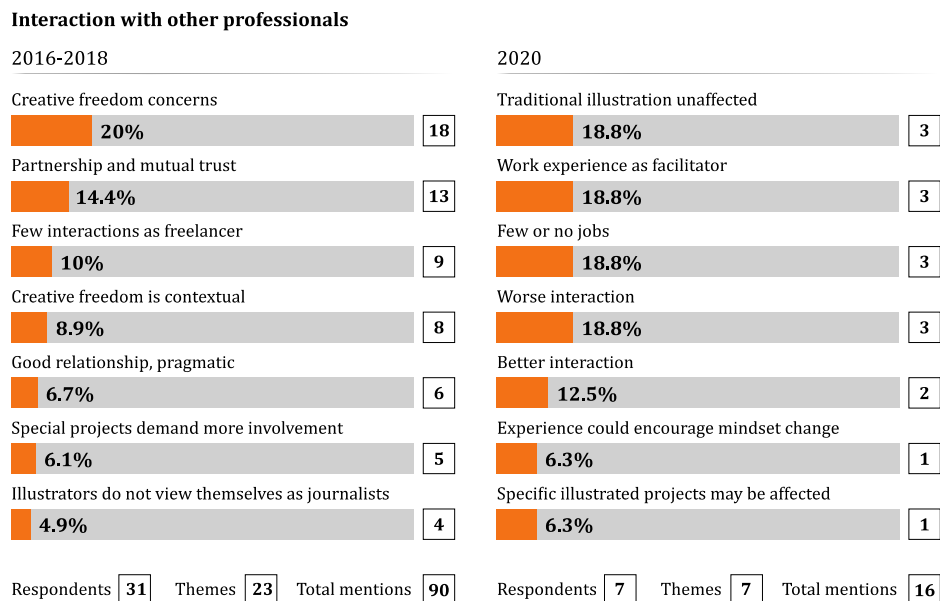


Figure 2 – Summary of results.

New themes found in 2020 should interest other pursuits. One concern expressed in the collected data is about the use of virtual private networks for sharing and sending work. This may be of importance to designers and illustrators working in editorial and news projects, as deadlines are tight and last minute changes aren't uncommon. As tools and resources become more complex, so are the sizes of project files, making the management of digital archives harder. How will this tendency of higher complexity and pace in projects adjust to worse equipment and slower networks as professionals are working from the infrastructure of their homes?

One respondent observed that, while designers and illustrators were used to working remotely, "art buyers" and managerial professionals that hire Design & Illustration work are experiencing it now, due to the pandemic emergency. This illustrator believed that the experience would promote awareness of the benefits of remote working, specially considering time gains through the avoidance of unnecessary in-person meetings and commuting. According to this view, distrust of virtual tools for remote management and job discussion should lower in corporate environments that still resisted changes, something valuable for creative professionals. To corroborate this, some illustrators who believe interaction is better on remote jobs described it as more objective, direct and straight to the point. Could this really lead to a permanent change in the mindset of professional relationships?

Three of seven subjects perceived the field as uncertain, mentioning either few or no jobs, or many acquaintances unemployed. "Dark times," as a professional called it. We can't conclude that this is specifically due to neither the remote working situation nor the Covid-19.

Considering qualitative research and the analysis of interview material, we believe there should be an effort to reach a balance between presenting qualitative and quantitative data. Although theme prevalence was summarized in graphics for presentation purposes in the conclusion, relevant questions that were voiced in the illustrator's answers were considered even if they were rare and had less statistical presence in the total pool of themes. The qualitative possibilities and its relevance in relation to research objectives and discussion were considered.

Lastly, as seen in the 2016-2018 research, being in contact with expert professionals was very important for sharing knowledge in the field of work. Also, interactions at the office were remarked as being beneficial to work development, such as gathering information and feedback incidentally on informal conversations. It was also observed that in person office work was viewed as good for the development of beginners. In 2020, one interviewee, reasoning over the transition to remote work, attributed the well-succeeded adaptation of the Design & Illustration team to the vast work experience among its members, who knew their jobs but, also, were able to see the "project as a whole". These remarks may provide inspiration for future investigations about education and training, considering new professionals that will enter the career in a situation of remote work and physical isolation.

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