



# UK JOURNALISTS IN THE 2020s

WHO THEY ARE, HOW THEY WORK,  
AND WHAT THEY THINK

Edited by

Neil Thurman, Imke Henkel, Sina Thäsler-Kordonouri, and Richard Fletcher







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# FOREWORD

## PETE CLIFTON

*Media consultant and speaker, Former Editor-in-Chief at PA Media, Former Editor of BBC News and Sport websites*



In the eight years between the previous survey on UK journalists and the 2023 survey that is the focus of this report, there has been significant change in the industry – and yet many things seem uncomfortably the same.

This survey of 1,130 journalists provides another fascinating insight into the UK media landscape, including the growing number of freelancers as permanent contracts shrink, the adoption of new technologies, changing views on professional standards, and, of course, inequality.

Despite so many people banging the drum for diverse newsrooms to cater for diverse audiences, the results make difficult reading once again.

Some 90% of journalists are White, 91% are university educated, and 71% are from a privileged background based on their parents' occupation. Only 12% grew up in a working-class household.

Female and ethnic minority journalists decline in numbers after the age of 50, while men generally earn higher average salaries and are more likely to be permanently employed and hold a top management role.

All these statistics provide a troubling picture, and underline once more the need for the industry to find more routes for people from different backgrounds to establish themselves and develop as journalists to strengthen the knowledge and output of our newsrooms.

Artificial intelligence (AI) was barely a twinkle a decade ago, but by 2023 7% of journalists worked in newsrooms that were using automated news text production, with this figure likely to have increased since. And those journalists feel that they have higher levels of job insecurity, not surprisingly.

News organisations face a difficult balancing act as they ponder the increasing capabilities of AI. Using AI intelligently to assist with the various stages in the news production process seems eminently sensible as there is a lot of repetitive drudgery we could all do without.

The survey found news agencies were more likely to use automated text production. As the former captain of the ship at PA, we always put having journalists on the ground reporting quickly, accurately, and impartially as the number one priority.

But PA's RADAR service was a good example of how automation can work well. Humans finding important stories in data sets and then automation creating versions for multiple locations – but with editors overseeing throughout.

So AI can be a positive force if it takes care of the basics to give journalists more time to actually find the news. Championing the importance of that news-gathering, preserving the copyright around it, and finding the funding models to support it seem some of the biggest challenges in the next decade.

This over 40,000-word report provides many other telling insights. As the industry has tightened its belt, the proportion of UK journalists on permanent contracts dropped from 74% to 65% over the eight years, while freelancers went up from 17% to 28%.

And it is very clear that, post-COVID, the days of always working in the office are well and truly numbered, even if CEOs are increasingly twitchy about the leases on half-empty buildings. The survey found that most UK journalists in 2023 were working from home at least three days per week. While the buzz of a busy newsroom is hard to beat, I think we all know the hybrid way is here to stay.

It is heartening to see journalists say their top three roles are educating the audience, counteracting disinformation, and being a detached observer. But while they do all those good things there is a diminishing commitment to always adhering to codes of professional ethics.

Now journalists more frequently say they will follow professional standards unless 'extraordinary circumstances require disregarding them'. We can only speculate what those circumstances might be, but, of course, it can never be because of threats. These, it would seem, are more prevalent than ever, with only 18% of UK journalists saying they have never experienced safety threats related to their work.

This is another highly detailed and absorbing report, and amid all the worrying themes there are still many positives to be drawn. That there are still so many journalists committed to providing quality, accurate, and impartial content to their many audiences, often in the face of adversity, is something we should all be thankful for.



# ABOUT THE EDITORS AND AUTHORS



**Dr Neil Thurman** is a Professor of Communication in the Department of Media and Communications at LMU Munich, Germany. He is also a Senior Honorary Research Fellow in the Department of Journalism at City St George's, University of London. He led the 2015 survey of journalists in the UK that this study builds on and co-chairs the association that sustains the Worlds of Journalism Study, of which this UK survey is part.



**Dr Imke Henkel** is Lecturer in Journalism and Media at the University of Leeds and an Honorary Research Fellow at Birkbeck, University of London. Imke's research interests include the intersection of journalism and democracy, disinformation, and journalists' professional roles. She is a Worlds of Journalism Study Co-Investigator for the UK.



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**Dr Glenda Cooper** is the head of the Department of Journalism at City St George's, University of London and a reader in journalism studies. She is the author of *Reporting Humanitarian Disasters in a Social Media Age* (Routledge) and co-editor of *Humanitarianism, Communications and Change* (Peter Lang). She researches in the fields of journalism ethics, live journalism, media representations of refugees, and media freedom and is the UK director of the European Journalism Observatory.





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**Dr Ayala Panievsky** is a Presidential Fellow at City St George's, University of London. Her research focuses on journalism under attack, media hate, and democratic backsliding. She works with journalists and academics to improve the news coverage of the populist right. Her book, *The New Censorship* (Footnote Press), will be out in 2025.



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**Dr Jingrong Tong** is Senior Lecturer in Media and Information Studies at the University of Sheffield. Her current research focuses on media freedom and politics, computational analysis, and science and technology studies focusing on the interplay between digital technology and journalism, as well as users' information consumption behaviours.

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Proposals for collaboration on further publications based on this survey data should be directed to Dr Neil Thurman <neil.thurman@ifkw.lmu.de>, Dr Imke Henkel <I.Henkel@leeds.ac.uk>, or Sina Thäsler-Kordonouri <sina.thaesler-kordonouri@ifkw.lmu.de>.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report is based on a survey conducted between September and November 2023 with a representative sample of 1,130 UK journalists, a follow-up to a similar survey in 2015 (Thurman et al. 2016). The survey was carried out as part of the third wave of the Worlds of Journalism Study project.<sup>1</sup> Our analysis of the survey data and of over 200 other relevant sources of information has produced numerous findings.

This report documents increased precarity in the profession with a shift away from permanent contracts and growth in the number of freelancers, lingering inequalities between specific groups in terms of pay and seniority, the continued adoption of new technologies that bring benefits but also exacerbate risks, and changing conceptions of roles, ethics, and journalism's relationship with society.

## On UK journalists' personal characteristics and diversity, in the survey:

- UK journalists were overwhelmingly White (90%), university educated (91%), non-religious (71%), and from a privileged background (as defined by their parents' occupation) (71%).
- Nearly two thirds (63%) were 40 years of age or older, with a median age of 45. That is three years above the median age of the working-age population but in line with other academic professions.
- Female and ethnic minority journalists differed significantly from their male and White colleagues in terms of age and years

of work experience. In both groups, journalists over 50 were less numerous, suggesting that female and ethnic minority journalists may experience less job satisfaction than their White and male colleagues.

- UK journalists were left-leaning and, as a group, have moved further to the left since 2015. In 2015, around half (54%) identified with the political left, but this rose to three quarters (77%) by 2023.
- A higher percentage of UK journalists were privately educated (13% at primary, 22% at secondary schools) than is the case for the general population (6%).
- Only 12% of UK journalists grew up in a working-class household. Those journalists who had a parent who worked in one of the three most privileged categories of occupation (71%) were more likely to be employed by the national media.

## On UK journalists' employment conditions:

- The proportion of UK journalists with permanent contracts dropped from 74% in 2015 to 65% in 2023. Over the same period, the proportion of freelancers grew from 17% to 28%.
- In 2023, the median annual income for UK journalists was between £37,501 and £45,000 after tax. Men, those aged 40 or over, those whose main employer was a broadcaster, and those who worked for publicly owned media all had higher salaries on average.
- Gender inequalities in the profession persisted, with men earning higher average salaries and being more likely to have a permanent contract and hold a top management role.
- Most UK journalists worked from home at least three days per week, with some variation by gender, age, and main employer.

<sup>1</sup> <https://worldsofjournalism.org/>

### On the media platforms, formats, and cultures UK journalists work with:

- The distribution platform – from print to podcasts – UK journalists were most likely to produce journalism for was websites (97% at least ‘rarely’), followed by social media (80%), print (74%), email newsletters (62%), podcasts (56%), news apps (53%), radio (39%), television (36%), and messaging apps (32%).
- On average, UK journalists produced journalism for just over five distribution platforms at least ‘rarely’, with that figure close to three if only platforms that they ‘always’ or ‘often’ produced for were included.
- The single media format – from audio to animation – UK journalists were most likely to produce journalism in was text (95% at least ‘rarely’); followed by photographs (77%); video (69%); audio (67%); and graphics, cartoons, illustrations, or animation (50%). 79% produced multimedia stories using a combination of these formats.
- 84% of UK journalists had a main employer from a legacy media background.

### On news automation in UK newsrooms:

- 7% of UK journalists worked in newsrooms that used automated news text production, and 10% in newsrooms that used personalised news distribution.
- Privately owned media organisations (and especially news agencies) were more likely to use automated text production, while publicly owned media organisations were more likely to use personalised news distribution.
- Journalists who were aware of the use of automation for text production or personalised news distribution in newsrooms where they worked felt less secure in their jobs and less free to select news stories they worked on.

### On UK journalists’ use of social media and audience analytics:

- Social media was widely used by UK journalists professionally, with 70% saying they regularly (‘always’ or ‘often’) used it to discover news stories and 57% saying they regularly used it to promote their journalism. Almost all UK journalists used social media for their work at least some of the time.
- Social media was widely used professionally by journalists working for commercially and publicly owned media, but those working for internet-native media were more likely to regularly use it for discovering news and promoting their journalism than those working for media with a print background.
- Journalists who regularly used social media to promote their journalism were more likely to have experienced some safety threats, including demeaning and hateful speech and attempts to publicly discredit their work.
- Newsroom analytics were used on a regular basis by 35% of UK journalists, with those working for internet-native media more likely to use them than their counterparts working for media with a broadcast or print background.

### On UK journalists’ safety and well-being:

- Only 18% of UK journalists<sup>2</sup> reported they had ‘never’ experienced safety threats related to their work over the previous five years. The most frequent forms of safety threats experienced by journalists were ‘demeaning or hateful speech’ (45% had experienced at least ‘sometimes’), followed by ‘public discrediting’ (39%) and ‘other forms of threats and intimidation’ (16%).
- Gender was significant in journalists’ experience of safety threats and work-related stress. In the survey, 22% of women journalists had experienced sexual violence in the previous five years compared with only 4% of men; and 60% had felt stressed out at work at least ‘often’ in the previous six months compared with 49% of men. Men reported experiencing ‘arrests, detentions or imprisonment’ and ‘legal actions taken against them because of their reporting’ more frequently.
- Journalists working for outlets with a TV or newspaper background reported experiencing hate speech (57% had at least ‘sometimes’) and other threats or intimidation (21% for TV and 23% for newspaper) more frequently compared with journalists who worked for news organisations with other backgrounds.
- On average, UK journalists felt moderate to high levels of stress at work, with one third of women (33%) and about one quarter of men (23%) reporting they experienced work-related stress very often.
- Lower-ranked journalists (with ‘no or very limited operational and strategic authority’) experienced hate speech and public discrediting of their journalistic work significantly more frequently than higher-ranked respondents (with ‘strategic authority’) and were also more likely to worry about losing their jobs (34% agreed compared with 25% of the higher ranked). Higher-ranked respondents, however, reported experiencing legal threats related to their work more frequently (10% had at least ‘sometimes’) than the lower ranked or middle ranked (4%).
- Race and ethnicity, which often shape attacks against journalists, did not produce significant statistical differences in the data. However, as the survey sample was predominantly White (90% of participants), further research is needed to account for the correlation between race and journalists’ safety.

### On the influences on UK journalists’ work and their perceptions of press freedom and editorial autonomy:

- While the majority of UK journalists believed the UK has a good level of media freedom and they had good levels of editorial autonomy personally, a considerable proportion disagreed.
- UK journalists perceived that their work was influenced – for better or for worse – by various factors, including editors, editorial policies, journalistic ethics, resources such as information access and time constraints, and other dynamics within the news production process.
- UK journalists also perceived some, albeit limited, commercial influences from audience research, audience feedback, profit expectations, business managers, and media owners.

<sup>2</sup> The 21 foreign correspondents who completed the survey were excluded from this chapter’s analyses as the safety threats they face are likely to be different.

- Government censorship, government officials, the police, and politicians were perceived as 'not influential' by many respondents.
- UK journalists did not view news actors, such as scientists or health experts, public relations, issue advocacy groups, businesspeople, and religious groups and institutions, as having a strong influence on their work; however, scientists or health experts were perceived as having a stronger influence than other news actors.

#### **On UK journalists' beliefs in truth, interpretation, and objectivity:**

- A large majority (82%) of UK journalists agreed that interpretation is necessary to make sense of facts. There was stronger agreement among more experienced journalists.
- 69% of UK journalists believed it is possible to represent objective reality in reporting, with older and more experienced journalists expressing higher confidence in this belief.
- 50% of UK journalists believed they could withhold their personal beliefs from their reporting, indicating a split view on this matter.
- Journalists employed by media with a television background and that were publicly owned were more likely to believe in objective reporting and the withholding of personal beliefs.
- 48% of UK journalists believed that truth is inevitably shaped by those in power, with younger journalists and those leaning politically left more likely to agree with this statement.
- Only 17% of UK journalists believed that things are either true or false with no in-between, reflecting a rejection of dogmatic thinking.

#### **On UK journalists' role in society:**

- Journalists continued to ascribe importance to their roles as informers and watchdogs. However, they gave increasing importance to activist roles compared with in 2015.
- Journalists saw their top three roles as to educate the audience (88% considered this role 'very' or 'extremely' important), to counteract disinformation (71%), and to be a detached observer (69%).
- When it comes to audience-oriented roles, journalists have moved away from roles that are predominantly commercially driven. The most important audience role in 2023 was to 'tell stories that emotionally move the audience' (48%).
- Journalists working for newsrooms with a legacy media culture (specifically, newspaper, TV, or radio) were more open to activist and innovative roles, for example solution journalism, than their colleagues who worked for newsrooms with an internet-native media culture.
- Journalists working for local and regional media gave more importance to roles related to the functioning of democracy, such as to 'provide information people need to form political opinion' and 'monitor and scrutinise political leaders', than their colleagues at national and transnational outlets.

- Although, since 2015, UK journalists have moved towards a more activist conception of their role in society, they were much less drawn towards roles that involve intervening on behalf of the established political order such as 'setting the political agenda' or 'supporting government policy'.

#### **On ethics and standards:**

- In 2023, journalists expressed a weakened commitment to a universal professional ethos; fewer than 60% agreed that professional standards should always determine ethical behaviour, compared with the 94% who agreed in 2015 that 'journalists should always adhere to codes of professional ethics, regardless of the situation'.
- UK practitioners in 2023 were most likely to agree that 'what is ethical for journalists should be determined by professional standards unless extraordinary circumstances require disregarding them'. But there was a notable rise in opposition to the idea that journalism ethics are purely a matter of personal judgement.
- Accepting payments from sources was considered unacceptable by almost all UK journalists.
- Seven out of ten UK journalists (69%) thought publishing unverified information was unacceptable under any circumstances, but the rest thought it was justified on some occasions.
- Freelancers and staff journalists shared broadly similar views on ethics. However, we found gender disparities. For instance, 60% of female journalists disapproved of payment for confidential information, compared with 48% of male journalists.
- Most questionable ethical practices were less likely to be justified by journalists in management positions than by those in more junior roles.

# 1 THE PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS AND DIVERSITY OF UK JOURNALISTS

IMKE HENKEL

## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

The survey gathered a wide range of information on UK journalists' personal characteristics. This included age, years of work experience, gender, ethnicity, education, religious affiliation, political stance, and socio-economic background.

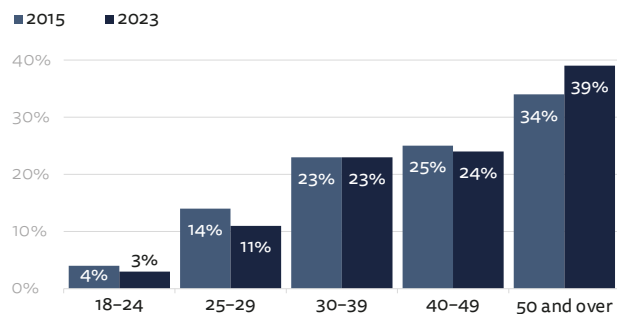
Journalists' personal characteristics have been shown to be among the factors that influence the news they produce (Shoemaker and Reese 2014). Diversity – or the lack of it – has become an increasingly salient issue when discussing the state of journalism. Researchers have argued, for example, that news media miss important stories and fail to reach diverse audiences if their staff are too homogenous (Borchardt et al. 2019; Cohen and Clarke 2024; Douglas 2022; Lück et al. 2022). In the UK, the National Council for the Training of Journalists (NCTJ) has, since 2017, published regular reports on *Diversity in Journalism* (see, e.g., Spilsbury 2023). The survey data partly support findings from these reports, while also adding further details on political leaning, and, for the first time, whether journalists were state or privately educated, which is still an important marker of social class in the UK.<sup>3</sup>

## 1.2 AGE

The age of the journalists who responded to the survey ranged from 20 to 88 years. Their average (median) age was 45,<sup>4</sup> which is three years higher than the median age of the working population (Faragher 2023).<sup>5</sup> At least in the UK, journalism cannot be seen as 'a young person's occupation' anymore – as it was in the past (Weaver 1998, 456).

### FIGURE 1.1: PROPORTION OF UK JOURNALISTS IN EACH AGE GROUP

UK Journalists were slightly older on average in 2023 compared with 2015.



age. In what year were you born? Base: 2015 = 640, 2023 = 958.

<sup>3</sup> In 2019, the Sutton Trust reported the percentage of leading UK journalists who were privately educated but did not do so for the profession as a whole (Sutton Trust 2019).

<sup>4</sup> There is a notable difference for gender non-conforming journalists ('other' in our survey), who are much younger on average: their mean age is 37, their median age 30. There were, however, only six respondents in this category. The 'other' gender option was not available in the 2015 survey.

<sup>5</sup> The Office for National Statistics (ONS) defines working age as being 16–64. Our respondents ranged from 20 to 88. If we exclude all our respondents over 64, the median age drops to 43. This matches the weighted average age of 'Newspaper, periodical and broadcast editors' in the 2021 England and Wales Census data. The weighted average age of 'Newspaper and periodical broadcast journalists and reporters', according to the 2021 census, is 42. Compared with other academic professions, such as teachers and doctors, journalists are, on average, as old as 'Teaching professionals NEC' (weighted average, 43 years of age), but slightly older than 'Generalist medical practitioners' (weighted average, 40 years of age) (ONS 2023).

The data suggest that the profession in the UK may have become slightly older since 2015, and less attractive to Generation Z and Millennials. In 2023, 39% of UK journalists were over 50 – up from 34% in 2015. Nearly two thirds (63%) of the journalists in our sample were 40 years or older, and only 14% under the age of 30 (see Figure 1.1). This is in contrast to the global average – where journalists’ median age is below 40, and often lower than the median age of the working population – but is in line with the US and the rest of Europe, where a lack of growth in the industry might explain the prevalence of older journalists (Joseph and Oller Alonso 2021).

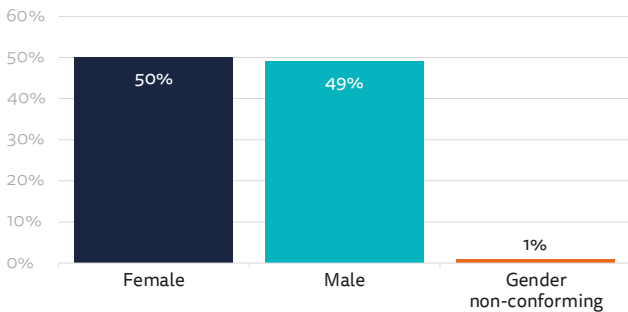
Journalists’ age is, unsurprisingly, mirrored in the data on their years of work experience. Nearly half of the respondents to the survey (46%) had been in the job for more than 20 years, and around one in five (20%) for more than 30 years. In contrast, only 5% in the sample had two years or less of work experience, and 15% between five and a half and ten years. There was a notable difference between genders, which we will discuss below.

### 1.3 GENDER

Respondents to the survey were divided nearly equally between journalists who identified as male (49%) and female (50%). Less than 1% (or six respondents in total) identified as gender non-conforming (‘other’) (see Figure 1.2).

**FIGURE 1.2: PROPORTION OF UK JOURNALISTS OF EACH GENDER**

There is a similar number of male and female UK journalists.

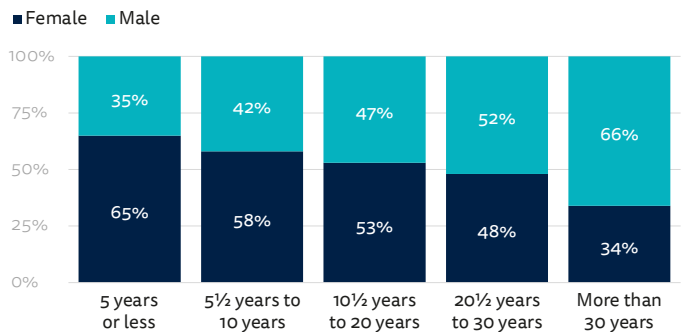


**gender.** What is your gender? Base: 1018.

Most older, more experienced UK journalists in the sample were men. Two thirds (65%) of those with up to five years of work experience were women, but among those with more than 30 years of work experience the pattern is reversed, with men making up 66% of journalists (see Figure 1.3).

**FIGURE 1.3: PROPORTION OF MALE AND FEMALE UK JOURNALISTS BY JOURNALISTIC WORK EXPERIENCE**

Journalists with less work experience are more likely to be female, whereas more experienced journalists are more likely to be male.



**work\_exp.** For how many years have you worked as a journalist? **gender.** What is your gender? Base: Up to 5 years = 152, Between 5 1/2 and 10 years = 140, Between 10 1/2 and 20 years = 255, Between 20 1/2 and 30 years = 267, More than 30 years = 204.

Female journalists in the sample were on average eight years younger than their male colleagues (41 vs 49 median age) – slightly widening the gap of seven years observed in the 2015 survey.

In line with the patterns described earlier, women over 50 were markedly underrepresented. While at least half of all journalists in the younger age groups were women, among the over 50s the figure was just 36%. We find a similar pattern for journalists who come from ethnic minority groups. We discuss possible explanations below.

Other chapters in this report look at the extent to which female and male journalists’ employment conditions (see Chapter 2), experiences of harassment, and perceived job security (see Chapter 6) differ.

### 1.4 ETHNICITY

Nine out of ten journalists in the sample (90%) came from a White background.<sup>6</sup> In line with the trend in the general UK population, this is slightly less than in 2015 (95%) (see Figure 1.4). The share of Black journalists has increased from 0.3% to 1.3%.<sup>7</sup> The small increase in the share of journalists with an Asian background is not statistically significant.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, it is important to be clear that any minor differences between 2015 and 2023 could be due to sampling error.

Importantly, though, compared with the 2021–2022 UK censuses that record a notably higher percentage of people with a Black (4%) or an Asian (9%) background, journalists from these ethnic groups were still underrepresented. In this regard we find little change to the situation in 2015.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> This includes ‘English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish or British’; ‘Irish’; ‘Gypsy or Irish traveller’; ‘Roma’; and ‘Any other White background’ but not ‘White and Black Caribbean’; ‘White and Black African’; ‘White and Asian’; or ‘Any other Mixed or Multiple background’.

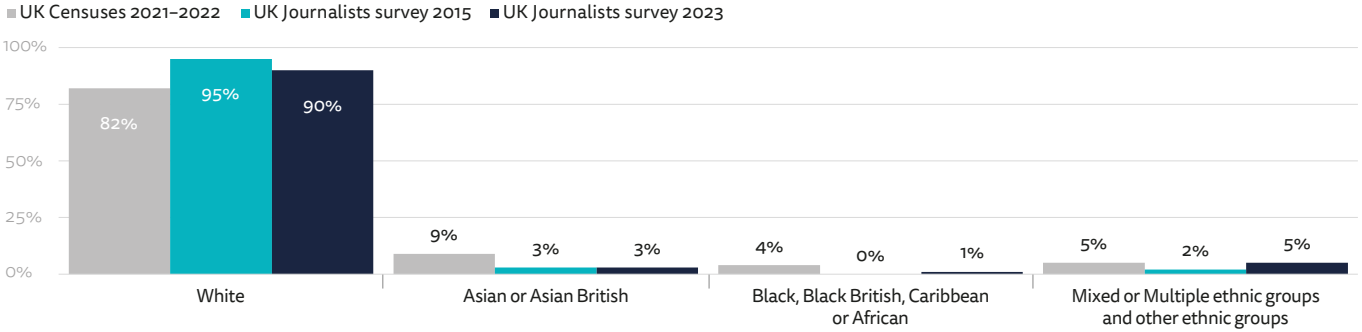
<sup>7</sup> The difference between 2015 and 2023 is statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ). However, the number of respondents is very small: 3 in 2015, 13 in 2023. ‘Black, Black British, Caribbean or African’ includes ‘African background’; ‘Caribbean’; and ‘Any other Black, Black British, or Caribbean background’.

<sup>8</sup> ‘Asian or Asian British’ includes ‘Indian’, ‘Pakistani’, ‘Bangladeshi’, ‘Chinese’, and ‘Any other Asian background’.

<sup>9</sup> The survey used the same ethnic groups as were used for the 2021 England and Wales Census (ONS 2022a).

### FIGURE 1.4: PROPORTION OF UK JOURNALISTS WITH EACH ETHNIC BACKGROUND COMPARED WITH THE GENERAL POPULATION

The data suggest that White journalists are overrepresented in the UK compared with the national population.



**cult\_grp.** To which ethnic group do you belong? Base: 2015 = 683, 2023 = 1003. Note: Categories derived from the 2011 UK Census and the 2021 Census of England and Wales.

The survey also shows that journalists from an ethnic minority background were less likely to hold a management role: three quarters of ethnic minority journalists (75%) had no management role, compared with less than two thirds (62%) of their White colleagues, and only 3% held a position in middle management, as opposed to 15% of their White colleagues. Interestingly, the gap was smaller at the top, with 23% of journalists from a White ethnic background having a top management role and 22% of journalists from an ethnic minority background.

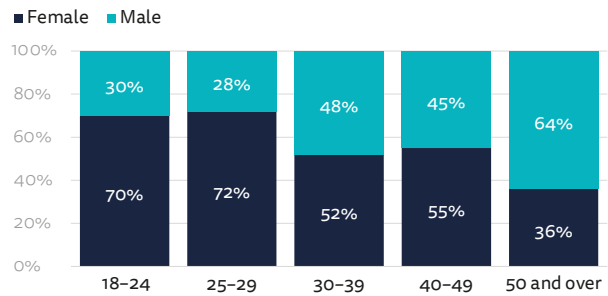
The survey data are aligned with what a number of qualitative studies have suggested in recent years, namely that news organisations in the UK still struggle with ethnic diversity, and, in some cases, systemic racism (Douglas 2022; Al-Kaisey 2022). This is despite the fact that some UK newsrooms have attempted to act on the discrimination against ethnic minority journalists. For example, in October 2021, the *Guardian* created the role of a senior editor for diversity and development (GNM press office 2021). In the same year, the BBC published a ‘Diversity and Inclusion Plan’ guiding actions for the next couple of years (BBC 2021).

## 1.5 AGE DISCRIMINATION AGAINST FEMALE AND ETHNIC MAJORITY JOURNALISTS?

The data show that the age distribution of female and ethnic minority journalists differed significantly from that of White and male journalists. As already observed, female journalists tended to be younger than their male colleagues (see Figure 1.5). Equally, UK journalists from an ethnic minority background also skewed younger (see Figure 1.6).

### FIGURE 1.5: PROPORTION OF MALE AND FEMALE UK JOURNALISTS WITHIN EACH AGE GROUP

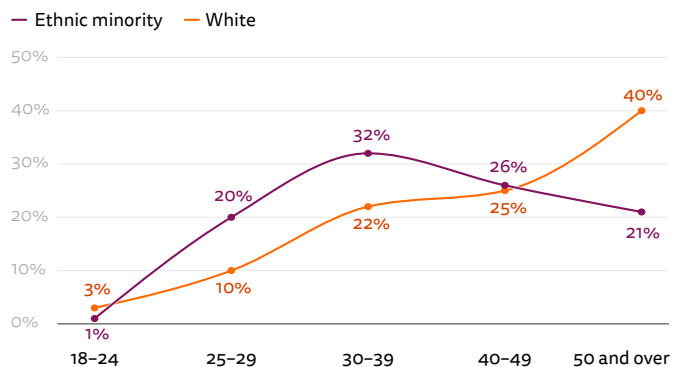
Younger journalists are more likely to be female whereas older journalists are more likely to be male.



**age.** In what year were you born? **gender.** What is your gender? Base: 18-24 = 30, 25-29 = 103, 30-39 = 219, 40-49 = 234, 50 and over = 369.

### FIGURE 1.6: PROPORTION OF UK JOURNALISTS IN EACH AGE GROUP

White UK journalists have an older age profile compared with journalists from ethnic minorities.



**cult\_grp.** To which ethnic group do you belong? Base: White = 854, Ethnic minority = 104. Note: Ethnic minority includes ‘Asian or Asian British’, ‘Black, Black British, Caribbean or African’, ‘Mixed or Multiple ethnic groups’ and ‘Other ethnic groups’. Categories derived from the 2021 Census of England and Wales.



There are two (non-mutually exclusive) explanations. First, it may be the case that the data on both female journalists and those from an ethnic minority background were ‘catching up’ with changes to hiring policies that were made after those now aged 50 entered the profession. However, we note that comparison with the data from the previous survey shows no change in the age distribution of female journalists since 2015.

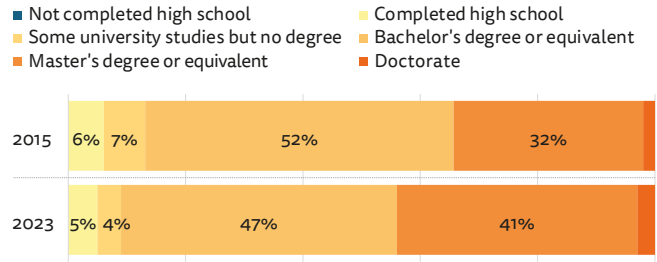
Another explanation may be that age discrimination hits female and ethnic minority journalists harder than their White and male colleagues, meaning that they exit the profession at an earlier age. Anecdotal evidence suggests that, in particular in television, women are discriminated against once they reach the age of 50 (The Guardian Datablog n.d.). Research on this topic is still rare (Joseph and Oller Alonso 2021). A close study of career trajectories of journalists in Seattle between 2015 and 2021 aligns with the theory that White men are most likely to retain their jobs in contrast to, among others, women and persons of colour. The study argues that ‘the direction of journalistic careers tends to be characterised mostly by inertia or exit’, with female and minority ethnic journalists more likely to be among those who exit, while ‘White men tend to advance to or retain the most prestigious jobs’ (Powers 2022, 406). However, these studies only provide some first indications and further research would be needed to explain what lies behind underrepresentation of female and ethnic minority journalists among UK journalists over the age of 50.<sup>10</sup>

## 1.6 EDUCATION

By 2023, 91% of journalists in the UK sample had a university degree, up slightly from 86% in 2015 (Thurman et al. 2016, 11). As in many professions in the UK, a university education has now become the norm, but the increase from 2015 is striking given the figure was already so high. Journalists in the survey were also more likely to hold higher degrees. In 2015 around a third (32%) of journalists had a master’s degree, but this percentage rose to 41% in 2023 (see Figure 1.7).

## FIGURE 1.7: PROPORTION OF UK JOURNALISTS WITH EACH LEVEL OF FORMAL EDUCATION

The proportion of journalists with a postgraduate qualification (master’s degree or doctorate) has increased since 2015.



gen\_edu. What is the highest level of education you have completed? Base: 2015 = 695, 2023 = 1028.

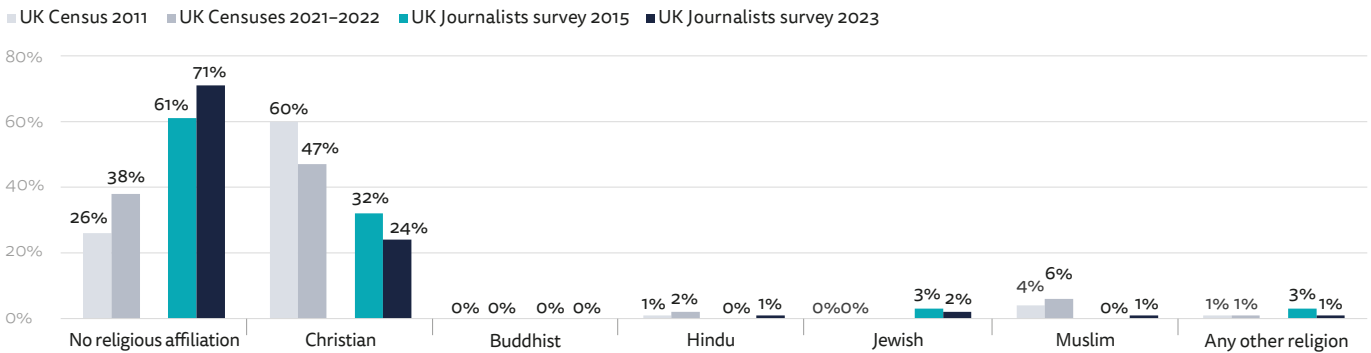
Two thirds of journalists in the sample (66%) had received some form of formal education or training in journalism. More than half (55%) took a short course in journalism at a university or college; 48% said that they did a journalism degree at university or college; and a little under a quarter (23%) undertook an apprenticeship.

## 1.7 RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION

The vast majority (71%) of the journalists in the sample said that they had no religious affiliation, up by ten percentage points (pp), from 61%, since 2015 (see Figure 1.8). This is in line with the broader trend among the UK population. However, as we observed in 2015, the proportion with no religious affiliation was considerably higher among UK journalists than the general UK population (where it was 38%) (ONS 2022b; Scotland’s Census 2024; NISRA 2022). The data on journalists’ affiliations with non-Christian religious groups is difficult to compare with the census data given the small numbers in the survey sample, so we should be cautious about any apparent differences.

## FIGURE 1.8: PROPORTION OF UK JOURNALISTS AFFILIATED WITH EACH RELIGION COMPARED WITH THE GENERAL POPULATION

The proportion of journalists with a religious affiliation is lower than in the general population, and has decreased since 2015.



religio. Do you consider yourself as affiliated with any particular religion or religious denomination? If yes, which one? Base: 2015 = 669, 2023 = 994.

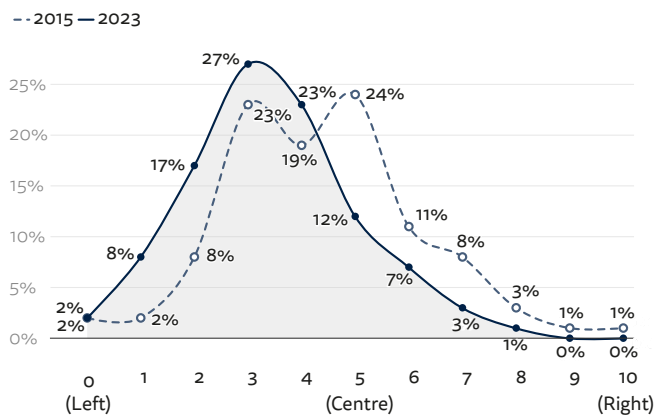
<sup>10</sup> Proposals for collaborative research projects are welcome and should be addressed to i.henkel@leeds.ac.uk.

## 1.8 POLITICAL STANCE

Although the most widely used news source in the UK, the BBC, is required to be impartial, it is often observed that most national newspapers have a right-leaning editorial line (Smith 2017; Ponsford 2024a). It is perhaps surprising, then, that not only did most journalists self-identify with the political left, but there has been a shift leftwards since 2015 (see Figure 1.9). When asked where they saw themselves on a scale from 0 ('left') through centre (5) to 'right' (10), in 2023 three quarters (77%) chose a left-leaning (0–4) position, as opposed to a little over half (54%) who did so in 2015 (Thurman et al. 2016, 12). The median political stance in 2015 was slightly centre-left at 4 on the 0–10 scale, whereas in the 2023 survey it was 3. The 2023 survey also shows that, in keeping with general trends, female journalists tended to be slightly more left-leaning than male journalists.

### FIGURE 1.9: PROPORTION OF UK JOURNALISTS WHO PLACE THEMSELVES AT EACH POINT ON THE LEFT-RIGHT POLITICAL SPECTRUM

In 2015, 54% of UK journalists self-identified with the political left, rising to 77% by 2023 (excluding those who answered with 'prefer not to say').



**pol\_view.** In political matters, people talk of 'the left', 'the right', and the 'center'. On a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 is left, 10 is right, and 5 is center, where would you place yourself? Base: 2015 = 603, 2023 = 941. Note: Those that answered 'prefer not to say' are excluded.

It should be pointed out, though, that journalists' personal political views do not necessarily exert a large influence on their work (as is described in Chapter 7, only 13% said that 'personal values and beliefs' were 'extremely influential' on their work). Also, journalists' self-identification between left and right may be fuzzy (Smith 2019) and the meaning of 'left' and 'right' may have shifted between 2015 and 2023, away from the traditional economic definition towards a more cultural one (de Vries et al. 2013).

## 1.9 SOCIO-ECONOMIC BACKGROUND

In spring 2022, the NCTJ published a *Diversity in Journalism* report that showed 80% of journalists came from a privileged background as measured by their parents' occupation, up from 75% the previous year (Spilsbury 2022).<sup>11</sup> Journalism in the UK, commentators observed, had 'a huge class problem' (Vinter 2022). A government-commissioned report from 2019 stated that between 'the 1958 and the 1970 birth cohorts, the biggest decline in social mobility occurred in the professions of journalism and accountancy' (Milburn 2009, 19).

The survey data show that class inequality continues to be an issue for UK journalism. We assess journalists' socio-economic background in two ways. The survey asked journalists what the main job of the main wage earner in their household was at the time they were 14 years old; secondly, it asked whether journalists attended a state-funded, a fee-paying private, or a non-fee-paying selective school (or a school outside the UK system).

### 1.9.1 JOURNALISTS' PARENTS' OCCUPATION

The first question about the main wage earner's job in their childhood home was asked using an open text question. We coded the responses using a coding scheme developed by the Warwick Institute for Employment Research at the University of Warwick.<sup>12</sup> This scheme classifies occupations into nine categories using standards developed by the Office for National Statistics (ONS). The NCTJ *Diversity in Journalism* report used the same classification (Spilsbury 2022).

The Warwick Institute for Employment Research scheme allocates job titles to the nine main categories of the ONS Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) 2020.<sup>13</sup> The nine categories are as follows,<sup>14</sup> with 1 being the most and 9 being the least privileged:

1. Managers, directors, senior officials
2. Professional occupations
3. Associate professional occupations
4. Administrative and secretarial occupations
5. Skilled trades occupations
6. Caring, leisure, and other service occupations
7. Sales and customer service occupations
8. Process, plant and machine operatives
9. Elementary occupations.

<sup>11</sup> According to the 2022 NCTJ Diversity report, 80% of journalists grew up in families where the parents worked in one of the following three top professional occupational categories: 'Managers, directors and senior officials' (17%), 'Professional occupations' (48%), and 'Associate professional and technical occupations' (15%) (Spilsbury 2022, 10).

<sup>12</sup> [https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/ier/data\\_group/cascot/](https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/ier/data_group/cascot/)

<sup>13</sup> <https://cascotweb.warwick.ac.uk/#/classification/soc2020>

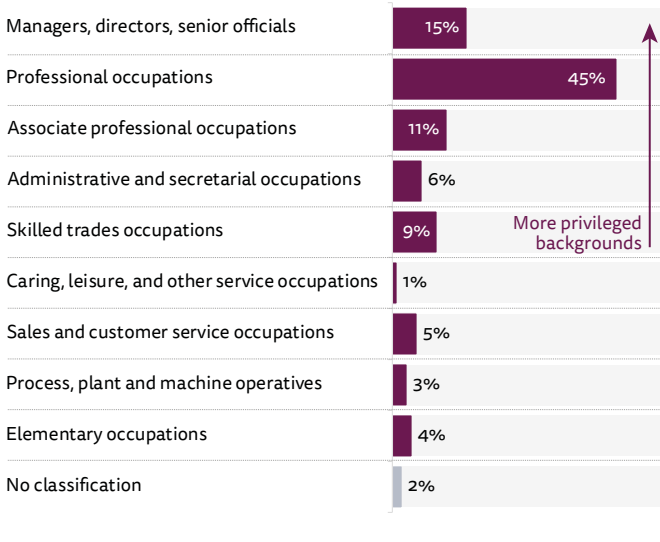
<sup>14</sup> Conceptually, this classification is based on the Erikson-Goldthorpe-Portocarero class schema (Erikson et al. 1979; Erikson and Goldthorpe 1992). It assesses social class through employment relations. The Goldthorpe class schema identifies 'social positions of actors [...] by their relations within the labour market' and thus is different from a vertical social hierarchy (Bergman and Joye 2005, 11). It is useful for our purpose of assessing journalists' socio-economic background because, as Bergman and Joye explain, members of the same class are 'relatively homogeneous in kind and level of resources, have similar experiences with regard to socio-structural fluctuations and, accordingly, are marked by similar class-specific interests' (Bergman and Joye 2005, 12).

We coded as ‘o’ those responses that we could not allocate unambiguously to one of the above nine categories. This was only the case for 21 job titles or 2% of all responses.

We find that the journalists in the sample overwhelmingly came from a privileged background. 71% grew up in a household where the main earner had a job in one of the three leading occupational categories (see Figure 1.10): ‘managers, directors, senior officials’ (15%), ‘professional occupations’ (45%), and ‘associate professional occupations’ (11%). In contrast, only about one in ten (12%) came from a working-class background. These figures align with the pattern found in other research (Spilsbury 2023).<sup>15</sup>

**FIGURE 1.10: PROPORTION OF UK JOURNALISTS WHOSE MAIN WAGE EARNER IN THEIR HOUSEHOLD WHEN THEY WERE 14 YEARS OF AGE HAD EACH JOB**

More than two thirds of UK journalists had a parent with a professional background when they were growing up.



**UK\_parent\_occupation.** What was the main job of the main wage earner (if any) in your house when you were 14 years old? Base: 944. Note: Those who did not provide an answer are excluded.

But to what extent does journalists’ socio-economic background influence their career? We looked at two areas. First, we assessed whether journalists whose parents were occupied in one of the three leading professions are overrepresented in senior positions. We do not find evidence to support this. The data do not suggest that it is more likely for those from a privileged background to hold a top management role than it is for journalists with a less privileged upbringing.

We also analysed whether journalists’ background has an influence on whether they work for national media. Here we do find a statistically significant link, albeit with a weak effect.

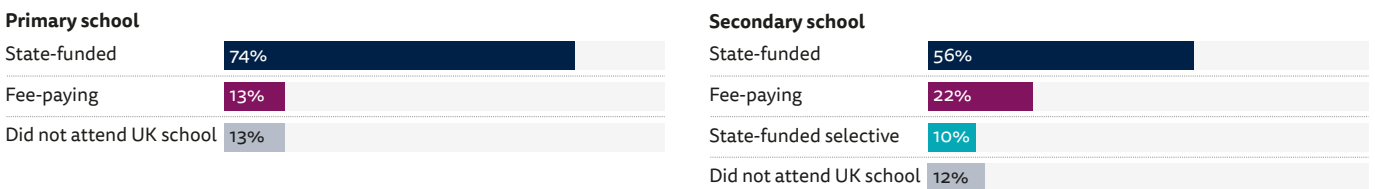
**1.9.2 STATE FUNDED, FEE-PAYING PRIVATE, AND NON-FEE-PAYING SELECTIVE EDUCATION**

In the UK, being privately educated is often considered a marker of class and privilege. The 2011–12 *British Social Attitudes* survey reported that ‘63% of the privately educated see themselves as middle or upper middle class compared with only 24% of the state educated’ (Park et al. 2013, 37). However, there is very little information about the percentage of journalists who attended fee-paying private schools. The only data available were collected by the Sutton Trust, which only considered leading journalists, among whom the proportion of those who attended private school is exceptionally high.<sup>16</sup>

Looking at the much more wide-ranging sample in the 2023 survey, the picture is different. 13% of respondents attended a fee-paying private primary school, 22% went to a fee-paying private secondary school, while 10% went to a selective but non-fee-paying secondary school (see Figure 1.11). This is considerably above the 6% of all UK school children who, according to the Independent Schools Council, currently attend a private school.<sup>17</sup> The fact that, according to the Sutton Trust, a considerably higher percentage of journalists in *leading positions* attended fee-paying schools than is the case for all journalists may indicate that a private education does have an influence on how successful journalists are in their career.

**FIGURE 1.11: PROPORTION OF UK JOURNALISTS WHO ATTENDED EACH TYPE OF SCHOOL**

Most journalists attended state-funded schools, but the proportion who attended fee-paying schools is higher than in the general population.



**school.** Did you attend any of the following types of school in the United Kingdom? Base: Primary school = 920, Secondary school = 992. Note: Base for primary school and secondary school is those that provided a relevant answer.

<sup>15</sup> Differences between our and the NCTJ’s findings may be explained by the different sampling methods. The NCTJ report used data from the UK Government’s Labour Force Survey of more than 40,000 households. However, because journalists make up only a small fraction of the workforce, the NCTJ data are extrapolated from a small sample, as the author of the report explained in an interview with the *Press Gazette* (Kersley 2022).

<sup>16</sup> In 2016, the Sutton Trust found that ‘51% [of journalists in their sample] attended private schools, 30% grammars and 19% comprehensives’ (Kirby 2016, 26). The author of the report explained that the ‘100 journalists chosen were picked for their perceived influence on the public debate, so are weighted towards the ‘commentariat’ in national newspapers, as well as newspaper editors’ (Kirby 2016, 27). The most recent figures from the Sutton Trust were collected three years later, when the researchers found that 43% of the leading 100 people in the news media were privately educated, which put them among the top ten professions with the highest attendance at fee-paying schools (Sutton Trust 2019, 4).

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.isc.co.uk/research/>

## 1.10 CONCLUSIONS

The survey data show that the median UK journalist in 2023 was White, university educated, over 40, not affiliated to any religion, from a privileged socio-economic background, and left-leaning. We also observe marked differences between groups of journalists. Such inequalities between journalists matter. Although female and male journalists were almost equal in number, women were clearly underrepresented among the over 50s (who are more likely to occupy senior positions) – with the same being true for journalists from an ethnic minority background. Compared with the 2015 survey, very little progress has been made towards a more representative share of Asian, Black, and other ethnic minority groups among UK journalists. Although journalists' political stance has moved towards the left, this does not appear to be reflected, so far, in more equality within their own profession – a task that is, of course, largely the responsibility of media owners and senior managers. These inequalities are likely to fuel concerns about the impact on what the news media cover. For example, the overrepresentation in the national media of journalists from relatively privileged backgrounds may mean the concerns of those from less privileged backgrounds are underrepresented. However, to properly understand the impact (if any) that such patterns have on journalistic output, the data must be combined with content analysis.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Proposals for collaborative research projects are welcome and should be addressed to [i.henkel@leeds.ac.uk](mailto:i.henkel@leeds.ac.uk).

# 2 THE EMPLOYMENT CONDITIONS OF UK JOURNALISTS

FRANÇOIS NEL

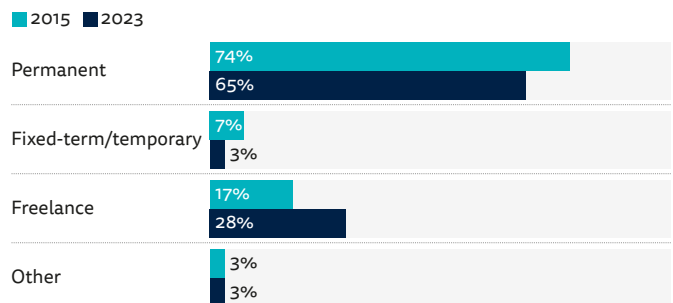
The working conditions of journalists in the UK have changed since 2015, but some characteristics and inequalities endure. The survey data reveal increases in temporary contracts and freelance and remote working, and the persistence of gender disparities in pay and promotion and the centralisation of media organisations in London. This chapter examines these trends in detail, drawing on the 2023 survey and its 2015 predecessor (Thurman et al. 2016).

## 2.1 WORK CONTRACTS: A MORE PRECARIOUS LANDSCAPE

The employment conditions of UK journalists have grown increasingly unstable in recent years. The survey data disclose a decline in permanent contracts, dropping from 74% in 2015 to 65% in 2023 (see Figure 2.1). This reflects a broader shift in the media industry towards more flexible, yet often precarious, employment arrangements. One of the most striking changes we found has been the rise in the proportion of freelance journalists, which grew from 17% to 28% over the same period, as media organisations have adjusted to economic pressures and evolving market demands (see, e.g., Standing 2016; Nel and Milburn-Curtis 2020).

### FIGURE 2.1: PROPORTION OF UK JOURNALISTS WITH EACH TYPE OF EMPLOYMENT CONTRACT

The proportion of UK journalists with a permanent contract decreased between 2015 and 2023, and the number of freelancers has increased.



**empl.** Which of the following categories best describes your current working situation as a journalist? Base: 2015 = 700, 2023 = 1130. Note: The 2015 survey asked about 'temporary' employment and the 2023 survey asked about 'fixed-term' employment, which are treated as the same here.

Freelancers in 2023 made up a significant portion of the journalism workforce. This model allows media organisations to scale their operations quickly and cost-effectively, but it places significant burdens on journalists. Freelance work typically lacks the job security and benefits, such as pensions, associated with full-time roles, leaving many journalists in vulnerable positions (Nel and Milburn-Curtis 2020).

Fixed-term contracts, while relatively stable, reflect the increasingly fragmented nature of employment in journalism. Many journalists pursue what are known as 'portfolio careers', where they juggle multiple roles across various organisations – including outside journalism – blending freelance, part-time, and short-term contracts. On average, the journalists in the survey earned 94% of their work-related income from journalism.

Economic pressures and organisational dynamics have undoubtedly contributed towards this shift, but other influences, such as personal choices or broader societal changes, may also be contributing to this trend.

It is important to note that the sample may underrepresent journalists working part-time, and, therefore, those working freelance and on temporary contracts. Journalists who worked fewer than 18.2 hours per week as a journalist – half the average working week in the UK – were ineligible to take the survey if they did not earn at least 50% of their income from journalism. If they did earn at least 50% of their income from journalism but worked fewer than 18.2 hours per week they were included. This approach was dictated by the global Worlds of Journalism Study, of which the survey is part.

The survey shows that male journalists were more likely to hold permanent contracts. This imbalance likely contributes to the gender inequalities we see in job security (see Chapter 6) and in career progression and access to higher-paying roles (see below).

## 2.2 SALARY DISTRIBUTION: PERSISTENT INEQUALITIES

The data show that the median annual income for UK journalists in 2023 was between £37,501 and £45,000 after tax deductions. While the equivalent median income for male journalists was £37,501–45,000, the median income for women was in the next band down at £30,000–37,500, underscoring the persistent gender pay gap in the journalism profession (see Table 2.1). These findings highlight how women's salaries are concentrated at the lower end of the pay scale, whereas men's earnings are more skewed towards the higher salaries.

### TABLE 2.1: MEDIAN INCOME (AFTER TAXES) OF JOURNALISTS IN EACH GROUP

Journalists who are men and/or are over 40 have higher salaries on average.

Group	Median income
All	£37,501-45,000
Men	£37,501-45,000
Women	£30,001-37,500
40 and over	£45,001-60,000
Under40	£30,001-37,500

**income.** In which of the following categories does your annual salary (in pounds sterling) as a journalist fall, after taxes? Base: All = 969, Men = 475, Women = 482, 40 and over = 547, Under 40 = 371. Note: Respondents who answered 'prefer not to say' were excluded.

The reasons for this gender pay gap are complex, involving structural biases, the lack of transparency in salary negotiations, and cultural expectations that often place women in lower-paying roles (Ross and Carter 2011).

In Chapter 1 we described how older UK journalists in the sample were more likely to be men. Unsurprisingly, older journalists also tended to occupy more senior positions with higher pay. The

median income for UK journalists aged 40 and over was between £45,000 and £60,000, dropping to £30,000–37,500 among the under 40s (see Table 2.1).

Of course, demographic differences are not the only cause of disparities in pay. They are, to some extent, also influenced by the characteristics of the employer. We find that journalists who worked for publicly owned media and/or broadcast media were, on average, in a higher pay bracket than their counterparts who worked for commercial media, print media, or internet-native outlets (see Table 2.2.). Shifts in the advertising market have impacted broadcast media less than the print sector, meaning that salaries may not have been as affected. Similarly, although there have been serious funding cuts for UK publicly owned media in recent years, they have a relatively secure financial outlook compared with some parts of the commercial sector.

### TABLE 2.2: MEDIAN INCOME (AFTER TAXES) OF JOURNALISTS IN EACH GROUP

Journalists who work for publicly owned media and broadcast media have higher salaries on average.

Group	Median income
All	£37,501-45,000
Publicly owned	£45,001-60,000
Commercial	£37,501-45,000
Broadcast	£45,001-60,000
Print	£37,501-45,000
Internet native	£37,501-45,000

**income.** In which of the following categories does your annual salary (in pounds sterling) as a journalist fall, after taxes? Base: All = 969, Publicly owned = 136, Commercial = 699, Broadcast = 153, Print = 518, Internet native = 136. Note: Respondents who answered 'prefer not to say' were excluded.

## 2.3 WORKING HOURS AND THE RISE OF REMOTE WORK

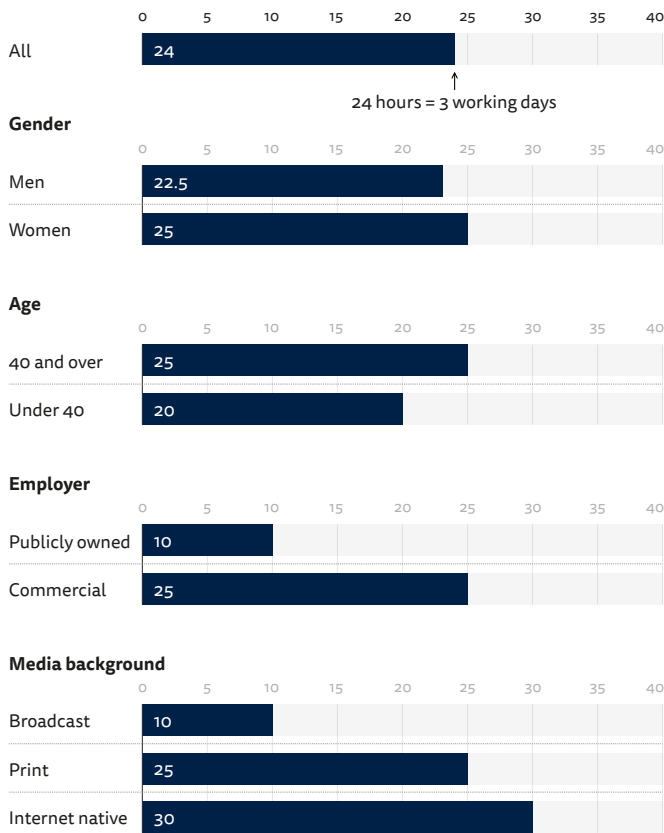
The median number of hours worked in journalism each week in the sample was 40, but this is heavily shaped by the exclusions mentioned earlier in this chapter. Around one third (30%) of the sample reported doing extra work outside of journalism, with 10 hours being the median amount of extra work done.

The working patterns of UK journalists have seen notable changes with the rise of remote work following the restrictions on social contact that were introduced in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Cherubini and Sharma 2023). The data show that the median number of hours worked from home each week was 24, which is equivalent to three days. There were only small differences in the average number of hours worked from home between men and women, and journalists under 40 and those 40 and over. However, journalists working for commercial media spent more time working from home than those working for publicly owned media, and journalists working for print and internet-native media typically spent more time working from home than those working for broadcast media (see Figure 2.2.).



### FIGURE 2.2: MEDIAN HOURS WORKED AT HOME BY UK JOURNALISTS

UK journalists work 40 hours a week on average. On average, journalists work from home three days a week, with women, older journalists, journalists working for commercial media, and print journalists all working from home for longer.



**hours2.** How many of these hours on average do you work from home? Base: All = 1047, Men = 500, Women = 507, 40 and over = 575, Under 40 = 379, Publicly owned = 147, Commercial = 752, Broadcast = 162, Print = 544, Internet native = 146.

The shift towards remote work has provided journalists with greater flexibility in managing their professional and personal lives. While this can offer benefits, such as reduced commuting times, it also raises concerns about the potential for burnout and the difficulties of disconnecting from work. Journalists must often be 'on call' for real-time updates, particularly in the digital media space, where the demand for continuous news coverage has become the norm (Bakker 2014). This may have contributed to a culture of overwork, with journalists working beyond their contracted hours, particularly during evenings and weekends.

## 2.4 JOB TITLES AND SENIORITY

The survey asked journalists to select their job title from a long list of options. Although around a quarter (26%) of respondents held jobs that did not fit into these categories, the data still give a sense of how work is distributed across the profession. The four most populated categories were 'Editor-in-chief/Editor/Online Editor/Magazine Editor' (16%), 'Reporter/Staff Writer' (12%), 'Features Writer' (7%), and 'Chief/Senior Reporter' (7%) – together accounting for about 40% of the UK journalism workforce (see Table 2.3).

### TABLE 2.3: PROPORTION OF UK JOURNALISTS WITH EACH JOB TITLE

'Editor-in-chief/Editor/Online Editor/Magazine Editor', 'Reporter/Staff Writer', 'Features Writer' and 'Chief/Senior Reporter' together make about 40% of the UK journalism workforce.

Title	Proportion
Editor-in-chief/Editor/Online Editor/Magazine Editor	16%
Reporter/Staff Writer	12%
Features Writer	7%
Chief/Senior Reporter	7%
Deputy/Assistant Editor	4%
Specialist Correspondent (e.g. Business, Sports, Health)	4%
Content Editor	3%
Section/Desk Editor (e.g. Business, Features, Picture)	3%
News Editor	3%
Managing Editor	3%
Producer/Podcast Researcher	2%
Presenter/Podcast Host	2%
Foreign Correspondent	2%
Columnist/Leader Writer	2%
Sub-editor	1%
Publisher/Founder	1%
Data Journalist	1%
Chief Sub-editor	1%
Blogger/Vlogger	0.3%
Photographer/Videographer	0.3%
Other	26%

**job\_title.** What is your current job title or position? Base: 1130.

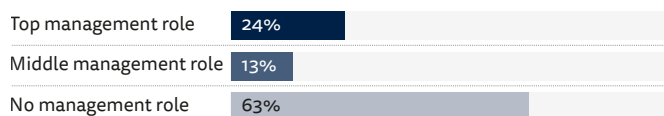
When we assign<sup>19</sup> these job titles to different levels of management responsibility we see that around two thirds (63%) of UK journalists did not have a management role, around a quarter (24%) had a top management role, with the remaining 13% having a middle management role (see Figure 2.3).

<sup>19</sup> For the 26% of journalists who gave an 'other' job title, that title was examined by three of the editors of this report and assigned to a level of management responsibility.



### FIGURE 2.3: PROPORTION OF UK JOURNALISTS WITH A MANAGEMENT ROLE

Around two thirds of UK journalists have no management role.



**job\_title.** What is your current job title or position? Base: 1129.

Gender disparities extend beyond salary and contracts and permeate other aspects of employment in journalism. The survey highlights that men were more likely to occupy top management roles, with 63% of top management roles held by male journalists, compared with just 37% by women. Conversely, women were slightly overrepresented in middle management and non-management roles, accounting for 55% of middle management positions and 54% of non-management roles. These findings suggest that female journalists face more significant challenges in advancing to leadership positions, a trend observed across many industries (Franks 2013).

## 2.5 BEATS AND SPECIALISATION

In 2015, 53% of UK journalists said that they worked on or supervised a specific beat or subject area. In 2023, the equivalent figure was 57%, suggesting there has been little if any change in the extent of specialisation in the sector. That most UK journalists focus on a particular beat may enhance the quality of reporting but could also limit their opportunities in a rapidly changing media environment.

As in 2015, business (focused on by 22% of journalists with a specific beat in 2023), lifestyle (13%), culture (9%), and sport (7%) were among the most commonly worked beats (see Table 2.4). Politics, although sometimes thought of as the archetypal and most important journalistic beat, was only worked on by 6% of those with a specific beat (or around 3% of UK journalists as a whole).

### TABLE 2.4: PROPORTION OF UK JOURNALISTS WITH A SPECIFIC BEAT WHO WORK ON EACH

As in 2015, business, lifestyle, culture, and sport are among the most commonly worked beats.

Beat	Proportion
Business (e.g. Economy, Finance, Markets, Companies)	22%
Lifestyle (e.g. Food & Drink, Fashion, Beauty, Travel, Home & Garden, Health)	13%
Culture (e.g. Music, Theatre, Film, Gaming, Arts, Books etc.)	9%
Sport	7%
Politics (domestic and foreign)	6%
Technology	5%
Environment/Climate	4%
Education/Social Affairs	3%
Entertainment/Showbiz/Royalty/Celebrities	3%
Science	3%
Crime/Justice	3%
Transport	3%
News desk	2%
Features	2%
Defence/Security	1%
Opinion (columns, editorials, letters, cartoons)	0.2%
Others	15%

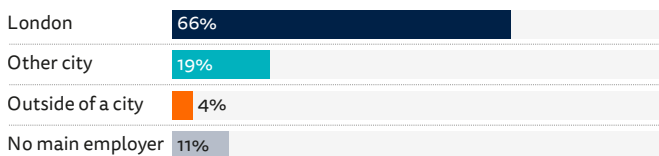
**beat2.** Which beat or subject area do you primarily work on or supervise? Base: Journalists with a specific beat = 608.

## 2.6 FUNDING MODELS AND REGIONAL DISPARITIES

Most of the journalists' main employer was a commercial media organisation (71%), as opposed to being publicly funded (14%) or a non-profit (2%) – though it is important to note that 11% said that they had no main employer. The concentration of media organisations in London is another long-standing feature of the UK journalism landscape. The survey data show that 66% of journalists were employed by media outlets based in the capital, with 19% based in another city, and 4% outside of a city (see Figure 2.4). This centralisation of the media industry has significant implications for regional representation in news coverage, with voices and perspectives from outside London long underrepresented (Franklin 2006).

### FIGURE 2.4: PROPORTION OF UK JOURNALISTS WHOSE MAIN EMPLOYER IS BASED IN EACH

Most journalists work for an outlet based in London.



**UK\_outlet\_answered.** Please tell me the name of the news outlet you do most of your work for. Base: 1118

## 2.7 UNION MEMBERSHIP

Union membership remains a notable feature of journalism, with 52% of journalists reporting that they belonged to a union. The comparable figure from 2015 was 44%, suggesting there has been an increase in recent years. Union representation is critical in advocating for better working conditions and negotiating wages, particularly for freelance journalists who may lack formal employment protections, so the increase could be linked to the rise in freelance working that was described at the beginning of this chapter.

## 2.8 CONCLUSION

The survey shows that a rise in freelance and remote working and persistent gender disparities in salary and employment roles characterise the working conditions of UK journalists. While remote work and flexible contracts provide new opportunities, they also introduce challenges, including job insecurity and the potential for burnout. The centralisation of media organisations in London continues to pose challenges to regional diversity in news coverage. Despite these challenges, union membership remains strong, as does specialisation. However, addressing persistent gender inequalities and supporting local and regional media will be crucial for ensuring a more equitable and sustainable future for journalism in the UK.

# 3 THE MEDIA PLATFORMS, FORMATS, AND CULTURES UK JOURNALISTS WORK WITH

## NEIL THURMAN

This chapter analyses, firstly, the distribution platforms – from print to podcasts – UK journalists produce for; secondly, the media formats – from audio to animation – they produce in; and, thirdly, the media cultural contexts – from newspaper to news agency – they work in. It shows the extent to which journalists work cross-format and cross-platform, which formats and platforms journalists most frequently produce in and for, and how journalists are distributed across employers with different media cultural backgrounds. Initial investigations into some of the implications for journalists’ well-being and their monitorial role of holding those in power to account are also presented.

### 3.1 A NEW METHOD TO MEASURE THE MULTIMEDIA JOURNALIST

The mix of media platforms and formats that journalists might be expected to produce journalism for and in has been increasing intermittently for at least three decades. One important impulse for this increase was the launch of websites by the press and broadcasters from the mid-1990s, opening opportunities for print, radio, and television journalists to write for the web, a specific skill that involved catering to the needs of an audience that, as BBC News Online found, wanted more than ‘simple reversioning’ (Amjadali 1998). Another was the 2007 ‘pivot to video’ made by UK local and national newspaper brands (Thurman and Lupton 2008), which, at the *Lancashire Evening Post* at least, led to ‘every member of editorial staff’ producing video stories (Smith 2007). A third was how, by 2011, social media had emerged as ‘a powerful’

source of traffic for news sites (Olmstead and Mitchell 2011), resulting in employers looking for reporters who could produce for social media as well as more traditional platforms (see, e.g., Journalism.co.uk 2011). Since then, other platforms, like podcasts, have also become more prominent in the mix.

While the increasingly online-first media environment has compelled legacy news media to ensure their workforces have ‘new’ media skills, the ability to produce for traditional media remains relevant, including in new institutional contexts. Examples of such new institutional contexts include how *The Times* and *Sunday Times* newspapers launched Times Radio in 2020, and the digital-native, long-form, global affairs magazine *New Lines* introduced a print edition two years after launching online (Salem 2022).

In such a convergent media context, analysing how journalists are working across multiple platforms, with multiple media formats, and in institutions with different media cultural backgrounds requires the right data. The survey used (WJS n.d.) in the previous wave of the Worlds of Journalism Study (see Thurman et al. 2016 for the UK results) recorded whether journalists worked for one or more of the following media types: a daily newspaper, a weekly newspaper, a magazine, television, radio, a news agency, a standalone online outlet, and an offline outlet’s online outlet. The data had three main limitations. Firstly, they provided inconsistently precise information about the media formats journalists produced in. Although it could be assumed radio journalists produced audio, and television journalists produced video, did any given newspaper journalist produce text or still images, or both? And those working for a news agency, working online, and/or working for multiple media types could be producing journalism in just one media format or many more.

Secondly, the survey’s data did not provide information on whether journalists were producing for different internet-based distribution platforms, subsuming social media networks,

websites, podcasts, news apps, messaging apps, and email newsletters under the single, broad category of 'online'.

Thirdly, the survey's data provided only limited information about the media cultures of the institutions for which journalists worked. Although a distinction was made between legacy and digital-native online outlets, if the same type of data had been gathered again by this new survey, it would have remained impossible to distinguish between, for example, a radio journalist working for a station (such as BBC Radio 4) with a broadcast culture and one (such as Times Radio) with a newspaper background.

For these reasons, in the 2023 survey, the UK, along with the other countries participating in the third wave of the Worlds of Journalism Study, introduced three new questions<sup>20</sup> that asked about the distribution platforms – from print to podcasts – journalists produced for, the media formats – from audio to animation – they produced in, and the media cultural background – from newspaper to news agency – of their main employer.

### 3.2 FROM PRINT TO PODCASTS: THE DIVERSITY OF DISTRIBUTION PLATFORMS UK JOURNALISTS PRODUCE FOR

Journalists were asked whether, when they produced or edited journalism, or when they supervised its production,<sup>21</sup> they usually knew in advance on which platforms – from print to podcasts – it would be delivered to the audience. An overwhelming proportion (95%) did, although some were a little less likely to know, for example those whose main employer had a news agency background.

Those who said they did know were asked how frequently they produced journalism for each of nine specific platforms plus

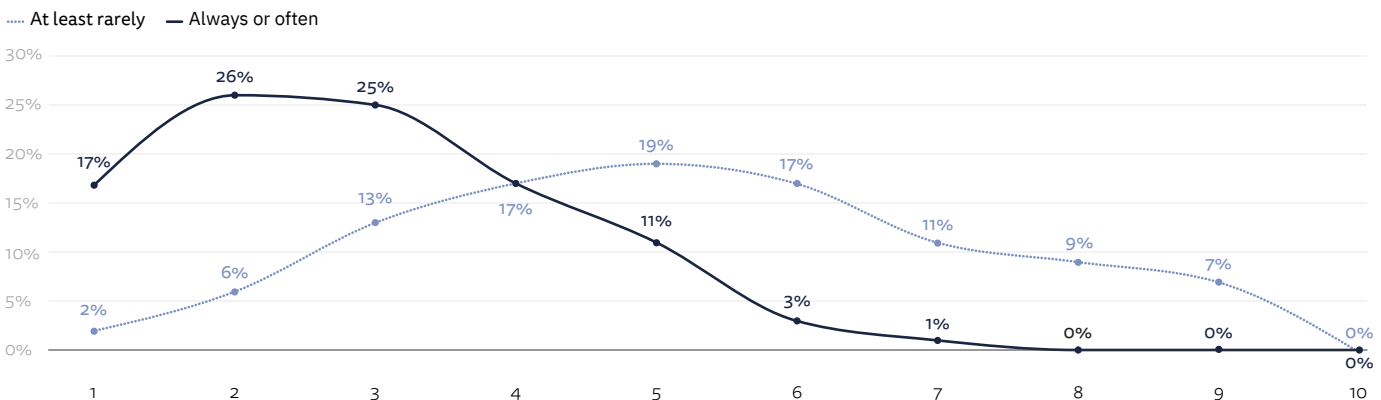
'other'. On average, journalists produced for over five platforms at least 'rarely', with that figure close to three if only platforms that they 'always' or 'often' produced for were included (see Figure 3.1).

Clearly, the media formats – from audio to animation – supported by different distribution platforms can vary. While journalists working for newspaper brands cannot include audio or animation in their outlets' print editions, those formats can appear in the brands' podcasts, websites, or social media feeds. But beyond the media format demands that can be placed on journalists producing for different distribution platforms, the platforms also differ in what they demand stylistically and from a content perspective. For example, even though radio and podcasts are both platforms that carry audio, podcasts are often less formal and 'talkier' than radio (McHugh 2016). That journalists were producing for an average of over five platforms – and for nearly three platforms 'always' or 'often' – shows that many have had to learn the styles, grammars, and logics of several distribution platforms, what Gibbs et al. (2015) refer to as the 'platform vernacular'.

So, how frequently, if at all, did UK journalists produce for the nine specific distribution platforms? This survey shows that websites were the distribution platform that journalists were most likely to produce for at least rarely (97%), followed by social media (80%), print (74%), email newsletters (62%), podcasts (56%), news apps (53%), radio (39%), television (36%), and messaging apps (32%) (see Figure 3.2). Although excluding journalists who only produced 'sometimes' or 'rarely' for a distribution platform does not change the ranking much (print moves ahead of social media to second place and podcasts fall below news apps to sixth), it does reveal how production for websites was a core task for a large majority of journalists (83% did it 'always' or 'often') while production for podcasts (14%), radio (12%), television (11%), and messaging apps (9%) was only a core task for small minorities. Print, social media, email newsletters, and news apps sit somewhere in the middle, with, respectively, 53%, 45%, 35%, and 31% of journalists producing 'always' or 'often' for these platforms.

**FIGURE 3.1: NUMBER OF DISTRIBUTION PLATFORMS THAT UK JOURNALISTS PRODUCE, EDIT, OR SUPERVISE THE PRODUCTION OF JOURNALISM FOR**

Most journalists produce for over five platforms at least 'rarely', and three 'always' or 'often'.



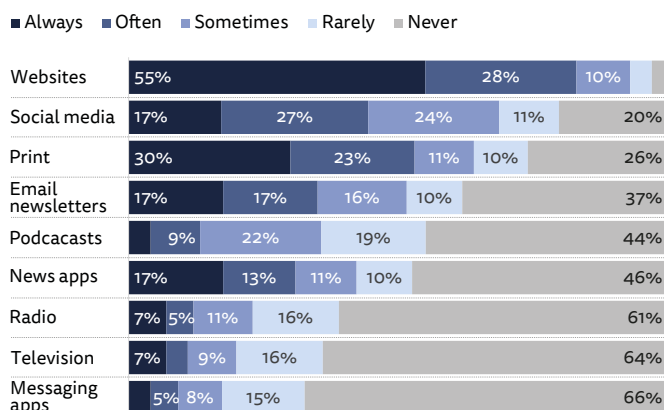
**platfz.** How often do you produce or edit content, or supervise its production, specifically for these platforms? Base: 992. Note: Distribution platforms = 'Print'; 'Radio'; 'Television'; 'Websites'; 'News apps'; 'Podcasts'; 'Social media, such as Facebook, Twitter/X, Instagram etc'; 'Messaging apps, such as WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger etc'; 'E-Mail newsletters'; and 'Other'.

<sup>20</sup> See Thurman et al. (2024a) for the complete set of survey questions used in the UK survey.

<sup>21</sup> From here on in 'produce' is used to refer to producing or editing journalism or supervising its production.

### FIGURE 3.2: PROPORTION OF UK JOURNALISTS WHO PRODUCE, EDIT, OR SUPERVISE THE PRODUCTION OF JOURNALISM FOR EACH PLATFORM

Websites are the distribution platform that journalists are most likely to produce for, with messaging apps the least likely.



**plafz.** How often do you produce or edit content, or supervise its production, specifically for these platforms? Base: Websites = 989, Social media = 980, Print = 987, E-mail newsletters = 972, Podcasts = 976, News apps = 957, Radio = 978, Television = 980, Messaging apps = 964. Note: Don't knows were excluded.

#### 3.2.1 WEBSITES AND SOCIAL MEDIA

That websites come top is not a surprise, given the importance of this form of digital distribution to almost all journalism outlets. Social media, at second in the list, is clearly still an important dissemination platform for UK journalists. This is despite evidence that news publishers have been trying to reduce their dependence on social media platforms (Hartley et al. 2023), in part due to changes platforms have made to their algorithms that have reduced referrals to news sites. For example, from December 2023, Facebook reduced the visibility of posts from news outlets for its UK users (Meta 2023a).

#### 3.2.2 PRINT

Many UK journalists still produced regularly for print. Indeed, a higher proportion did so 'always' and 'often' than for all other platforms except websites. The print platform's high ranking may surprise some given the declines in its consumption, as illustrated by how paid-for UK national newspaper circulation fell by more than 60% in the ten years to 2023 (Watson et al. 2023). However, in the UK, 'print still contributes the majority of revenues for many publishers and remains profitable' (Watson et al. 2023). This is also the case more widely, with the World Association of Newspapers predicting that, in 2024, 75% of global newspaper revenues would come from print editions (WAN-IFRA 2024). To support the vital revenue the print channel continues to bring to news publishers, three quarters of UK journalists in the sample still produced for it, with over half doing so 'always' or 'often'.

#### 3.2.3 EMAIL NEWSLETTERS AND NEWS APPS

That a clear majority of UK journalists produced for email newsletters (62%) shows both the persistence of this relatively old form of digital distribution and how it has become an important tool with which publishers can encourage visitors to regularly consume their content and attract 'the type of customers that can help with monetisation' (Newman et al. 2020). Indeed, over half of the publisher respondents to a survey fielded in 56 countries said they planned to produce more email newsletters in 2024 (Newman 2024).

Although most UK journalists said they produced for news apps, much of the journalism that appears on outlets' news apps also appears on those outlets' websites. Therefore, news apps should probably be regarded as an extension of websites, or vice versa, rather than as a platform with a distinct vernacular of its own.

#### 3.2.4 PODCASTS, RADIO, AND TELEVISION

That over half of UK journalists produced content for podcast distribution at least 'rarely' – more than did so for radio and television – is indicative of the steady rise in popularity of this once disparaged distribution platform. It is true that, despite 'podcast' being chosen as the *New Oxford American Dictionary's* Word of the Year in 2005 (Bowers 2005), the medium struggled to break through to the masses until the 2014 investigative journalism podcast *Serial* both boosted and helped highlight podcasts' popularity (Bottomley 2015). Ten years later, 31% of the UK online population listened to a podcast monthly (Newman et al. 2024). Podcasts' considerable reach is a reason why nearly half of publishers surveyed were planning to produce more podcasts in 2024 (Newman 2024). In 2023, the Department of Journalism at City St George's, University of London launched a new MA in Podcasting (Maher 2023) in response to podcasts' popularity and an apparent shortage of podcast production skills.<sup>22</sup>

The very existence of this MA in Podcasting elicited expressions of surprise – 'you can even get an MA in podcasting' said Shaad D'Souza (2023) in the *Guardian* – that are not made in response to the existence of degrees in radio and television journalism, despite, as this survey shows, UK journalists being less likely to produce for radio or TV than for podcasts. To distribute via these broadcast platforms requires, of course, relatively high levels of capital investment. This, spectrum limits, and regulatory burdens limit the number of broadcast stations, many of which have limited news output anyhow. It is, therefore, not a surprise that relatively few (11–12%) UK journalists in the sample 'always' or 'often' produced for these two broadcast platforms.

<sup>22</sup> Disclosure: the author has an honorary affiliation with this department.

### 3.2.5 MESSAGING APPS

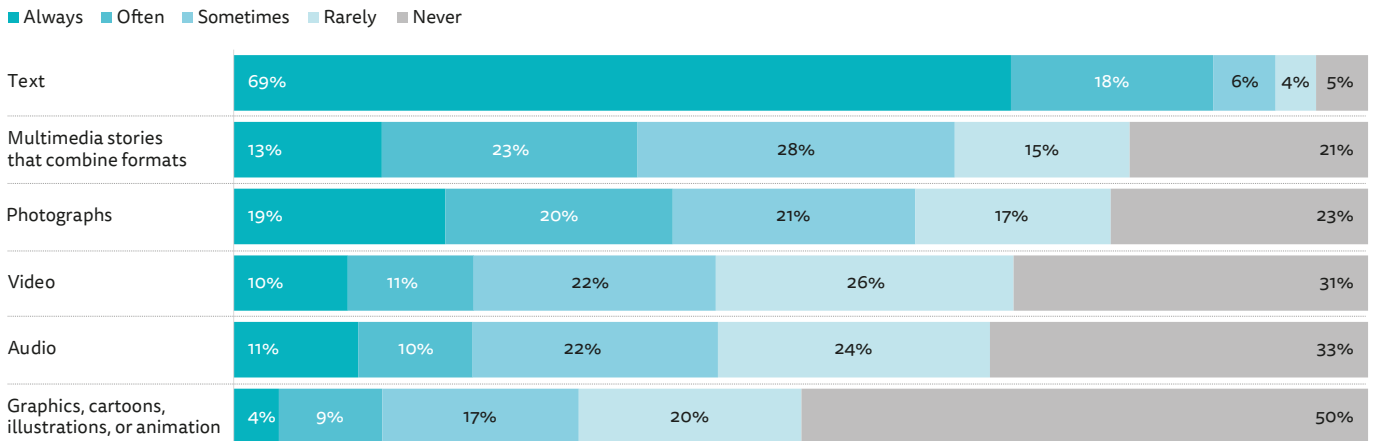
Messaging apps have been used as a peer-to-peer news distribution platform for over a decade. By 2014, 2% of UK internet users were using WhatsApp to consume or discuss news on a weekly basis (RISJ 2014), a figure that had risen to 10% by 2024 (Newman et al. 2024). However, such apps have been hard for news organisations to publish on. WhatsApp introduced the ability to ‘broadcast’ messages in 2013, but only to groups of 256 people. The launch of WhatsApp ‘Communities’ in 2022 increased that number, but only to 2,000 (Ponsford 2023). However, the launch of WhatsApp ‘Channels’ – which enables publishers to send text, photos, and videos to unlimited numbers of users – turned the app into a viable mass distribution platform. The feature was launched globally in September 2023, two weeks before this survey started (Meta 2023b). Given WhatsApp’s short history as a viable mass distribution platform, it is perhaps surprising that as many as 32% of UK journalists said they produced journalism for messaging apps, although with only 9% doing so ‘always’ or ‘often’, an MA in Instant Messaging still looks some way off.

## 3.3 FROM AUDIO TO ANIMATION: THE MIX OF MEDIA FORMATS UK JOURNALISTS PRODUCE IN

Journalists were asked how frequently they produced, edited, or supervised the production of journalism<sup>23</sup> in six media formats (text; photographs; audio; video; graphics, cartoons, illustrations, or animation; and multimedia stories that use a combination of the formats) plus ‘other’. On average, journalists produced in around four formats at least ‘rarely’, with that figure just over two if only formats that they ‘always’ or ‘often’ produced in were included (see Figure 3.3).

**FIGURE 3.4: FREQUENCY WITH WHICH UK JOURNALISTS PRODUCE, EDIT, OR SUPERVISE THE PRODUCTION OF JOURNALISM IN VARIOUS MEDIA FORMATS**

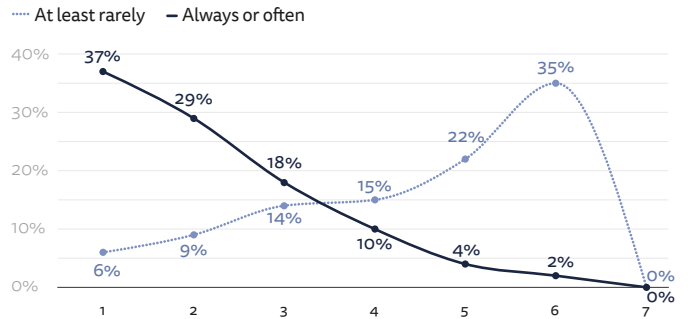
Text is the media format that journalists are most likely to produce in, and graphics is the least likely.



**format.** How often do you produce, edit, or supervise the production of journalism content in any of these formats? Base: Text = 1035, Multimedia = 1034, Photographs = 1034, Video = 1033, Audio = 1031, Graphics = 1030. Note: Don't knows were excluded.

**FIGURE 3.3: NUMBER OF MEDIA FORMATS THAT UK JOURNALISTS PRODUCE, EDIT, OR SUPERVISE THE PRODUCTION OF JOURNALISM IN**

Most journalists produce in nearly five formats at least ‘rarely’, and two formats ‘always’ or ‘often’.



**format.** How often do you produce, edit, or supervise the production of journalism content in any of these formats? Base: 1024. Note: Media formats = ‘Text’; ‘Photographs’; ‘Audio’; ‘Video’; ‘Graphics, cartoons, illustrations, or animation’; ‘Other’; and ‘Multimedia stories that use a combination of formats’.

Text was the media format that journalists were most likely to produce in (95%, at least rarely); followed by multimedia stories (79%); photographs (77%); video (69%); audio (67%); and graphics, cartoons, illustrations, or animation (50%). Excluding journalists who just produced ‘sometimes’ or ‘rarely’ in a media format reveals how the production of text is a core task for a high majority of journalists (86% did it ‘always’ or ‘often’) while the other formats are only a core task for smaller proportions: 13% for graphics, 20% for video, 21% for audio, 36% for multimedia stories, and 39% for photographs (see Figure 3.4).

<sup>23</sup> From here on in ‘produce’ is used to refer to producing or editing journalism or supervising its production.



The centrality of text to a large majority of UK journalists' production routines is striking. Of course, text is normally a required element when producing journalism for websites, social media, print, email newsletters, and news and messaging apps. And journalism whose final form is video or audio is often scripted, with the writing of text an essential intermediate stage. The frequency with which UK journalists produced text is also indicative of the audience demand for the format. When it comes to online news, the Reuters Institute *Digital News Reports* have shown that 'most audiences still prefer text because of its flexibility and control' (Newman et al. 2024).

Overall, most journalists at least 'sometimes' produced journalism in photographic form, with journalists whose main employer had a magazine, newspaper, or internet-native background most likely to do so. Even a quarter of journalists whose main employer had a radio background 'often' or 'always' produced photos. Although the majority of UK journalists did produce video and audio, working with these other audiovisual formats more than rarely was the preserve of minorities, most likely to be employed by news outlets with a television, radio, or internet-native background.

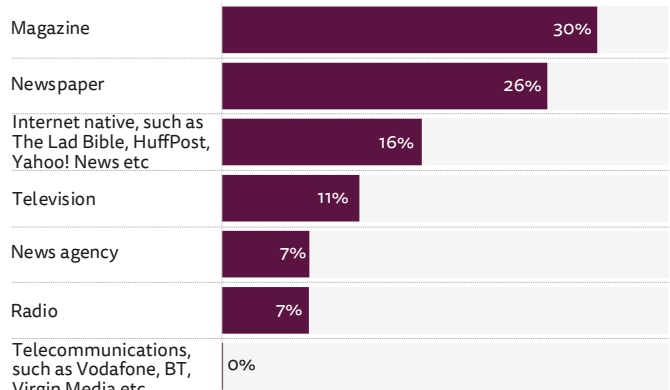
More than 18 years on from Rupert Murdoch's (2005) accusation that newspaper publishers had been 'slow to react' to how 'the emphasis online is shifting from text only to text with video', this survey found that barely 10% of journalists employed by newspapers were producing videos 'often' or 'always'. Of course, as Murdoch suggested in his speech, newspapers can acquire video from third parties rather than producing it in-house; and short-form news videos are increasingly automated (Thurman et al. 2024b), reducing the human resources required. Nevertheless, with, in 2024, only 9% of the UK online population watching short online news videos on a daily basis (Newman et al. 2024.), a lower level of audience demand than Murdoch and others anticipated is also likely to be part of the explanation for why the average UK newspaper journalist did not often produce video.

### 3.4 FROM NEWSPAPER TO NEWS AGENCY: THE MEDIA CULTURAL CONTEXTS IN WHICH UK JOURNALISTS WORK

Journalists were asked about the media cultural background – from newspaper to news agency – of their main employer (see Figure 3.5). Excluding the 18% who either did not know or did not have one main employer, for 30% their main employer had a magazine background; for 26%, newspaper; for 16%, internet-native; for 11%, TV; for 7%, news agency; and also for 7%, radio. Just 0.1% of journalists had a main employer with a telecommunications background.

#### FIGURE 3.5: PROPORTION OF UK JOURNALISTS WITH EACH MAIN EMPLOYER OR THE MAIN OUTLET WHERE THEY WORK

Journalists are most likely to work for a newspaper or magazine outlet.



**mbackg.** How would you describe the background of your main employer, or the main outlet where you work? Which of the following categories is the best fit? Base: 924. Note: Journalists who said they had no main employer, didn't know the background of their main employer, or did not answer this question (18.2% of our sample) were excluded.

So, the vast majority – 84% – of UK journalists had a main employer from a legacy media background. The institutional affiliation of UK journalists is similar to those of their audiences: in 2024, of the 16 *online* news brands with the highest weekly reach in the UK, all but three – MSN News, GB News, and Yahoo! News – were from legacy newspapers or broadcasters (Newman et al. 2024). Although two digital-native news brands, BuzzFeed News and HuffPost, were in the top 16 in 2020 (Newman et al. 2020), after they subsequently shuttered their UK news operations (Bland 2021; Sweney 2020), their popularity plummeted.

Despite some progress being made by UK national and local newspaper brands in offsetting the 'relentless print decline' with digital growth, 'the challenge of the print-to-digital transition has not faded ... amidst the oncoming cliff-edge for print' (Enders et al. 2024; McCabe et al. 2023).<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, the incomes of the public service broadcasters behind the news brands ranked first, second, and fourth in terms of weekly offline reach (Newman et al. 2024) to UK audiences – BBC News, ITV News, and Channel 4 News – are under pressure. In the BBC's case, from a freeze in the licence fee and uncertainty about the fee's future; and for ITV and Channel 4, increased competition from digital-native streaming services.<sup>25</sup>

Given that, as this survey shows, legacy media institutions employ the vast majority of UK journalists, the uncertainty around those institutions' future funding is clearly of concern. What will it mean for the jobs of journalists and their output when the cliff-edge for print is reached and if funding for public service broadcasters continues to fall in real terms?

<sup>24</sup> Between 2009 and 2022, the amount advertisers spent with UK print newspapers fell, in real terms, by 84% and with UK print magazines by the same amount (Ofcom 2023).

<sup>25</sup> Between 2009 and 2022, the amount advertisers spent with UK television fell, in real terms, by 15% (Ofcom 2023).



By 2023, UK advertising spend with internet-native search and social platforms was more than ten times higher than the spend with all national and regional newspapers, magazines, and radio stations – including their online editions – combined (Ponsford 2024b). This shift in resource allocation has not been accompanied by a commensurate shift in funding the employment of UK journalists. Although internet-native media are generating employment in the UK, they are not a significant employer in an industry – journalism – whose workers play a key democratic role as, in part, evidenced by how a majority believe in the importance of providing accurate information and analysis, and in holding politicians and business to account (see Chapter 9 in this report).

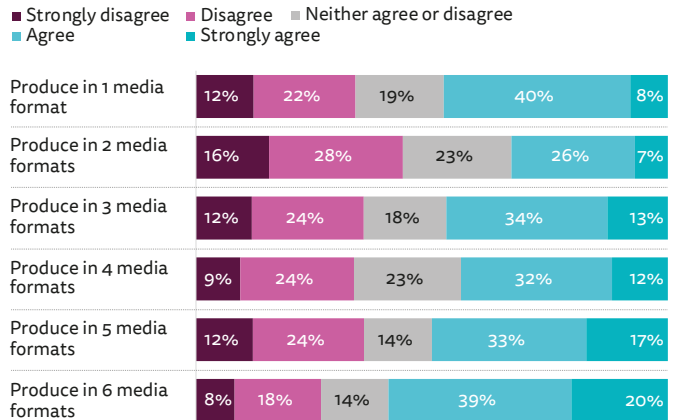
### 3.5 DO JOURNALISTS’ MEDIA MODALITIES MATTER?

This chapter has presented new data that describe the mix of media platforms and formats UK journalists produced for and in and how journalists were distributed across employers with different media cultural backgrounds in 2023. There is, of course, much more that can be explored using these data.<sup>26</sup> Three feasible foci for further research are suggested below, along with some initial findings.

Firstly, as this chapter shows, media convergence has led to UK journalists producing in an average of nearly five media formats and for an average of over five distribution platforms. Does such multi-tasking take a toll on their emotional and mental well-being? This survey’s data suggest that the more media formats journalists produce in – at least sometimes – the higher their concerns about their emotional and mental well-being (see Figure 3.6). This association is very weak but statistically significant. The data also suggest that the more media platforms journalists produce for – at least ‘sometimes’ – the greater their concerns about their emotional and mental well-being (see Figure 3.7). This association is also very weak but statistically significant. Chapter 6 provides more detailed information on UK journalists’ perceptions of their physical and mental well-being.

#### FIGURE 3.6: PROPORTION OF UK JOURNALISTS WHO AGREE THEY ARE CONCERNED ABOUT THEIR EMOTIONAL AND MENTAL WELL-BEING

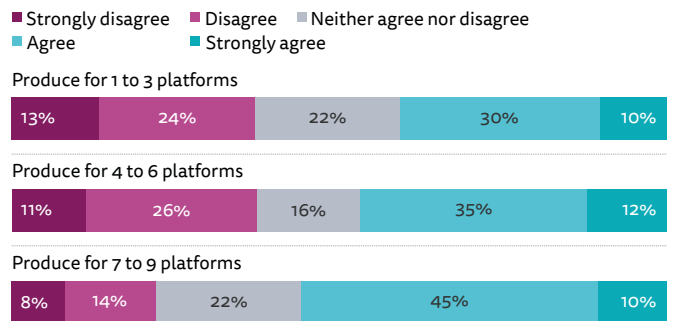
The more media formats journalists work in – at least ‘sometimes’ – the greater their concerns about their emotional and mental well-being.



**format.** How often do you produce, edit, or supervise the production of journalism content in any of these formats? **safe3\_C.** Thinking about your work, please tell me how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements: I am concerned about my emotional and mental well-being. Base: 1 media format = 139, 2 = 187, 3 = 211, 4 = 203, 5 = 174, 6 = 98. Media formats = ‘Text’; ‘Photographs’; ‘Audio’; ‘Video’; ‘Graphics, cartoons, illustrations, or animation’; ‘Other’; and ‘Multimedia stories that use a combination of formats’.

#### FIGURE 3.7: PROPORTION OF UK JOURNALISTS WHO AGREE THEY ARE CONCERNED ABOUT THEIR EMOTIONAL AND MENTAL WELL-BEING

The more media platforms journalists produce for – at least ‘sometimes’ – the greater their concerns about their emotional and mental well-being.



**platf2.** How often do you produce or edit content, or supervise its production, specifically for these platforms? **safe3\_C.** Thinking about your work, please tell me how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements: I am concerned about my emotional and mental well-being. Base: Produce for 1 to 3 platforms = 352, 4 to 6 = 549, 7 to 9 = 86. Distribution platforms = ‘Print’; ‘Radio’; ‘Television’; ‘Websites’; ‘News apps’; ‘Podcasts’; ‘Social media, such as Facebook, Twitter/X, Instagram etc.’; ‘Messaging apps, such as WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger etc.’; ‘E-Mail newsletters’; and ‘Other’.

<sup>26</sup> Proposals for collaboration are welcome and should be addressed to neil.thurman@ifkw.lmu.de

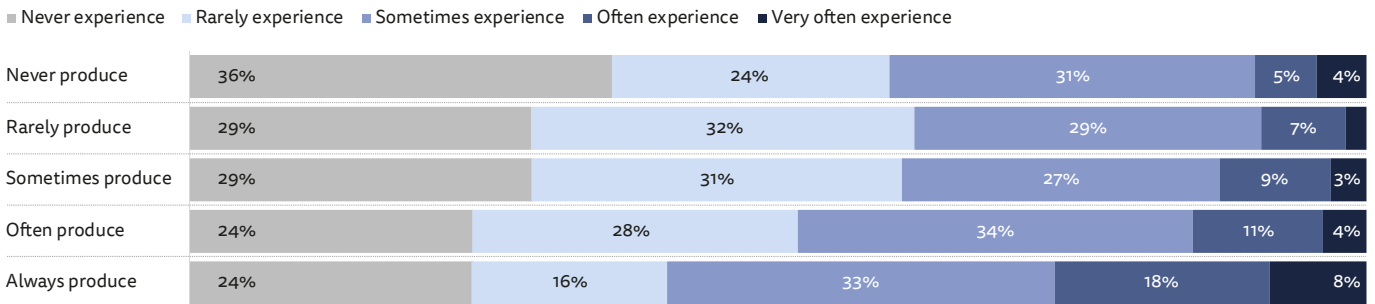
Secondly, given the prevalence of online hate speech – one study found 3.9% of comments under news articles at theguardian.com were hateful (Zannettou et al. 2020) – do journalists producing journalism for online platforms have more demeaning or hateful speech directed their way? This survey’s data suggest that the more frequently journalists produce for social media platforms the more frequently they report having demeaning or hateful speech directed at them (see Figure 3.8). This association is, again, very weak but statistically significant. Further information on UK journalists’ experiences of a range of threats and harassment, including hateful speech, is contained in Chapter 6.

Using data from the last wave of the Worlds of Journalism Study survey, Henkel et al. (2020) found that ‘online journalists are more likely than their offline colleagues to find justification for publishing unverified information and less interested in

holding politicians to account’. Because the 2023 survey’s data can distinguish between journalists producing for different distribution channels and in different content formats and working for employers with different media cultural backgrounds, another idea for further research would be to build on Henkel et al.’s work and analyse associations between, on the one hand, media channel, content, and culture and on the other, the roles journalists hold to be important and their ethical orientations. This survey’s data suggest that journalists whose main employer has an internet-native background give significantly less importance to monitoring and scrutinising those in power than journalists whose main employer has a newspaper, radio, or television background (see Figure 3.9). For more on the importance journalists give to various professional roles, including monitoring and scrutinising those in power, see Chapter 9.

**FIGURE 3.8: PROPORTION OF UK JOURNALISTS WHO EXPERIENCE HAVING DEMEANING OR HATEFUL SPEECH DIRECTED AT THEM BY FREQUENCY THEY PRODUCE CONTENT FOR SOCIAL MEDIA**

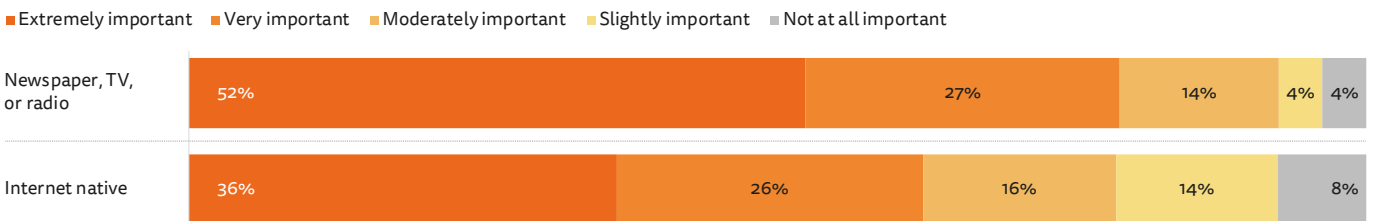
The more often journalists produce content for social media, the more often they experience demeaning or hateful speech.



**plattf2.** How often do you produce or edit content, or supervise its production, specifically for these platforms? Social media. **safe1\_A.** In the last five years, how often have you experienced any of the following actions related to your work as a journalist? Demeaning or hateful speech directed at you. Base: Never produce = 190, Rarely = 112, Sometimes = 233, Often = 271, Always = 170.

**FIGURE 3.9: PROPORTION OF UK JOURNALISTS WHO THINK IT IS IMPORTANT TO MONITOR AND SCRUTINISE THOSE IN POWER**

Journalists who work for newspapers, TV, or radio outlets are more likely than those who work for internet natives to think it is important to monitor and scrutinise those in power.



**mbackg.** How would you describe the background of your main employer, or the main outlet where you work? Which of the following categories is the best fit? **role\_B.** Please tell me how important it is to do each of the following in your daily work. Monitor and scrutinize those in power. Base: Newspaper, TV, or radio = 430, Internet native = 146.

## 3.6 CONCLUSIONS

This chapter has shown why, in an era of media convergence, it is necessary to be able to distinguish between journalists who produce for different distribution platforms and in different media formats and who work for institutions with different media cultural backgrounds. To be able to make such distinctions, a novel set of three questions was developed. This chapter's analysis of the data from those questions shows the average UK journalist produced for multiple distribution platforms and in multiple media formats. Although such multi-tasking may add variety to journalists' routines, this survey's data suggest that juggling too many platforms and formats may have a small negative impact on mental well-being. The frequencies with which journalists produced for particular distribution platforms show the centrality of news websites, the persistence of print and social media platforms, and how podcasts and email newsletters have gone mainstream. Furthermore, the frequencies with which journalists produced in specific media formats, also evident in the data, demonstrate the primacy of text and the importance of photographs. Producing for the other audiovisual formats more than rarely was the preserve of minorities, most likely to be employed by news outlets with a television, radio, or internet-native background. Finally, our finding that 84% of UK journalists had a main employer from a legacy media background raises questions about the continuity of the profession when the cliff-edge for print is reached and if revenue for broadcasters continues to fall in real terms. The indication in the data of differences in the importance journalists at legacy<sup>27</sup> and internet-native news outlets give to monitoring and scrutinising those in power shows that continuity is not just about maintaining the number of journalists employed, it is also about preserving their sense of purpose.

<sup>27</sup> Specifically, in this case, those whose main employer had a newspaper, radio, or television background.

# 4 NEWS AUTOMATION IN UK NEWSROOMS

SINA THÄSLER-KORDONOURI

News automation is becoming more common in UK journalism, sparking discussions about how the use of artificial intelligence (AI) technologies in the newsroom might change the relationship between journalists and the public (Smith 2024). This trend is also reflected internationally, as, driven by economic pressures and the general AI hype, news organisations across the world have been exploring how automation may support the productivity of journalists (Beckett and Yaseen 2023). However, there is a concern that the uncritical use of these technologies could decrease public trust in journalistic institutions (Newman et al. 2024).

AI is often used as an umbrella term that includes rule-based automation and more advanced machine learning-based systems, essentially describing the ‘automation of tasks or decisions (either fully or partly) that would previously have required the intelligence of a human being’ (Schjøtt Hansen et al. 2023, 17–18). While rule-based systems have been employed in news production for a while (Thurman 2019), recent advancements in machine learning have accelerated AI use in news production workflows (Simon 2023; Esposito 2022).

In the UK, both private and publicly owned media have incorporated AI into their newsroom workflows. This includes the automation of news production at organisations such as Reach PLC and the BBC (Stalph et al. 2023), to, for instance, generate local data-driven stories, as well as personalise news distribution (BBC 2024b). Collaborations between technology companies and UK news organisations, like the partnership between AI developer OpenAI and the *Financial Times*, have emerged to develop AI

solutions tailored to specific journalistic needs (Reuters 2024). The growing prevalence of AI in UK journalism has also prompted the creation of editorial guidelines for the professional use of AI tools, exemplified by initiatives at the *Guardian* (de Lima-Santos et al. 2024) and the BBC (BBC 2024c).

These developments suggest that news automation might be becoming an integral part of journalistic workflows in the UK. Consequently, this survey sought to investigate whether UK journalists were aware of the use of some types of news automation in their editorial environment and how this awareness may affect other professional experiences that have been said to be associated with the use of automation, such as increased editorial freedom and decreased job security (Lindén 2017; Flew et al. 2012). Therefore, in this 2023 survey, the UK, alongside other countries participating in the third wave of the Worlds of Journalism Study, introduced two new questions. These questions pertained to journalists’ awareness of (1) the use of automation for news text production<sup>28</sup> and (2) the application of personalised news distribution<sup>29</sup> within their newsrooms. At the time of the survey’s composition (2019), these were among the most prevalent editorial uses of automation in news organisations.

## 4.1 THE PREVALENCE OF NEWS AUTOMATION IN UK NEWSROOMS AND ITS DRIVERS

The findings show that only 7% of UK journalists were aware of working in a newsroom that used automated text production, and only 10% of working in one where personalised news distribution was used (see Figure 4.1). These figures suggest that a minority of

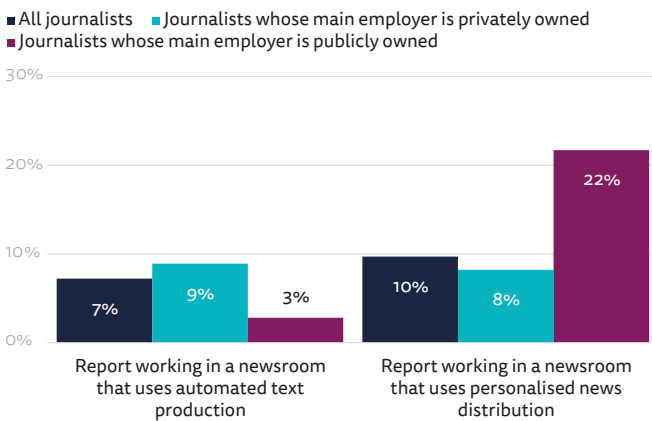
<sup>28</sup> Specific text in survey: ‘Automated’ or ‘robot’ journalism in which computer software automatically converts data into news texts.

<sup>29</sup> Specific text in survey: ‘News personalization’ where computer software automatically selects which stories are shown to audience members and how prominently.

UK newsrooms have incorporated such technologies into these particular workflow stages. However, it is important to note that these data solely reflect the journalists' awareness of the use of these technologies. The use of automation in these editorial processes that happens unbeknown to the surveyed journalists remains unaccounted for in the data.

#### FIGURE 4.1: PROPORTION OF UK JOURNALISTS WHO REPORT WORKING IN A NEWSROOM THAT USES AUTOMATED TEXT PRODUCTION OR PERSONALISED NEWS DISTRIBUTION

Few journalists are aware of working in a newsroom that uses automated news text production, or where personalised news distribution is used.



**mbackg.** How would you describe the background of your main employer, or the main outlet where you work? Which of the following categories is the best fit? **tech2\_A/B.** Please tell us whether these technologies are used in any of the newsrooms you work in. Base: All journalists = 1032, Journalist whose main employer is privately owned = 745, publicly owned = 143. Note: Of the journalists surveyed, up to 22% did not know whether automated text production was used in a newsroom where they work, and up to 34% did not know whether personalised news distribution was used.

The propensity to automate these two editorial processes varies by the media organisation's ownership. Specifically, 9% of journalists primarily employed by private media organisations worked in newsrooms where automated news text production was used. By contrast, only 3% of journalists primarily working for outlets with public ownership reported that the technology was used for text production in their newsrooms (see Figure 4.1).

Private media organisations face substantial pressure to innovate and remain competitive in an ever-evolving digital news landscape. This dynamic may explain the somewhat higher prevalence of automated news writing in these newsrooms compared with publicly owned ones, which enjoy a larger degree of independence from market-driven competition and may, therefore, not be as reliant on the efficiency gains in news production that AI enables. In the ongoing pursuit of faster, more efficient, and cost-effective news production, automated solutions may offer an enticing opportunity – once integrated into editorial processes – to increase the speed and volume of publishing while saving resources (Diakopoulos 2019). News organisations that rely on their ability to publish news quickly, such as news agencies, may particularly benefit from the efficiencies afforded by automated news text production (Thäsler-Kordonouri and Barling 2023). Despite other studies indicating that 'both public and private funding models are under pressure as audiences

shift their attention further towards digital channels' (Newman et al. 2024, 64), the 2023 survey's findings suggest that privately owned media organisations exhibit a slightly but significantly higher propensity to alleviate this pressure through the economic advantages promised by automated text production than publicly owned ones.

However, research indicates that readers find news stories produced with the help of automation harder to understand than those fully authored by humans (Thäsler-Kordonouri et al. 2024). Furthermore, the automation of news production may pose risks to the maintenance of journalistic values, given that AI-assisted workflows often lack the transparency inherent in human processes (Cools and Koliska 2024; Diakopoulos and Koliska 2017). Indeed, an international study revealed that many journalists remain 'concerned about the ethical implications of AI integration for editorial quality and other aspects of journalism' (Beckett and Yaseen 2023, 7). These and other considerations may explain why publicly owned media exhibit a lower propensity to automate their workflows in this way. Some public service media have stringent AI implementation standards in news text production. This is exemplified by the BBC's 'AI Principles', which state that the 'use of AI will reflect the public service mission and values of our organisation. When we use AI to create, present or distribute content we will make sure that this complies with the BBC editorial values, guidance and guidelines' (BBC 2024c).

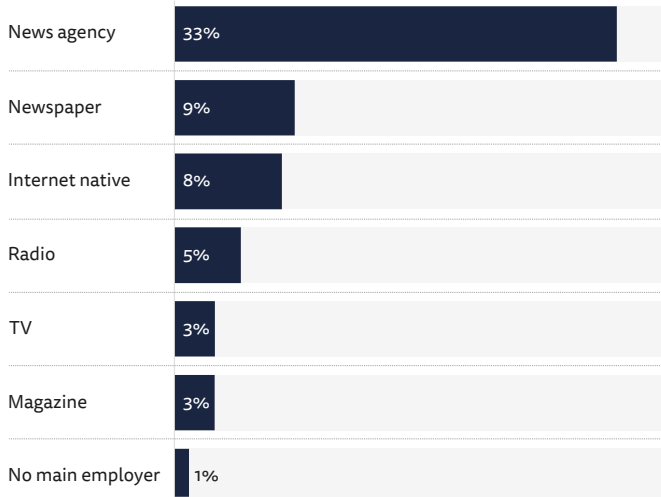
The survey shows a different relationship between the use of personalised news distribution and the ownership of media organisations. Specifically, only 8% of journalists mainly employed by private media organisations worked in newsrooms where personalised news distribution was used, whereas 22% of journalists in publicly owned outlets reported the use of such technology in their newsrooms (see Figure 4.1). Automating this workflow step supports the targeted delivery of relevant news content to specific audience groups. This functionality may help publicly owned news outlets, such as the BBC, to fulfil their mandate to serve diverse audiences across the UK by highlighting relevant content to various demographic segments (BBC 2024c).

Another organisational characteristic pertinent to the implementation of these two types of news automation is the news outlet's media cultural background: whether it has, for instance, a newspaper, radio, or television tradition (see Chapter 3). The findings of the 2023 survey indicate that the outlet's media cultural background significantly affects newsrooms' adoption of automated text production.

The proportion of journalists who indicated that automated text production was used in a newsroom where they worked was highest among those who worked mainly for news agencies (33%) (see Figure 4.2). News agencies, in particular, may benefit from the resource savings and increased speed that automated news writing can provide, as rapid publishing is essential to their business model. In the UK, the news agency RADAR (Reporters and Data and Robots) uses this production approach as its business model, describing itself as 'the world's only automated local news agency [that combines] human analysis and writing skills with cutting-edge automation tools' (RADAR 2024).

### FIGURE 4.2: PROPORTION OF UK JOURNALISTS WHO REPORT WORKING IN A NEWSROOM THAT USES AUTOMATED TEXT PRODUCTION

The proportion of journalists who indicate that automated text production is used in a newsroom where they work is highest among those who work mainly for a news agency.



**mbackg.** How would you describe the background of your main employer, or the main outlet where you work? Which of the following categories is the best fit? **tech2\_A/B.** Please tell us whether these technologies are used in any of the newsrooms you work in. Base: News agency = 66, Newspaper = 266, Internet native = 145, Radio = 61, TV = 98, Magazine = 279, No main employer = 94.

## 4.2 THE PROMISES AND PERILS OF NEWS AUTOMATION

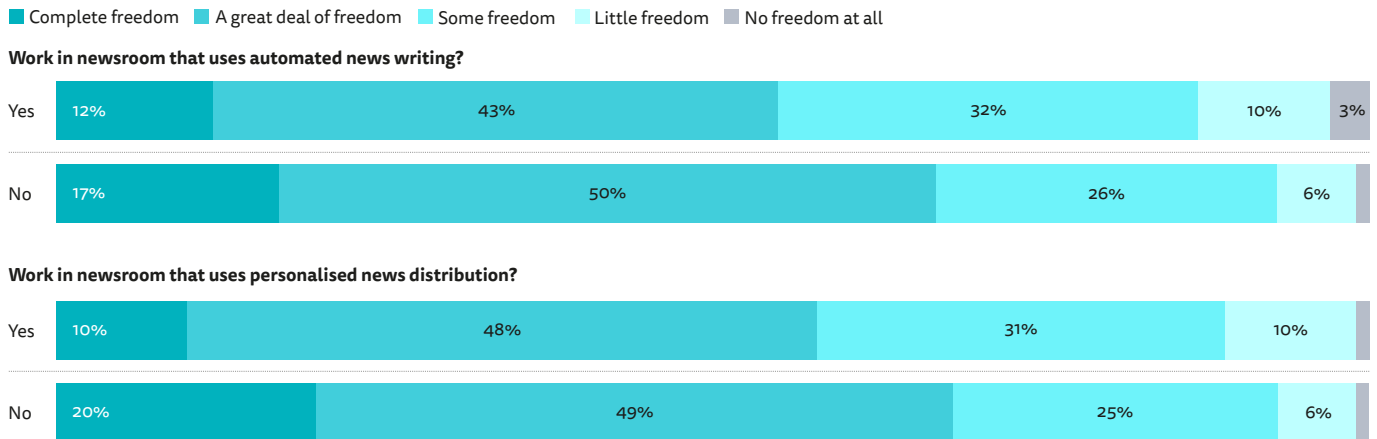
The introduction of automation into the news cycle has sparked debate regarding the benefits and risks associated with outsourcing editorial processes to these technological systems. One anticipated benefit of AI is the potential to relieve journalists of routine tasks that can be easily automated, thereby allowing them to focus on more substantive and meaningful responsibilities, such as covering more complex topics in their news reporting (Beckett and Yaseen 2023; Flew et al. 2012).

However, the 2023 survey found that the editorial freedom<sup>30</sup> felt by journalists who worked in newsrooms where, to their knowledge, either of the two types of news automation were used was slightly but significantly less than for journalists who worked in newsrooms that did not use these technologies.

Specifically, among journalists who reported working in newsrooms where automated news text production was not employed, 67% felt they had ‘complete’ or ‘a great deal of’ freedom to select which stories to cover. In contrast, this feeling was shared by only 55% of journalists who reported working in newsrooms where automated news text production was used. In newsrooms that used personalised news distribution, 58% of journalists felt they had ‘complete’ or ‘a great deal of’ freedom to select which stories to cover compared with almost 69% in newsrooms that did not use this technology (see Figure 4.3).

### FIGURE 4.3: PROPORTION OF UK JOURNALISTS WHO AGREE THAT THEY HAVE FREEDOM IN SELECTING WHICH STORIES TO COVER

Journalists who report working in newsrooms where automated news text production or personalised news distribution is used feel less freedom in selecting what stories to cover.



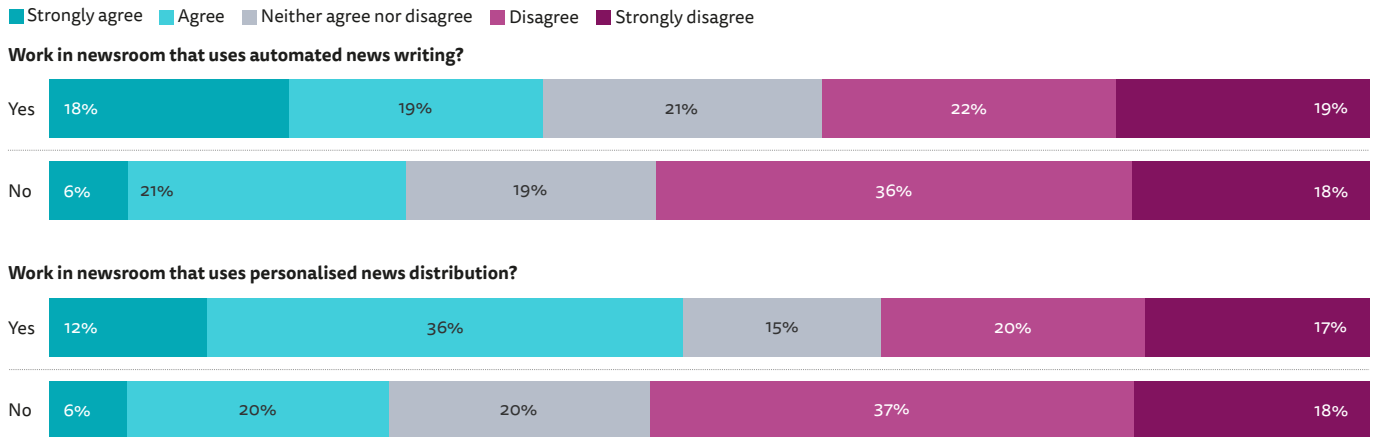
**tech2\_A/B.** Please tell us whether these technologies are used in any of the newsrooms you work in. **auto1.** Thinking of your work overall, how much freedom do you personally have in selecting the news stories you work on? Base: Automated news writing yes = 74, No = 727; Personalised news distribution yes = 100, No = 577.

<sup>30</sup> Specifically, the freedom they said they had to select which stories to cover.



## FIGURE 4.4: PROPORTION OF UK JOURNALISTS WHO AGREE THAT THEY ARE WORRIED ABOUT LOSING THEIR JOB IN THE NEXT 12 MONTHS

Journalists who report working in newsrooms where automated news text production or personalised news distribution is used are more worried about losing their jobs.



**tech2\_A/B.** Please tell us whether these technologies are used in any of the newsrooms you work in. **safe3\_A.** Thinking about your work, please tell me how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements: I am worried about losing my job in journalism within the next 12 months. Base: Automated news writing yes = 72, No = 725; Personalised news distribution yes = 100, No = 575.

Considering a risk associated with AI implementation, job security,<sup>31</sup> the survey shows a significant relationship between awareness of the use of these two types of automation in the newsroom and journalists' fear of job loss. Previous research has linked the use of AI for editorial tasks with insecurity among journalists regarding their professional roles, with concerns about being replaced by the technology emerging as a recurrent theme (e.g. Lindén 2017; Graefe 2016). The 2023 survey's findings add empirical weight to these concerns.

Among journalists working in newsrooms where news writing was automated, 37% expressed concern about losing their jobs in journalism within the next 12 months.<sup>32</sup> In contrast, this concern was shared by only 27% of journalists in newsrooms where this was not the case. This disparity is even more pronounced with respect to the use of personalised news distribution: in newsrooms that used this type of automation, 48% of journalists indicated being worried about job loss within the next year, compared with just 26% in newsrooms that did not automate this task (see Figure 4.4).

The fear of job loss and perceptions of editorial freedom are undoubtedly influenced by a range of factors beyond AI usage in the newsroom. However, further preliminary analysis shows that, even when controlling for other potentially relevant organisational variables such as the outlet's media cultural background, its reach (local, national, or international), and primary ownership, both the use of automated news writing and personalised news distribution in newsrooms where journalists work, contribute significantly to journalists' fear of job loss and perceptions of editorial freedom. However, it is important to be clear that with cross-sectional data such as this, it is not possible to confidently identify causal relationships.

## 4.3 CONCLUSIONS

This chapter has presented and analysed UK journalists' awareness of the use of two forms of automation within newsrooms – automated text production and personalised news distribution – and explored the relationship between use and organisational characteristics – ownership and media cultural background – and journalists' perceptions of editorial freedom and job security.

The findings suggest that these AI technologies have yet to achieve widespread adoption in UK newsrooms. However, certain integration tendencies already exist: private media organisations and those with a news agency background are more likely to use automated text production. Publicly owned media organisations are more likely to use personalised news distribution. These tendencies can be partly attributed to the business models and publication logics of these media organisation types.

Despite the limited uptake of these forms of AI in UK newsrooms, this survey's results indicate that their implementation in the newsroom significantly contributes to journalists' perceptions of editorial freedom and job insecurity. These relationships have been only briefly touched upon in this chapter, but the preliminary findings underscore the necessity for more comprehensive research, particularly in the context of the increasing integration of other forms of AI into newsroom workflows in the UK and globally.

<sup>31</sup> Specific text in survey: Thinking about your work, please tell me how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statement: 'I am worried about losing my job in journalism within the next 12 months'.

<sup>32</sup> This value derives from adding up the responses of journalists who answered 'strongly agree' or 'agree'.



# 5 THE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA AND AUDIENCE ANALYTICS BY UK JOURNALISTS

RICHARD FLETCHER

## 5.1 THE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Journalists have a complicated and conflicted relationship with social media. Looked at in one way, they are clearly among the most active users of the technology. Many journalists have embraced social media both professionally and personally, using it for news-gathering, gauging public opinion, sourcing quotes, and to be part of the conversation around news events (Canter 2015; Molyneux and McGregor 2022). But at the same time, some journalists – especially in recent years – believe that social media has disrupted traditional journalistic practices and encouraged patterns of news use and dissemination that have undermined journalistic authority and weakened public trust (Ross Arguedas et al. 2022). When it comes to trust, the evidence suggests that they may be right (Fletcher et al. 2024).

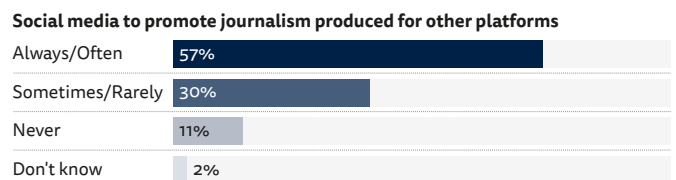
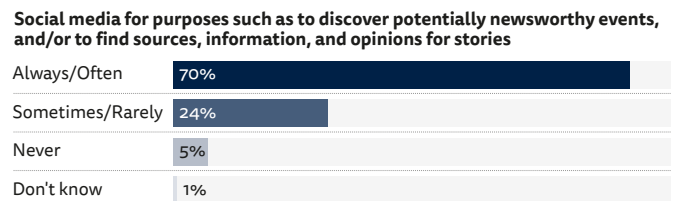
The survey included two questions concerning how widely social media is used by journalists. First, they were asked how frequently they used social media to *discover stories*, and second, how frequently they used it to *promote journalism*.

Despite the recent backlash, the results show that a clear majority of UK journalists regularly used social media to discover stories. More specifically, 70% said that they ‘always’ or ‘often’ used social media to ‘discover potentially newsworthy events, and/or to find sources, information, and opinions for stories’. Well over 90% said that they used social media for this purpose at least some of the time (‘rarely’ or more frequently). Just 5% said that they ‘never’ used social media to discover stories.

Slightly fewer UK journalists (57%) said that they regularly used social media to ‘promote journalism produced for other platforms’ – with 30% saying they did this ‘sometimes’ or ‘rarely’. But again, just 11% said that they ‘never’ used social media to promote their journalism (see Figure 5.1).

### FIGURE 5.1: PROPORTION OF JOURNALISTS WHO USE SOCIAL MEDIA FOR EACH PURPOSE

Most journalists regularly use social media to discover news and promote journalism.



tech1\_B/C. Please tell me how frequently you use the following technologies for journalistic purposes. Base: 1035.

Social media, then, has clearly become an integral part of the work of many UK journalists. Although data from analytics company Chartbeat suggest that referrals to news websites from Facebook and X declined by around 50% and 25% respectively between 2022 and 2023, most news organisations still put effort into reaching audiences through their social channels – it’s just that they are putting more effort into networks like WhatsApp, TikTok, and YouTube rather than Facebook and X (Newman 2024). This aligns with data from the Reuters Institute *Digital News*

Report showing that the proportion who use social media for news has remained stable at around 40% since 2017 (Newman et al. 2024).

If we break the data down by the type of organisation that journalists worked for – commercially or publicly owned media – we see that the use of social media for finding and promoting news was equally widespread at each. Among journalists who worked for commercial media, 70% said that they ‘always’ or ‘often’ used social media to discover news, compared with 74% of those working for publicly owned media. Similarly, using social media to promote journalism was equally widespread among those who worked for commercial (57%) and publicly owned (55%) media (see Figure 5.2). Although some might question whether publicly owned media really need to use social media to promote their journalism, it should be remembered that they still have a commitment to serve all parts of the public – and social media is the only effective way of reaching some audiences, particularly younger people and those with low interest in news.

### FIGURE 5.2: PROPORTION OF JOURNALISTS WHO ALWAYS/OFTEN USE SOCIAL MEDIA FOR EACH BY MEDIA OWNERSHIP

There is little difference between commercial and publicly owned media in the proportion of journalists who use social media to discover news and promote journalism.

**Social media for purposes such as to discover potentially newsworthy events, and/or to find sources, information, and opinions for stories**



**Social media to promote journalism produced for other platforms**



**UK outlet answered.** Please tell me the name of the news outlet you do most of your work for. **tech1\_B/C.** Please tell me how frequently you use the following technologies for journalistic purposes. Base: Commercial media = 745, Publicly owned media = 144.

If we drill down a little deeper and group the respondents by the media cultural background of their main employer (internet-native, broadcast, and print) some small but relevant differences start to emerge. Journalists that worked for outlets with an internet-native media background were more likely than those that worked for organisations with a print background (newspapers and magazines) to use social media for news discovery (77% vs 67%), and were more likely than those working for outlets with both a broadcast (television and radio) and print background to use social media to promote their journalism<sup>33</sup> (see Figure 5.3). Internet-native news organisations are typically more reliant on social media to build and maintain their audience, in part because they do not have the benefit of a legacy brand from the pre-internet era, meaning that people are less likely to go to their websites and apps directly (Fletcher et al. 2023).

### FIGURE 5.3: PROPORTION OF JOURNALISTS WHO ALWAYS/OFTEN USE SOCIAL MEDIA FOR EACH BY MEDIA BACKGROUND

Journalists who work for internet natives are more likely than those who work for print media to use social media to discover news and promote journalism.

**Social media for purposes such as to discover potentially newsworthy events, and/or to find sources, information, and opinions for stories**



**Social media to promote journalism produced for other platforms**



**UK outlet answered.** Please tell me the name of the news outlet you do most of your work for. **tech1\_B/C.** Please tell me how frequently you use the following technologies for journalistic purposes. Base: Internet native = 145, Broadcast = 160, Print = 545.

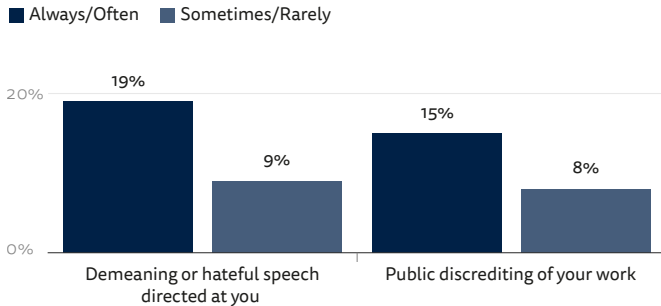
At the individual level, there are differences in social media use by age. Younger journalists were more likely to use social media to find news and to promote it, which aligns with the fact that younger people in the UK general population are more likely to use social media (Ofcom 2024a). Similarly, female journalists were also more likely to use social media in their work than their male counterparts.

Social media is often criticised for doing too little to stop users abusing and harassing one another. In journalism, this has led to fears that the expectation that journalists should be active on social media exposes them to greater risk of such threats. The survey data lend some support to this idea. Among those who said that they ‘sometimes or rarely’ used social media to promote their journalism, 9% said that they ‘often’ or ‘very often’ had demeaning or hateful speech directed at them. However, this figure rises to 19% among those that ‘always’ or ‘often’ used social media to promote their journalism. The pattern is similar for public discrediting of their work. Just 8% of those that ‘sometimes or rarely’ used social media to promote their work often experienced public discrediting of their work, but this rises to 15% among those who regularly used social media professionally (see Figure 5.4). These findings are similar to those in Chapter 3, which described how journalists who produced for social media were also more likely to experience some threats. It is also worth keeping in mind that most UK journalists always or often used social media to promote their work, so these are issues experienced by a significant number of working journalists (see Chapter 6).

<sup>33</sup> Here, we use the terms ‘print’ and ‘broadcast’ to refer to organisations like the *Guardian* and the BBC whose legacy is in print media or broadcast media. We acknowledge that these organisations also now devote significant resources to their websites, apps, and social media presence.

### FIGURE 5.4: PROPORTION OF JOURNALISTS WHO OFTEN EXPERIENCE HATEFUL SPEECH OR PUBLIC DISCREDITING OF THEIR WORK BY SOCIAL MEDIA USE

Journalists who Always/Often use social media to promote their work are more likely to report experiencing hateful speech and public discrediting of their work.



**tech1\_C.** Please tell me how frequently you use the following technologies for journalistic purposes. Social media to promote journalism produced for other platforms. **safe1\_A/B.** In the last five years, how often have you experienced any of the following actions related to your work as a journalist? Base: Always/Often = 728, Sometimes/Rarely = 246.

It is not possible with cross-sectional data to know whether there is a causal relationship between professional social media use and experiencing hateful speech and public discrediting of work. But it is noticeable that for some of the other threats asked about in the survey – which are unlikely to be enabled by social media, such as ‘arrests, detentions or imprisonment’ and ‘legal actions against you because of your work’ – there was no difference by social media use in the proportions of journalists that had experienced these.

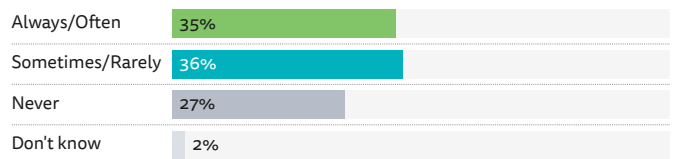
## 5.2 THE USE OF NEWSROOM ANALYTICS

The survey also included a question on the related issue of newsroom analytics. It asked respondents how frequently they used ‘technology that tracks and analyses information about the characteristics and behaviour of online audiences (such as which stories they read and for how long) ... [e.g.] ... Chartbeat, Parse.ly, and Google Analytics’.

The results show that around one third (35%) of UK journalists said they ‘always’ or ‘often’ used newsroom analytics in their work. A similar number (36%) said that they used them ‘sometimes’ or ‘rarely’, and 27% said that they ‘never’ used them (see Figure 5.5). This means that although newsroom analytics were not used as widely as social media, they have still become a key part of the workflow of many journalists.

### FIGURE 5.5: PROPORTION OF JOURNALISTS WHO USE NEWSROOM ANALYTICS

A minority of UK journalists regularly use newsroom analytics, but around two thirds use them at least some of the time.

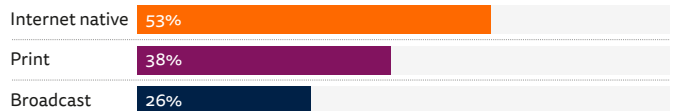


**tech1\_A.** Please tell me how frequently you use the following technologies for journalistic purposes. Technology that tracks and analyses information about the characteristics and behavior of online audiences (such as which stories they read and for how long). Examples of tools that do this include Chartbeat, Parse.ly, and Google Analytics. Base: 1035.

Journalists working for commercial media were slightly more likely to regularly use this technology than those working for publicly owned media (39% vs 32%), but there are much larger differences if we group journalists by the media cultural background of their main employer. Journalists working for internet-native media (53%) were more likely than those working for outlets with a print media background (38%) to use newsroom analytics, and twice as likely as those working for organisations with a broadcast media background (26%) (see Figure 5.6).

### FIGURE 5.6: PROPORTION OF JOURNALISTS WHO ALWAYS/OFTEN USE NEWSROOM ANALYTICS BY MEDIA BACKGROUND

Journalists working for internet native media are more likely than those working for print media to use newsroom analytics, and twice as likely as those working for broadcasters.



**tech1\_A.** Please tell me how frequently you use the following technologies for journalistic purposes. Technology that tracks and analyses information about the characteristics and behavior of online audiences (such as which stories they read and for how long). Examples of tools that do this include Chartbeat, Parse.ly, and Google Analytics. Base: Internet native = 145, Broadcast = 160, Print = 545.

These differences are likely to be partly rooted in the fact that internet-native media tend to have business models based on online reach rather than reader revenue, and thus have a stronger incentive to understand what drives traffic. Some print media are in a similar situation, but many of the upmarket UK titles now have paywalls or rely on donations and membership. Some UK broadcasters have shown little interest in online news, and the news sections of their websites are not widely used by the public.

## 5.3 CONCLUSION

In summary, social media and newsroom analytics have become important tools for UK journalists to discover news stories, promote their journalism, and understand their audiences better. Social media in particular is now widely used by those working for print and broadcast media (whether commercially or publicly owned) – but it is especially widely used by those working for internet-native media. Journalists and news organisations clearly recognise that social media offers some benefits to them – but it also carries risks. Platform dependency is one such risk – as those working in newsrooms that have seen social referrals tumble in recent years know all too well. Another is safety and well-being. Journalists who regularly used social media to promote their work also reported being more exposed to hateful speech and attempts to discredit their work, and there may be other downsides that are not captured by the survey. Whether social media continues to be used so widely by those in the profession in the future will likely depend on how the balance between these risks and benefits evolves.

# 6 THE SAFETY THREATS EXPERIENCED BY UK JOURNALISTS AND THEIR PHYSICAL, EMOTIONAL, AND MENTAL WELL-BEING

AYALA PANIEVSKY AND LINDSEY BLUMELL

## 6.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter outlines our findings concerning the safety threats that UK journalists<sup>34</sup> experienced, from surveillance and hate speech to legal threats and sexual harassment. Firstly, we explain why this topic was introduced into the survey for the first time, and how it was approached and measured. Secondly, we report how frequently UK journalists said they experienced various safety threats and felt stressed at work. Thirdly, we describe how worried they were about their physical, emotional, and mental well-being. Next, we highlight how *gender*, the *medium*, and journalists' *seniority* affected their experience of safety and well-being. Finally, we summarise our findings and suggest directions for future research. This chapter aims to support media workers, newsroom directors, media activists, policymakers, journalism educators, and scholars specialising in journalism who seek to protect reporters facing attack and inequalities in the news industry, promote press freedom, and protect reporters' safety and well-being in the UK.

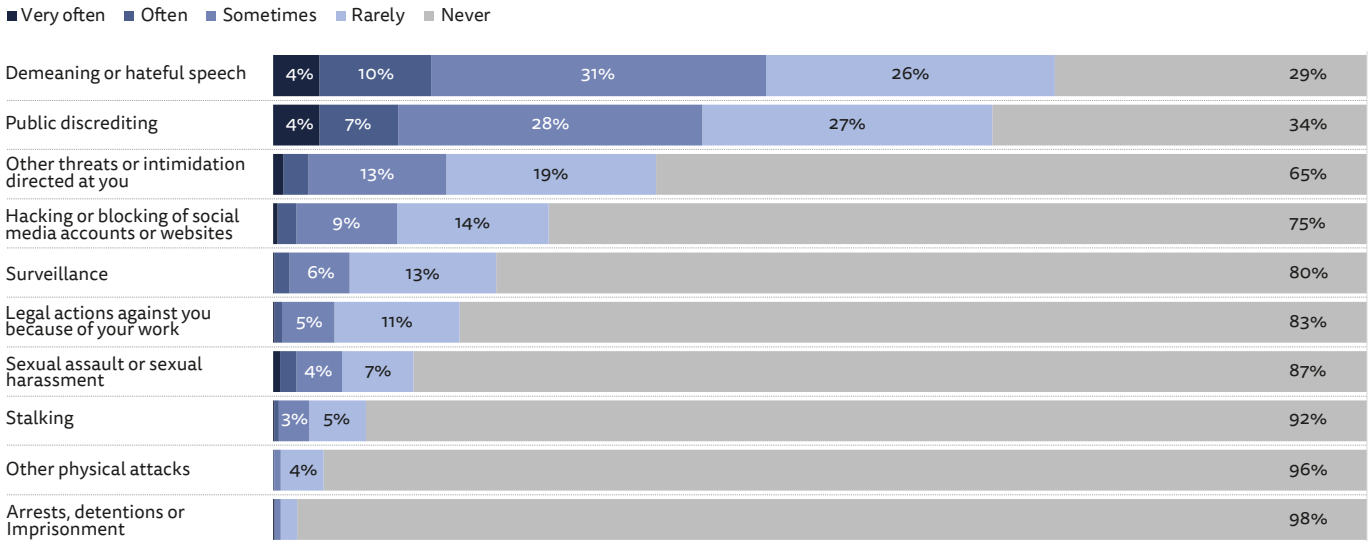
## 6.2 JOURNALISM IN A CLIMATE OF HATE: FOCUSING ON JOURNALISTS' SAFETY AND WELL-BEING

The increasingly hostile work environment for journalists in various countries on the democratic spectrum has attracted growing academic and media attention over the past decade (Miller 2021; Waisbord 2020). The rise of anti-media populists on the one hand (Panievsky 2021; Relly 2021) and digital platforms as a direct path to contact journalists on the other (Chen et al. 2018; Lewis et al. 2020) have made political attacks on the media particularly pervasive – including in contexts like the UK, where press freedom is considered relatively protected. Newsrooms worldwide have not yet figured out how to address this techno-political setting, with journalists under attack repeatedly reporting inadequate newsroom policies and insufficient organisational support when coping with personal and aggressive attacks and threats (Holton et al. 2021; Nelson 2023). After decades of journalists' safety being considered a central issue mainly in the Global South and authoritarian contexts, media scholars and practitioners now pay more attention to threats to journalism in the Global North. In the US, most journalists reported experiencing online harassment to some extent (Lewis et al. 2020). In Sweden, an overwhelming majority received offensive and insulting comments, and a third reported experiencing threats at work (Nilsson and Örnebring 2016). The 2023 survey finds that, among UK journalists, the three most common safety threats are hate speech, public discrediting, and other threats and intimidation (see Figure 6.1). Stress is also a common part of working life for news personnel with 54% of participants responding they experienced work-related stress often or very often (see Figure 6.2).

<sup>34</sup> The results in this chapter exclude the UK foreign correspondents who completed the survey (n=21) as their experiences of safety threats are likely to be very different from journalists in the UK.

### FIGURE 6.1: PROPORTION OF UK JOURNALISTS WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED EACH SAFETY THREAT IN THE LAST FIVE YEARS

The three most common safety threats are hate speech, public discrediting, and other threats or intimidation.

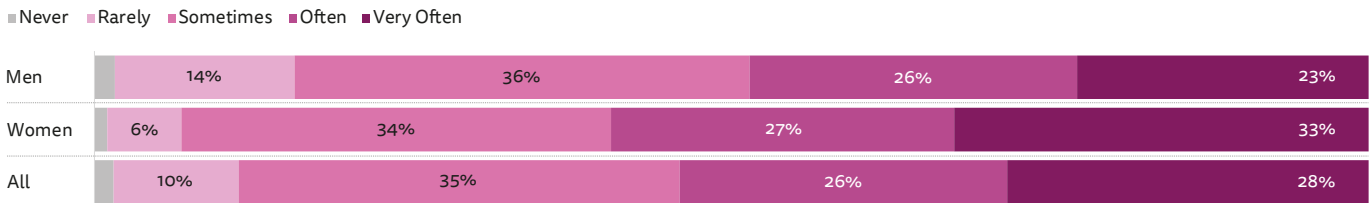


**safe1.** In the last five years, how often have you experienced any of the following actions related to your work as a journalist? Base: 1103. Note: The 21 foreign correspondents who completed the survey were excluded from this analysis as the safety threats they face are likely to be different. Prefer not to say responses were also excluded.

Due to low frequency in the data, separate figures for ethnicity are not shown because the percentages have a large amount of uncertainty and comparisons with other groups are potentially misleading. The frequency of the responses for Asian or Asian British\* (n=29), Black, Black British, Caribbean or African (n=12), Mixed or multiple ethnic groups (n=33), White (n=892), and Other ethnic group (n=18) can be viewed on our website. \*Categorisation based on 2021 Census of England and Wales: [www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/style-guide/ethnic-groups/](http://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/style-guide/ethnic-groups/).

### FIGURE 6.2: PROPORTION OF UK JOURNALISTS WHO FELT STRESSED AT WORK IN THE PREVIOUS SIX MONTHS

One third of women and about one quarter of men reported experiencing work-related stress ‘very often’.



**gender.** What is your gender? **stress.** In the last six months, how often have you felt stressed out in your work as a journalist? Base: Men = 503, Women = 509, All = 1129. Note: The 21 foreign correspondents who completed the survey were excluded from this analysis as the safety threats they face are likely to be different. Prefer not to say responses were also excluded.

Due to low frequency in the data (n=6), gender non-conforming respondents were not included above because the percentages would have had a large degree of uncertainty and comparisons with other groups could have misled. The responses for gender non-conforming journalists were: Very often = 2, Often = 2, Sometimes = 1, Rarely = 1, Never = 0. Due to low frequency in the data, separate figures for ethnicity are not shown because the percentages have a large amount of uncertainty and comparisons with other groups are potentially misleading. The frequency of the responses for Asian or Asian British\* (n=29), Black, Black British, Caribbean or African (n=12), Mixed or multiple ethnic groups (n=33), White (n=892), and Other ethnic group (n=18) can be viewed on our website. \*Categorisation based on 2021 Census of England and Wales: [www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/style-guide/ethnic-groups/](http://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/style-guide/ethnic-groups/).

In the UK, the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), Women in Journalism, and the National Union of Journalists (NUJ) have documented a significant rise in harassment against journalists, with women and journalists with minoritised characteristics (such as racialised minorities, religious minorities, and LGBTQ+ communities) particularly vulnerable (NUJ 2020; Philips et al. 2023). While sexism and other forms of prejudice are not new to journalism, hostile rhetoric by powerful political figures, combined with social media platforms for angry audiences, requires women journalists to invest more energy, labour, and time in handling online and offline attacks (Kim and Shin, 2022; Miller and Lewis, 2023). One consequence of this is significantly higher levels of stress among women when compared with men. One third of women and about one quarter of men in the survey reported experiencing work-related stress ‘very often’ (see Figure 6.2). Gender non-conforming people also reported high levels of stress. One important note on gender is that only six participants

identified as gender non-conforming, therefore statistical comparisons could not be made with such a small sample. The inclusion of results from such a small sample on Figure 6.2 is to promote inclusion and not to infer any overall patterns. In terms of race and ethnicity, mixed and multiple ethnic groups and the other ethnic group category reported higher levels of stress, but again, statistical comparisons cannot be made because of the small number of respondents.

Echoing the increasing awareness of mental health, the burgeoning literature on journalists’ safety has turned towards studying journalists’ happiness and well-being (Bélair-Gagnon et al. 2023; Storm 2024). Qualitative interviews, for instance, found the social environment and newsroom culture in which UK journalists work less supportive than that surrounding journalists in Germany (Šimunjak and Menke 2023).



Journalists' safety is critical not only for their personal well-being and job satisfaction (Blumell et al. 2023), but also for press freedom and democracy. Attacks against 'the media' were found to have a chilling effect in multiple countries, with targeted journalists practising self-censorship, avoiding certain beats and communities, or leaving the profession altogether (Miller 2023; Panievsky 2022).

Our understanding of how media bashing affects journalists' safety and well-being in different contexts and, in turn, shapes the news they produce, requires further empirical evidence. This is why two questions were added to the survey: (1) 'In the last five years, how often have you experienced any of the following actions related to your work as a journalist?' with options ranging from 'stalking' and 'surveillance' to 'hateful speech' and 'public discrediting'; and (2) 'Thinking about your work, please tell me how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements: 'I am worried about losing my job in journalism within the next 12 months', 'I am concerned about my physical well-being', and 'I am concerned about my emotional and mental well-being'.<sup>35</sup>

This is the first systematic, representative survey mapping journalists' experiences of safety and well-being in the UK. Previous research on UK journalists produced alarming evidence concerning the extent of threats and actual violence journalists face, but none of these reports used a representative sample as the 2023 survey did (see Chapter 11).

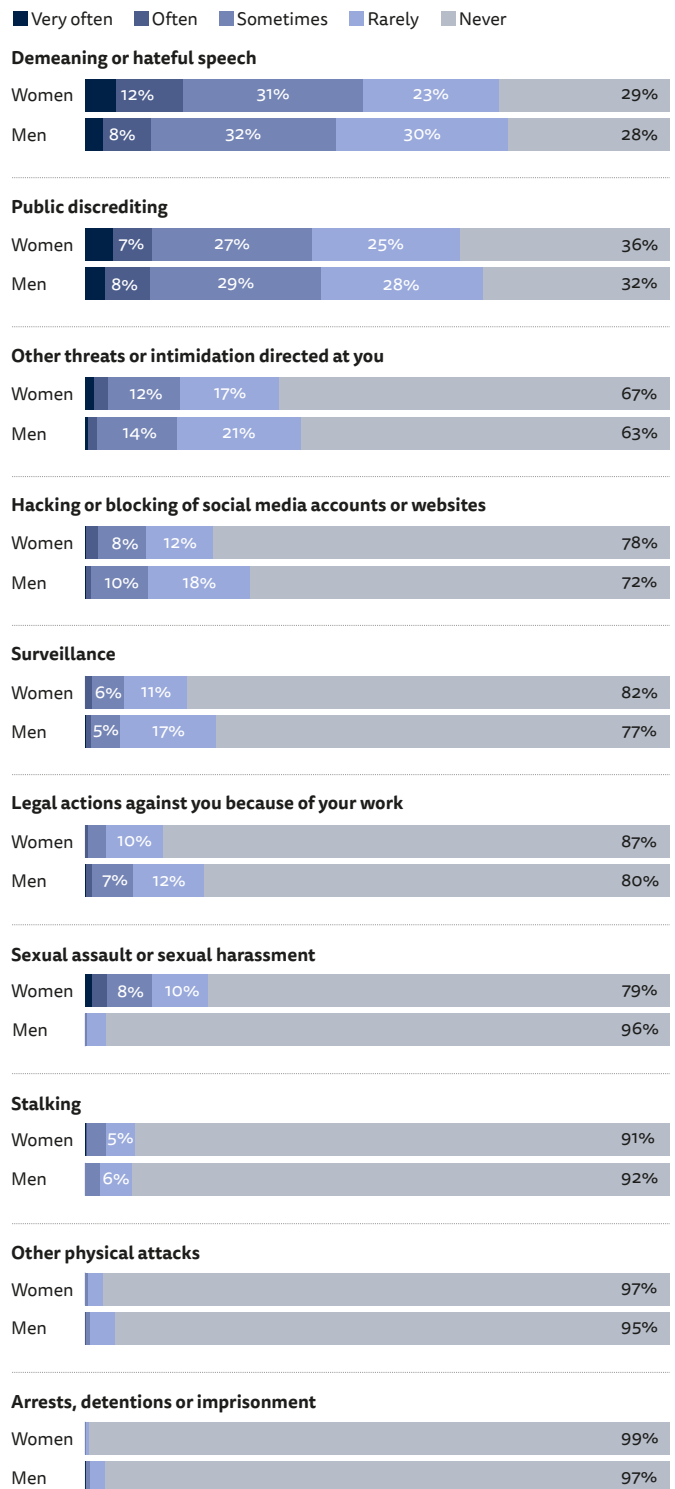
## 6.3 GENDERED SAFETY AND WELL-BEING IN THE NEWSROOM

In the survey, women reported higher levels of 'very often' across five of the ten safety threat variables compared with men (see Figure 6.3). Men reported 'very often' slightly more often for the threats of 'arrests, detentions or imprisonment', 'legal actions', and 'surveillance'. One explanation for this gap might be how higher-ranked journalists are more likely to experience legal actions (see Figure 6.8) and women are underrepresented in the higher rank (see Chapter 2). Respondents who identified as gender non-conforming also reported high levels of safety threats; however, the sample was too small to generalise ( $n = 6$ ).

One safety threat that disproportionately affects women is sexual harassment. According to our findings, 22% of UK women journalists reported experiencing sexual harassment over the previous five years due to their professional work (10% 'rarely', 8% 'sometimes', 3% 'often', 1% 'very often'). However, this figure should be approached with caution, since online surveys are not an ideal method to discuss such sensitive and stigmatised issues.

### FIGURE 6.3: PROPORTION OF UK JOURNALISTS WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED EACH SAFETY THREAT IN THE LAST FIVE YEARS

Women are more likely to report often experiencing 'demeaning or hateful speech' and 'sexual assault or sexual harassment' than men – but men report more often experiencing legal action.



**gender.** What is your gender? **safe1.** In the last five years, how often have you experienced any of the following actions related to your work as a journalist? Base: Women = 497, Men = 491. Note: The 21 foreign correspondents who completed the survey were excluded from this analysis as the safety threats they face are likely to be different. Prefer not to say responses were also excluded.

Due to low frequency in the data ( $n=6$ ), gender non-conforming respondents were not included above because the percentages would have had a large degree of uncertainty and comparisons with other groups could have misled.

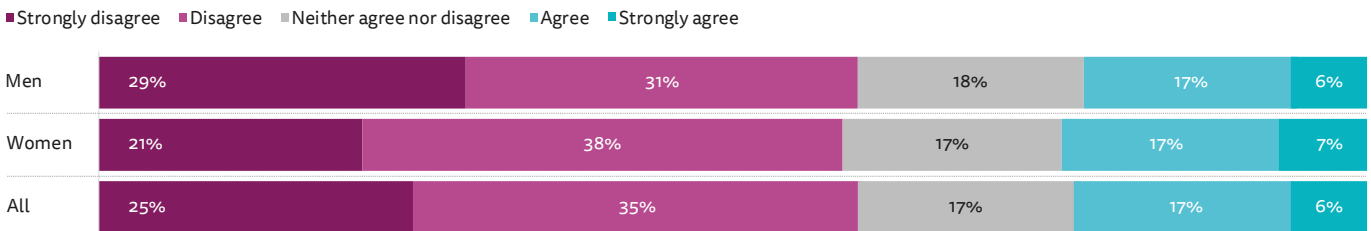
<sup>35</sup> This question battery also included the statement 'I am concerned that those who harm journalists in the UK go unpunished'. 54% responded 'agree' or 'strongly agree', 33% 'neither agree or disagree' and 13% either 'disagree' or 'strongly disagree'.

We also found gender differences in how journalists perceived their job security and well-being. While concerns about physical well-being (see Figure 6.4) were almost equal among men and women (23% and 24% agreed or strongly agreed they were concerned, respectively), concerns about emotional and mental well-being were higher among women journalists (49% compared with 43% among men) (see Figure 6.5). Fears of losing their job

within the next 12 months were also higher among women – 33% expressed such worries, compared with 27% among men (see Figure 6.6). As for women, the few respondents who identified as gender non-conforming also reported lower levels of job security and physical, mental, and emotional well-being; however, the sample was too small to generalise.

**FIGURE 6.4: PROPORTION OF UK JOURNALISTS WHO AGREE WITH THE STATEMENT: ‘I AM CONCERNED ABOUT MY PHYSICAL WELL-BEING’**

Concerns about physical well-being are almost equal among men and women.

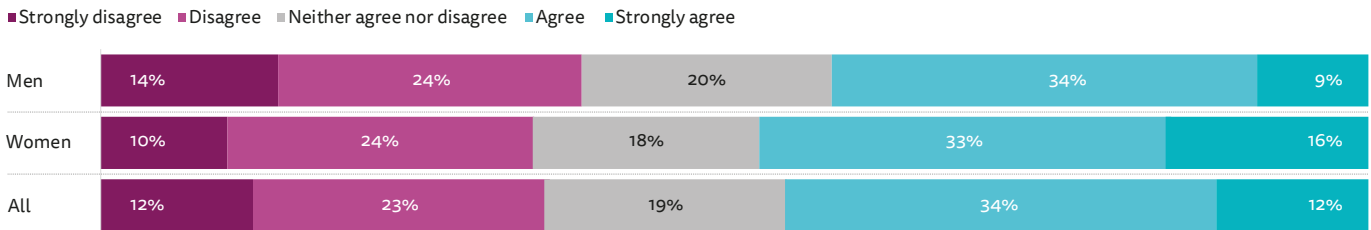


**gender.** What is your gender? **safe3\_B.** Thinking about your work, please tell me how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements: ‘I am concerned about my physical well-being’. Base: Men = 488, Women = 501, All = 1107. Note: The 21 foreign correspondents who completed the survey were excluded from this analysis as the safety threats they face are likely to be different. Prefer not to say responses were also excluded.

Due to low frequency in the data (n=6), gender non-conforming respondents were not included above because the percentages would have had a large degree of uncertainty and comparisons with other groups could have misled. The responses for gender non-conforming journalists were: Strongly Agree= 0, Agree = 3, Neither Agree nor Disagree = 1, Disagree = 2, Strongly Disagree = 0. Due to low frequency in the data, separate figures for ethnicity are not shown because the percentages have a large amount of uncertainty and comparisons with other groups are potentially misleading. The frequency of the responses for Asian or Asian British\* (n=29), Black, Black British, Caribbean or African (n=12), Mixed or multiple ethnic groups (n=33), White (n=892), and Other ethnic group (n=18) can be viewed on our website. \*Categorisation based on 2021 Census of England and Wales: [www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/style-guide/ethnic-groups/](http://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/style-guide/ethnic-groups/).

**FIGURE 6.5: PROPORTION OF UK JOURNALISTS WHO AGREE WITH THE STATEMENT: ‘I AM CONCERNED ABOUT MY EMOTIONAL AND MENTAL WELL-BEING’**

Concerns about emotional and mental well-being are higher among women journalists.

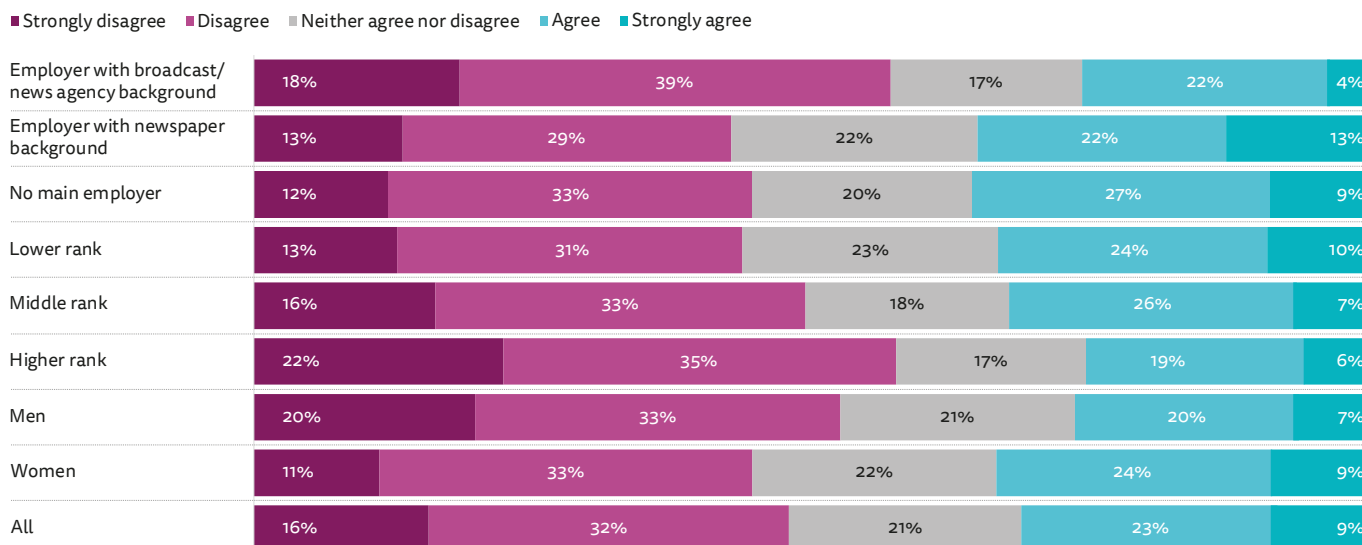


**gender.** What is your gender? **safe3\_C.** Thinking about your work, please tell me how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements: ‘I am concerned about my emotional and mental well-being’. Base: Men = 486, Women = 501, All = 1105. Note: The 21 foreign correspondents who completed the survey were excluded from this analysis as the safety threats they face are likely to be different. Prefer not to say responses were also excluded.

Due to low frequency in the data (n=6), gender non-conforming respondents were not included above because the percentages would have had a large degree of uncertainty and comparisons with other groups could have misled. The responses for gender non-conforming journalists were: Strongly Agree= 2, Agree = 3, Neither Agree nor Disagree = 1, Disagree = 0, Strongly Disagree = 0. Due to low frequency in the data, separate figures for ethnicity are not shown because the percentages have a large amount of uncertainty and comparisons with other groups are potentially misleading. The frequency of the responses for Asian or Asian British\* (n=29), Black, Black British, Caribbean or African (n=12), Mixed or multiple ethnic groups (n=33), White (n=892), and Other ethnic group (n=18) can be viewed on our website. \*Categorisation based on 2021 Census of England and Wales: [www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/style-guide/ethnic-groups/](http://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/style-guide/ethnic-groups/).

## FIGURE 6.6: PROPORTION OF UK JOURNALISTS WHO AGREE WITH THE STATEMENT: 'I AM WORRIED ABOUT LOSING MY JOB IN JOURNALISM WITHIN THE NEXT 12 MONTHS'

Worries about job insecurity are higher among women journalists, lower and middle rank employees, and journalists outside of broadcasting and news agencies.



**gender.** What is your gender? **safe3\_A.** Thinking about your work, please tell me how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements: 'I am worried about losing my job in journalism in the next 12 months'. Base: Employer with broadcast/news agency background = 158, No main employer = 92, Newspaper = 255; Lower rank = 687, Middle = 148, Higher = 265; Men = 486, Women = 499, All = 1102. Note: The 21 foreign correspondents who completed the survey were excluded from this analysis as the safety threats they face are likely to be different. Prefer not to say responses were also excluded.

Due to low frequency in the data (n=6), gender non-conforming respondents were not included above because the percentages would have had a large degree of uncertainty and comparisons with other groups could have misled. The responses for gender non-conforming journalists were: Strongly Agree = 1, Agree = 4, Neither Agree nor Disagree = 0, Disagree = 1, Strongly Disagree = 0. Due to low frequency in the data, separate figures for ethnicity are not shown because the percentages have a large amount of uncertainty and comparisons with other groups are potentially misleading. The frequency of the responses for 'Asian or Asian British' (n=29), Black, Black British, Caribbean or African (n=12), Mixed or multiple ethnic groups (n=33), White (n=892), and Other ethnic group (n=18) can be viewed on our website. \*Categorisation based on 2021 Census of England and Wales: [www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/style-guide/ethnic-groups/](http://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/style-guide/ethnic-groups/).

These findings mirror evidence coming from outside the UK. Gender is a well-documented factor shaping attacks against journalists (e.g. Chen et al. 2018). Women journalists – especially from minoritised backgrounds – are more likely to experience harassment, intimidation, and threats compared with their colleagues (e.g. Obermaier 2023). Online harassment was labelled 'the new frontline for women journalists' following a 15-country survey that found 73% of women journalists reported online abuse; 20% of those also subsequently experienced offline harassment (Posetti et al. 2021). Women journalists were found to be targeted more often than their colleagues – but also differently. Sexual harassment, for instance, tends to disproportionately affect women journalists (Blumell and Mulupi 2024). Moreover, gender inequality shapes both attacks on the media and the response to them. Newsroom norms that punish reporting online violence as signs of 'weakness', for instance, make it harder to counter online attacks against women journalists (Claesson 2023).

In addition to the gender differences, we found some discrepancies between journalists from different ethnicities. Although the overwhelming majority of our respondents identified as White, making straightforward comparisons with journalists from other ethnicities difficult, the data still suggest that journalists from Black, Black British, Caribbean, or African backgrounds, for instance, experienced higher levels of stress at work – 75% reported feeling stressed at work 'often' or 'very often', compared with 53% of White journalists. Journalists from Asian or Asian British backgrounds reported more worries about

losing their jobs than journalists who identified as White, but the underrepresentation of these groups in UK newsrooms, and the size of the sample, means that we cannot provide comparative statistical analysis. Further qualitative investigation into these underrepresented groups of journalists is needed.

In 2021, the Home Office and the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport held a 'call for evidence' on journalist safety, where journalists were encouraged to report their experiences. More than four in five journalists who responded to the call experienced threats, abuse, or violence related to their journalistic work, including violence, death threats, bullying, sexism, racism, and homophobia, and more than a third of women respondents indicated that they did not feel safe operating as a journalist in the UK (NUJ 2020). While this evidence strengthens the impression that many journalists in the UK feel unsafe, it did not offer a comprehensive view of the media industry. The 2023 survey, which is representative of the population of UK journalists, helps map the centres of risk to journalists' safety and well-being. Due to the sensitive nature of these risks – particularly sexual harassment – a combination of our representative quantitative overview and further qualitative work is needed to better monitor and protect UK journalists against these risks in the future.

Addressing the gender and racial safety gap is critical for the future of newsroom equality. Continuing efforts and coalitions, like the Expert Women Project (Franks and Howell 2019) have had a positive impact on gender inequality in UK media. The share

of women in top editing positions in the UK, for instance, has grown from 29% in 2020 to 40% in 2024, higher than in countries like Germany, Spain, and Finland (Ross Arguedas et al. 2024). Nevertheless, gendered discrimination remains a substantial challenge. Initial evidence indicates that women journalists are more likely to use avoidance strategies – like self-censoring and considering quitting – in response to online attacks (Sampaio-Dias et al. 2023; Stahel and Schoen 2020). Thus, if support and training for journalists under attack remain insufficient, newsroom equality in the UK (see Chapter 1) might further deteriorate.

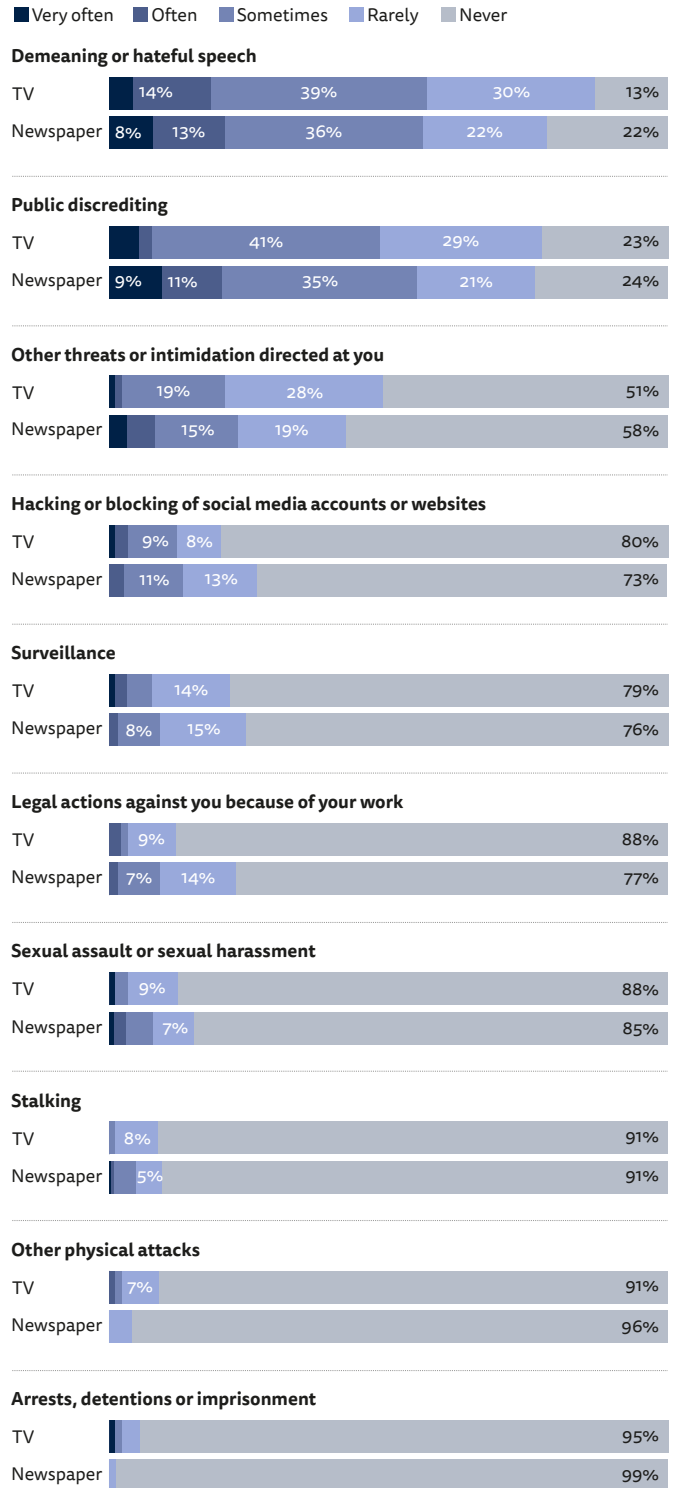
## 6.4 FIND A HAPPY MEDIUM: TYPES OF MEDIA AND JOURNALISTS’ SAFETY

Who are the likely targets of harassment and intimidation in the UK media? Beyond gender, race, and ethnicity, previous research indicates that *visibility* and certain *news beats*, among other variables, increase the likelihood of journalists being targeted (Lewis et al. 2020; Stahel 2023; Waisbord 2020). While physical attacks on journalists are associated with war reporting and investigative reporting, particularly in authoritarian countries, the kinds of threats that the UK respondents reported on – from online harassment to public discrediting – have been shown to disproportionately affect journalists who cover controversial topics (North 2016).

We found that the media cultural background of UK journalists’ main employer was another factor that correlated with higher levels of experienced risks and threats. Journalists at an outlet with a TV or newspaper background reported the highest levels of hate speech (57% of TV journalists and newspaper journalists reported experiencing it ‘sometimes’, ‘often’, or ‘very often’) and other threats or intimidation (21% for TV and 23% for newspapers) (see Figure 6.7). Newspaper journalists faced the highest levels of legal action taken against them (9% reported facing legal threats ‘sometimes’, ‘often’, or ‘very often’). The overwhelming majority of UK journalists, nonetheless, said they never experienced legal actions directed against them.

**FIGURE 6.7: PROPORTION OF JOURNALISTS WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED EACH SAFETY THREAT IN THE LAST FIVE YEARS BY BACKGROUND OF MAIN EMPLOYER**

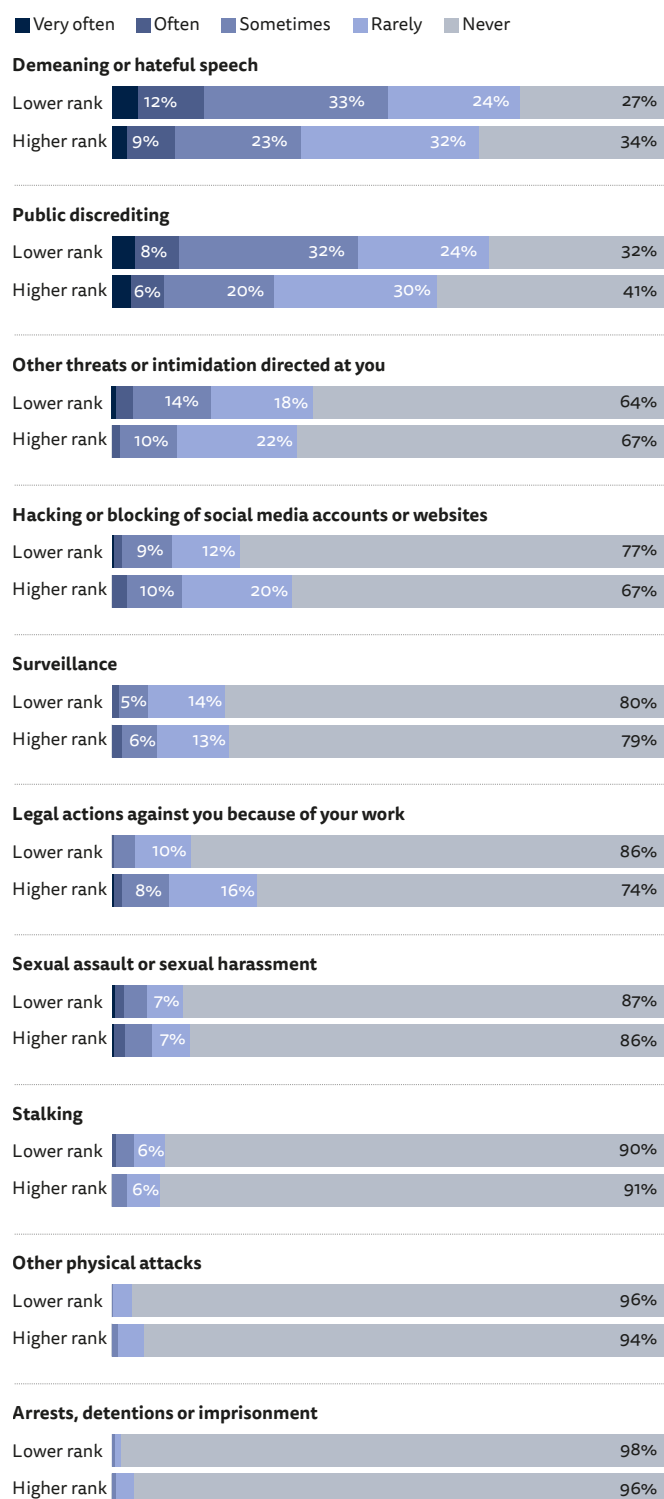
Journalists who work for TV or newspaper outlets tend to experience more safety threats.



**mbackg.** How would you describe the background of your main employer, or the main outlet where you work? Which of the following categories is the best fit? **safet1.** In the last five years, how often have you experienced any of the following actions related to your work as a journalist? Base: TV = 263, Newspaper = 98. Note: The 21 foreign correspondents who completed the survey were excluded from this analysis as the safety threats they face are likely to be different. Prefer not to say responses were also excluded.

## FIGURE 6.8: PROPORTION OF JOURNALISTS WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED EACH SAFETY THREAT IN THE LAST FIVE YEARS BY RANK

Lower-ranked journalists experience hate speech and public discrediting of their journalistic work significantly more frequently than those of the higher rank.



**UK job title\_rec.** What is your current job title or position? **safer1.** In the last five years, how often have you experienced any of the following actions related to your work as a journalist? Base: Lower rank = 697; Higher = 261. Note: The 21 foreign correspondents who completed the survey were excluded from this analysis as the safety threats they face are likely to be different. Prefer not to say responses were also excluded.

The explanation for why these two groups suffer disproportionately might be different, however. TV reporters were previously found to be more targeted than others due to their higher visibility (e.g. Miller and Lewis 2023; Stahel 2023). Moreover, the decades-long campaign against the BBC (Barwise and York 2020; Mills 2016) might have contributed to the particularly hostile environment that TV journalists describe. The high levels of intimidation towards *newspaper* journalists, however, might result from the exceptionally partisan and tabloid nature of large sections of the British press.

Concerns about job loss also varied based on medium: while 35% of newspaper journalists and 36% of journalists who had no main employer expressed fear of losing their jobs only 25% of journalists who worked for news agencies, 26% of radio journalists, and 27% of TV journalists expressed similar concerns (see Figure 6.6). These findings could be explained by two factors: first, the ongoing decline in newspaper readership and decades of budget cuts in newspapers across the UK. Second, journalists with no main employer tend to do more freelance work and have unstable contracts. Fears of job loss among journalists is a critical factor, as it might have a chilling effect, jeopardising journalists' willingness to produce independent investigative reporting or stand up to those in power for the fear of losing their livelihood.

## 6.5 BREAKING RANKS: JOURNALISTS' SENIORITY AND SAFETY

Finally, we found a correlation between journalists' reported experiences of safety threats and their seniority within the newsroom.

We classified all respondents as either 'higher ranked', for those with strategic authority in the newsroom, 'middle ranked', for those with operational authority, or 'lower ranked', for those with no management role. We found that lower-ranked journalists experienced hate speech and public discrediting of their journalistic work significantly more frequently than those of the higher rank (see Figure 6.8).

Lower- and middle-ranked respondents were also more worried about losing their jobs – 34% and 33% respectively agreed or strongly agreed when asked if they were concerned about losing their job in the upcoming year, compared with 25% of higher-ranked journalists (see Figure 6.6). Higher-ranked respondents, however, reported experiencing legal actions related to their work more than the other two groups of journalists. 10% of higher-ranked respondents reported experiencing legal threats related to their work at least 'sometimes', more than lower-ranked (4%) and middle-ranked respondents (4%) (see Figure 6.8).

## 6.6 CONCLUSION: SAFER FUTURE FOR UK JOURNALISM

This chapter provides evidence for the gendered nature of the risks to UK journalists' safety and well-being. It also highlights the different experiences reported by journalists working for TV and newspapers compared with those working for other media, like news agencies and internet natives. Finally, it exposes the discrepancies between the types of threats experienced by journalists of different levels of seniority in the newsroom. These findings can be helpful for future research and advocacy to meet the current challenge of attacks on journalists in the UK.

Race and ethnicity, which were found to shape the spread, intensity, and nature of attacks against journalists (e.g. Obermaier 2023), did not produce significant statistical differences in the survey. However, as the overwhelming majority of all the respondents to the survey identified as White (90%, see Chapter 1), further research will be needed to account for the role of race and ethnicity in UK journalists' safety and well-being. A 15-country UNESCO report found that Black, Indigenous, Jewish, Arab, and Asian women journalists were experiencing 'the highest rates and most severe impacts of online violence', highlighting the intersectional dimension of online attacks on reporters (Posetti et al. 2021). However, the approaches and legal limitations to measuring the racial nature of attacks against journalists vary significantly between countries. More qualitative work, focused on the UK news industry, is hence called for.

There is a growing demand for better protective measures, proactive monitoring, and support systems for journalists due to increasing evidence that the resources in place are insufficient. This includes policies aimed at preventing violence, providing legal protections, and offering organisational backing, professional training, and psychological support (e.g. the UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists 2021). This chapter is intended to contribute to these ongoing efforts by media practitioners, outlets, and researchers.



# 7 UK JOURNALISTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR EDITORIAL AUTONOMY, THE INFLUENCES ON THEIR WORK, AND PRESS FREEDOM IN THE UK

JINGRONG TONG

## 7.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter explores UK journalists' perceptions of their editorial autonomy, the extent of freedom in UK news media, and the factors influencing their work. Journalistic autonomy is the freedom journalists have to independently perform their duties, such as informing the public, scrutinising governments, promoting social values, and fulfilling other responsibilities (Sjøvaag 2013; Tong 2022a). It includes both editorial autonomy and media freedom. A good level of journalistic autonomy is crucial and often a requirement for journalism of high quality that can fulfil its democratic function (Obermaier et al. 2023). However, many contextual factors can influence journalists' work and limit their journalistic autonomy (Shoemaker and Reese 1996). Some of these factors may be at the individual level, such as personal values or perspectives on social issues. But others may come from within news organisations or externally, including editorial

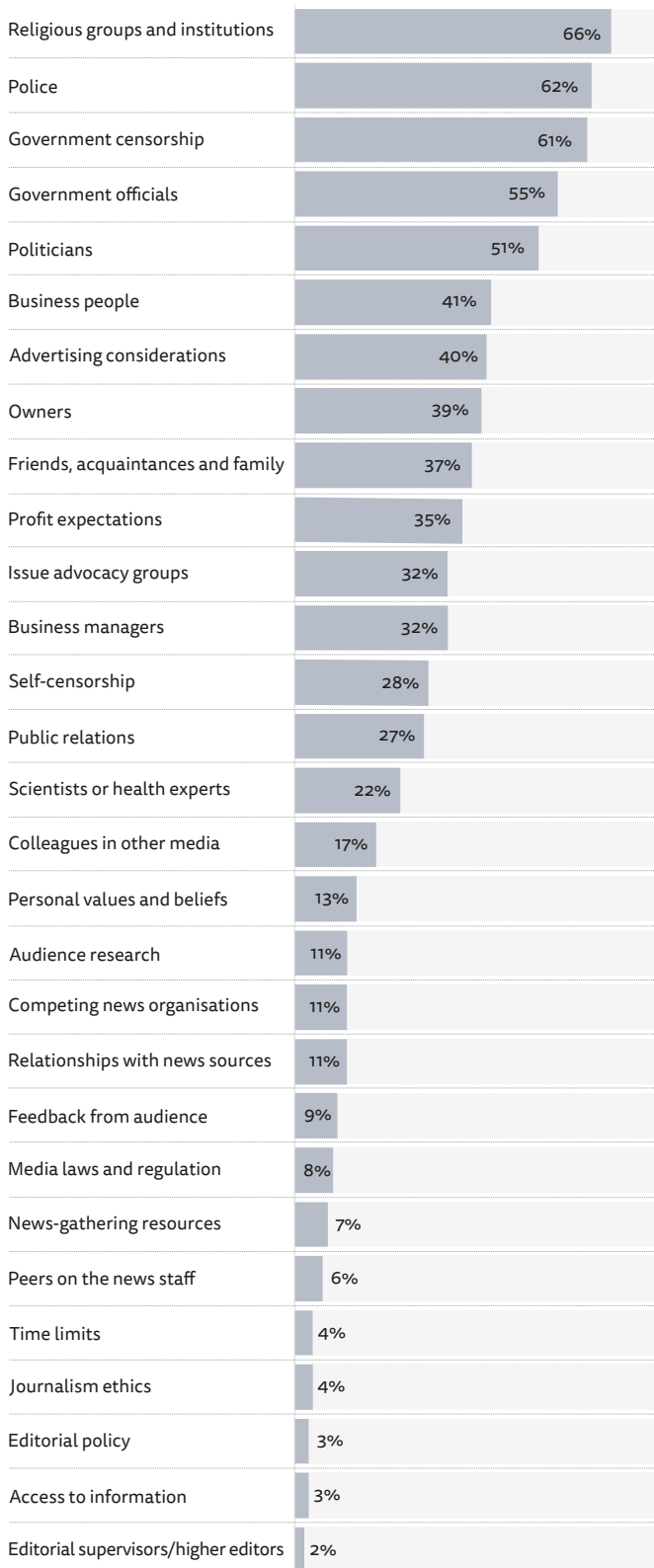
policies, regulations, financial pressures, and relationships with news sources. In theory, to achieve journalistic autonomy, it is important for individual journalists and journalism as a social institution to be free from restrictions (Örnebring and Karlsson 2019). In this chapter, we explore UK journalists' perceptions of media freedom in the UK, their editorial autonomy, and the impact of various influences on their work.

Overall, the survey finds that more than half of UK journalists believed they had a good level of editorial autonomy in choosing stories (63%) and selecting story angles (67%), and that the UK news media has a great deal of freedom (54%). They did not perceive political and commercial influences as strong. For them, the strongest influences came mostly from news production and editorial processes. For example, 61% of respondents saw government censorship as having no influence at all, with 55% feeling the same about government officials, 62% the police, 51% politicians, and 41% businesspeople (see Figure 7.1).<sup>36</sup> By contrast, the factors the largest numbers of journalists felt to be 'extremely influential' were ethics (26%), followed by access to information (22%), media laws and regulation (22%), editorial supervisors/higher editors (22%), and time limits (20%) (see Figure 7.2). The following sections will discuss these findings in detail.

<sup>36</sup> Respondents who answered 'Not relevant' were excluded from the analysis.

**FIGURE 7.1: PROPORTION OF UK JOURNALISTS WHO CONSIDER VARIOUS INFLUENCES AS 'NOT INFLUENTIAL' ON THEIR WORK**

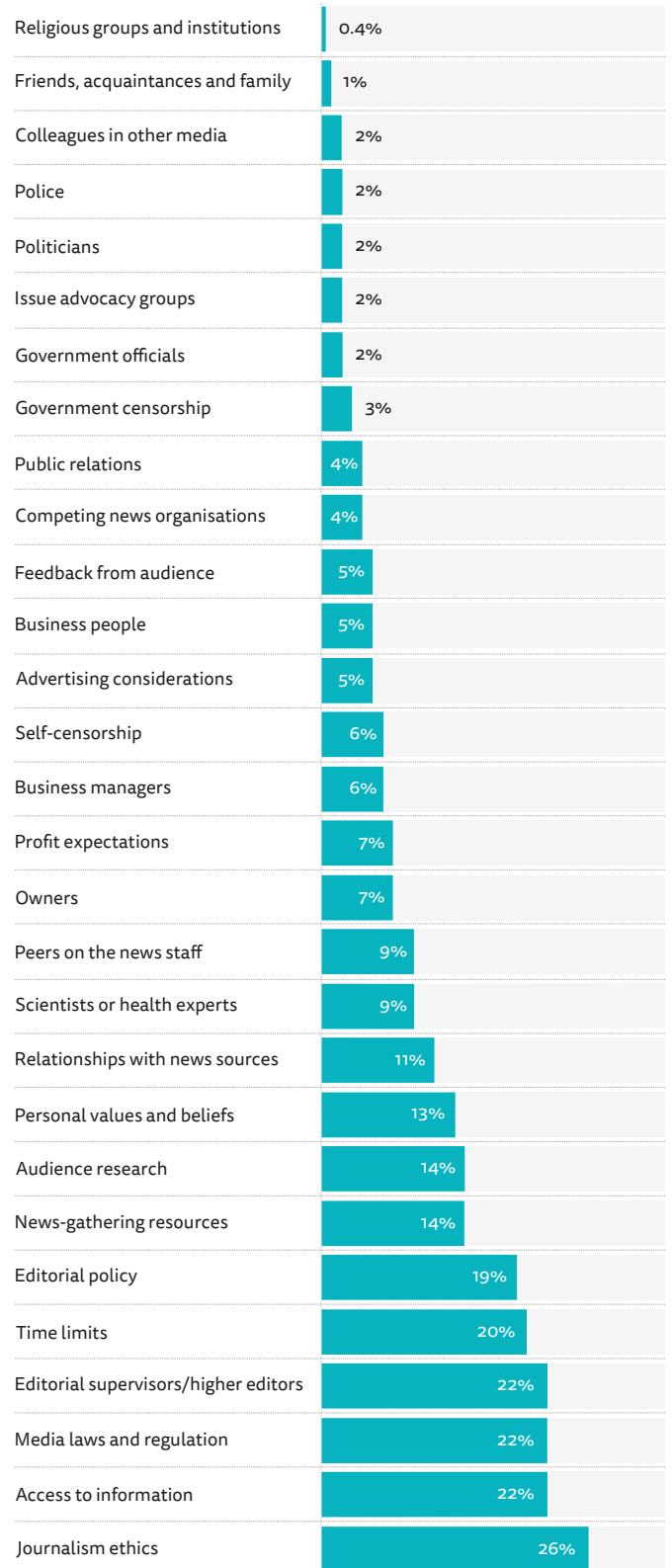
Many journalists do not feel influenced by political or commercial influences.



**infl1.** Here is a list of potential sources of influence. Please tell me how much influence each of the following has on your work as a journalist. **infl2.** Here is another list. Again, please tell me how influential each of the following is in your work. Base: 1074. Note: Those who selected 'Not relevant' were excluded.

**FIGURE 7.2: PROPORTION OF UK JOURNALISTS WHO CONSIDER VARIOUS INFLUENCES AS 'EXTREMELY INFLUENTIAL' ON THEIR WORK**

Journalists feel most influenced by ethics, followed by access to information, media laws and regulation, and editorial supervisors/higher editors.



**infl1.** Here is a list of potential sources of influence. Please tell me how much influence each of the following has on your work as a journalist. **infl2.** Here is another list. Again, please tell me how influential each of the following is in your work. Base: 1074. Note: Those who selected 'Not relevant' were excluded.

## 7.2 PERCEPTIONS OF EDITORIAL AUTONOMY AND MEDIA FREEDOM IN THE UK

Journalists were asked to assess UK news media’s level of freedom (see Figure 7.3).<sup>37</sup> Their views on this topic were polarised, with some perceiving good levels of media freedom and others seeing it as insufficient. Most frequently, journalists thought the UK news media enjoy ‘a great deal of freedom’ (54% of respondents hold this view). The proportions of respondents who thought the UK news media has either ‘complete freedom,’ ‘little freedom,’ or ‘no freedom’ are all small: 3%, 6%, and 0.1%, respectively. However, 37% of respondents thought there is only ‘some’ media freedom. It is worrying that, in total, 43% of respondents considered the UK news media to have only ‘some,’ ‘little,’ or ‘no media freedom’ at all. The divided views on media freedom echo the recent warnings signalled by observer groups such as Index on Censorship that the UK has already slid down to be only ‘partially open’ (Index on Censorship 2023). The UK government, political parties, and politicians have been reported to have posed restrictions on journalists’ access to information, with politicians such as Boris Johnson attempting to prevent journalists from attending press briefings (Reporters Without Borders 2020) and an investigative journalist being barred from attending the Labour Party’s annual conference (Miller 2024).

Similarly polarised opinions can be found in relation to editorial autonomy. Journalists were asked about the amount of freedom they had in selecting the news stories they worked on and deciding which aspects of a story should be emphasised. In general, the more respondents thought they had freedom in selecting stories, the more freedom they considered they had in deciding which aspects to emphasise. It was most common for journalists to say they had ‘a great deal of freedom’ in selecting stories and deciding which aspects to emphasise, with around 50% holding these views. Only small proportions of respondents considered they had ‘complete freedom’ in selecting stories (15%) and in deciding which aspects to emphasise (17%). Considerable proportions of respondents thought they had ‘no freedom’ or only ‘little’ or ‘some’ freedom in selecting stories (37%) and in deciding

which aspects to emphasise (33%). This polarised picture reveals a workplace culture where a significant proportion of the news industry workforce lacks decision-making power over their reporting.

The survey also shows the higher the respondents’ rank, the more editorial autonomy they felt. The associations between the rank of respondents<sup>38</sup> and their perceptions of both freedom in selecting stories and in deciding which aspects to emphasise are both positive and moderately strong.

## 7.3 INFLUENCES JOURNALISTS PERCEIVE ON THEIR WORK

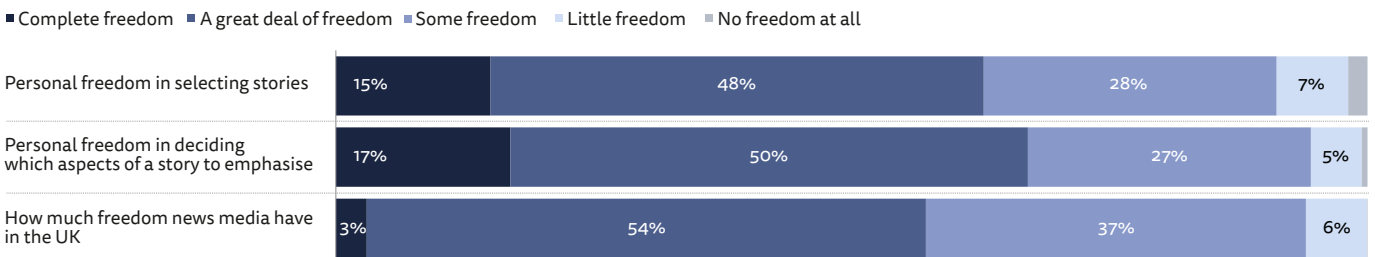
### 7.3.1 PERSONAL VALUES, BELIEFS, AND JOURNALISTIC ETHICS

News production does not happen in a vacuum. It can be influenced by numerous factors both within and outside the newsroom. In the survey, respondents were given a list of potential sources of influence and asked how influential each of them was on their work as a journalist (from ‘extremely influential’ to ‘not influential’).

Personal values and beliefs are one of these potential influences and in some contexts can have a strong impact on journalistic work (Rupar and Seizova 2017; Papathanassopoulos et al. 2021). In the UK, however, just over one third of respondents considered this influence either ‘extremely’ (13%) or ‘very’ (25%) influential. A further 27% of journalists thought that their personal values and beliefs moderately influenced their work (see Figure 7.4). However, the percentage of respondents who believed personal values and beliefs were an ‘extremely’ or ‘very’ strong influence (38%) was less than the 52% found in this survey’s predecessor in 2015 (Thurman et al. 2016). This finding may be in part driven by the changes in personal values and beliefs of the respondents. For example, in the 2023 survey, 71% of respondents had no religious affiliation, up from 61% in 2015.

**FIGURE 7.3: PROPORTION OF UK JOURNALISTS WHO THINK THEY HAVE THE FREEDOM TO DO EACH OF THE FOLLOWING AND PROPORTION WHO THINK THERE IS MEDIA FREEDOM IN THE UK**

Journalists think they have slightly more freedom to decide which aspects of a story to emphasise than freedom to select stories.

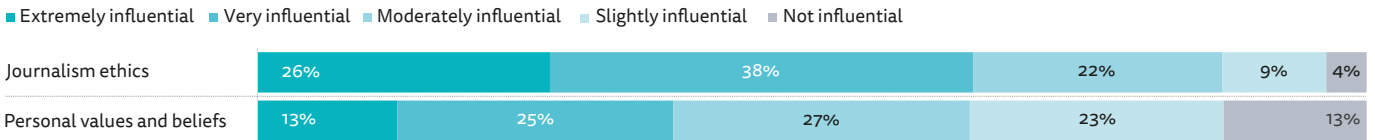


**auto1.** Thinking of your work overall, how much freedom do you personally have in selecting the news stories you work on? **auto2.** And how much freedom do you personally have in deciding which aspects of a story should be emphasized? **freedom.** In your view, how much freedom do the news media have in the United Kingdom? Base: 1127. Note: Don't knows were excluded.

<sup>37</sup> Respondents who answered ‘Don't know’ were excluded from the analysis.

<sup>38</sup> No management responsibility, middle management responsibility, and senior management responsibility.

**FIGURE 7.4: PROPORTION OF UK JOURNALISTS WHO THINK EACH IS INFLUENTIAL ON THEIR WORK**  
Journalism ethics are seen as more influential than personal values and beliefs.



**influn.** Here is a list of potential sources of influence. Please tell me how much influence each of the following has on your work as a journalist. Base: 1074. Note: Those who selected 'Not relevant' were excluded.

The changes in personal values and beliefs as an influence may be a result of demographic change in UK journalists since 2015, as older respondents perceived personal values and beliefs to have more influence. Although, in 2023, the survey had a higher proportion of respondents who were aged 60 plus (15%) than in 2015 (8%), it also had much higher proportions of respondents in their thirties (23%) and forties (24%) and a lower percentage in their fifties (23%) than in 2015 (when the proportions were 13%, 11%, and 27%, respectively).

UK journalists perceived journalism ethics to be one of the most influential factors on their work. Indeed, we see evidence for this perception in how the more influential respondents considered journalism ethics, the less they thought accepting a free product or service was justifiable. (See Chapter 10 for more on UK journalists' ethical beliefs). However, journalism ethics was perceived as less influential than it was in 2015. The proportion of respondents considering it either 'extremely' or 'very' influential has fallen from 77% to 64%. This significant decline may indicate that ethical considerations are being overshadowed by other priorities.

### 7.3.2 PROFESSIONAL AND SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

Another important type of influence was perceived to come from journalists' professional and social relationships, ranging from relationships with editorial supervisors and higher editors to friends, acquaintances, and family. Of these, the influence of editorial supervisors and higher editors was perceived as being strongest, followed by that from peers on the news staff, relationships with news sources, and colleagues in other media (see Figure 7.5). Most respondents considered the influence of editorial supervisors and higher editors 'extremely' (22%) or 'very' (45%) influential. This finding aligns with the earlier discussion on editorial autonomy: with (perceived) strong influence from editorial supervisors and higher editors, lower-level journalists would naturally experience less autonomy. However, those in top management roles who believed they had greater autonomy to select and frame stories than those in lower ranks also felt slightly more influenced by editorial supervisors and higher editors. This finding suggests that editorial influence may be exerted more on those at the top, as they likely have greater autonomy in making editorial decisions and, consequently, more impact on the outcome.

Although literature suggests media owners influence journalism (McNair 2003; Franklin 2012), UK journalists in the survey

did not see media owners and the business managers of their organisations as having a strong influence on their work. A large proportion of respondents considered owners as only 'slightly' (23%) or 'not' (39%) influential. Only a small proportion regarded them as 'extremely' (7%) or 'very' (14%) influential. The same patterns can be found for business managers: most frequently, UK journalists saw them as 'not influential' (32%), followed by 'slightly influential' (25%).

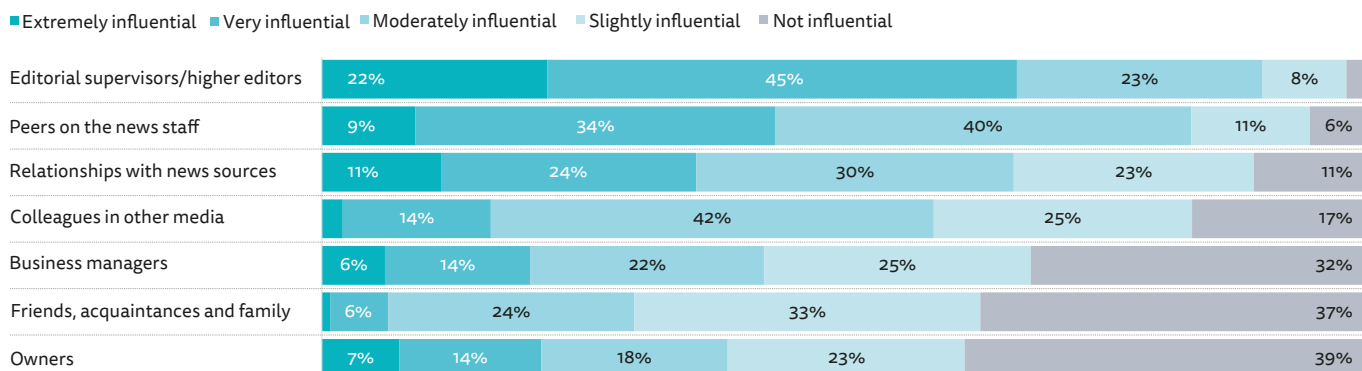
How can we square claims that media ownership influences journalistic work (see, e.g., Deuze 2011) with the perceived low influence journalists felt from news media owners and business managers? It may be that media owners and business managers exert influence through the editorial supervisors and higher editors who most journalists considered 'extremely' or 'very' influential, as discussed above.

Beyond their own newsrooms, colleagues in other media can also impact UK journalists' work, although such influence tends to be most frequently considered as moderate (42%), with about another 40% considering it as only either 'slightly' (25%) or 'not' (17%) influential. Less than 20% of respondents thought it was 'extremely' (2%) or 'very' influential (14%). The relatively strong perceived influence of colleagues in other media on journalists' work may be indicative of the enduring competitive culture in the news industry in which journalists feel pressured to keep up with or outperform colleagues in other news organisations (Williams and Clifford 2008).

News sources often strongly influence journalistic work, with the journalist-source relationship being at the centre of journalistic practice (Fisher 2023). However, the rise of digital platforms has changed – or, more precisely, weakened – this interdependence. News sources no longer largely depend on news media to get messages out (Fisher 2023). Meanwhile, journalists can also get information from other sources, such as the internet (see, e.g., Van Leuven 2018), rather than relying on news sources to provide information. In these circumstances, how have UK journalists' perceptions of the influence of news sources changed?

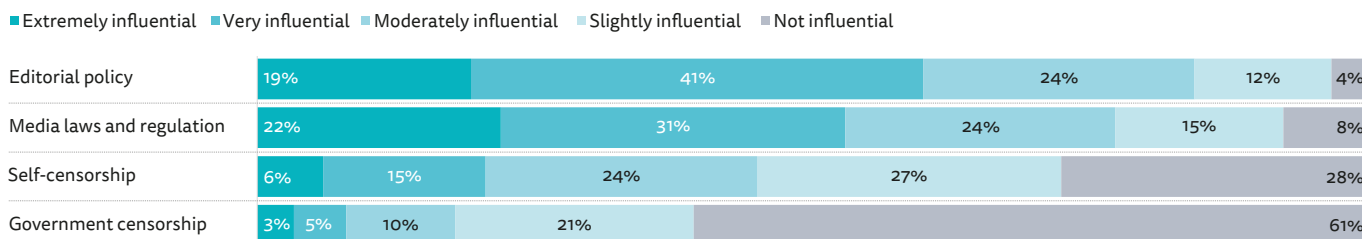
The 2023 survey shows that, most frequently, UK journalists considered the relationship with news sources as having a 'moderate' influence on their work (30%). Compared with the 2015 survey, this factor was perceived as less influential, with the proportion of respondents seeing this relationship as 'extremely' or 'very' influential dropping from 43% to 35%.

**FIGURE 7.5: PROPORTION OF UK JOURNALISTS WHO THINK EACH IS INFLUENTIAL ON THEIR WORK**  
Journalists think their colleagues inside and outside of their own newsrooms have an influence on their work.



**influz.** Here is another list. Again, please tell me how influential each of the following is in your work. Base: 1056. Note: Those who selected 'Not relevant' were excluded.

**FIGURE 7.6: PROPORTION OF UK JOURNALISTS WHO THINK EACH IS INFLUENTIAL ON THEIR WORK**  
Journalists think that editorial policy and media laws are influential on their work. A minority feel government censorship has any influence.



**influz.** Here is a list of potential sources of influence. Please tell me how much influence each of the following has on your work as a journalist. Base: 1074. Note: Those who selected 'Not relevant' were excluded.

### 7.3.3 EDITORIAL POLICY, MEDIA REGULATION, AND CENSORSHIP

Editorial policy and media laws and regulations were seen as strong influences, but respondents mostly did not feel influenced by government or self-censorship (see Figure 7.6).

Most frequently, UK journalists considered editorial policy to be 'very influential' (41%), with around 19% of respondents believing it 'extremely influential'. Only around 4% of respondents regarded it as 'not influential'.

Likewise, UK journalists saw media laws and regulations as influencing their work greatly: half of respondents considered them as either 'extremely' (22%) or 'very' (31%) influential. Only around 8% regarded them as 'not' influential.

Most frequently, UK journalists saw government censorship as 'not influential' (61%), a rise from 34% in the 2015 survey. Around 18% regarded this factor as 'extremely' (3%), 'very' (5%), or 'moderately' (10%) influential on their work.

Respondents viewed self-censorship as more influential than government censorship. However, most frequently UK journalists saw it as 'not influential' (28%). They considered it to have a slightly stronger influence on their work than government censorship, with 6% considering it as 'extremely influential', 15%

'very influential', and another 24% as 'moderately influential'.

Freelance and self-employed journalists thought government and self-censorship had a slightly stronger influence on their work than those on full-time permanent contracts. This suggests that freelancers may feel less able to report freely, perhaps due to having less institutional support.

### 7.3.4 ECONOMIC FACTORS AND THE AUDIENCE

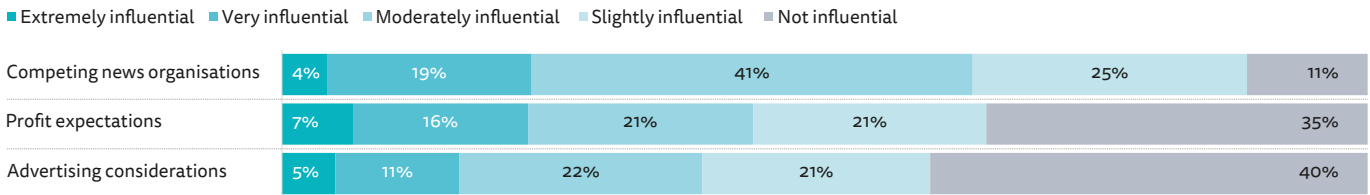
Journalists were asked the extent to which economic factors – such as advertising considerations and profit expectations – and the audience had an impact on their work. Although the UK news media have been experiencing financial pressures for decades (Curran 2010; Franklin 2014; Tong 2022b), the respondents did not perceive that economic factors were as influential as other factors, such as media laws and regulation and relations with news sources.

Around one third of respondents thought economic factors were 'not influential' (40% for advertising considerations and 35% for profit expectations). Only around 5% of respondents regarded advertising considerations as 'extremely influential', and around 11% considered it as 'very influential'. Only around 7% of respondents regarded profit expectations as 'extremely



**FIGURE 7.7: PROPORTION OF UK JOURNALISTS WHO THINK EACH IS INFLUENTIAL ON THEIR WORK**

Journalists think competing news organisations have more influence on their work than advertising considerations and profit expectations.



**influr.** Here is another list. Again, please tell me how influential each of the following is in your work. Base: 1074. Note: Those who selected 'Not relevant' were excluded.

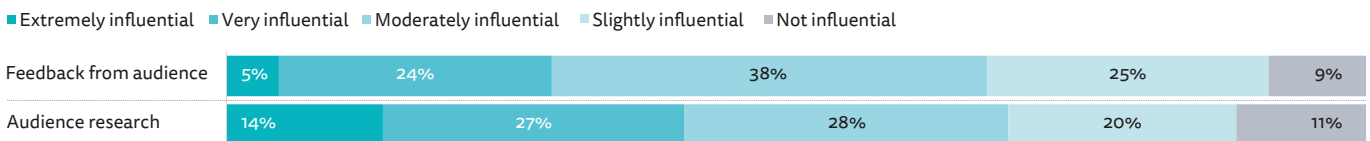
influential', with 16% considering it as 'very influential' (see Figure 7.7). These findings suggest that they generally believed their work was largely uninfluenced by commercial pressures – surprising, perhaps, given the market conditions.

UK journalists regarded competing news organisations as having more influence on their work than advertising considerations and profit expectations. However, such an influence has grown weaker since 2015. Most frequently, they considered it as 'moderately influential' (41%, a fall from 47% in the 2015 survey).<sup>39</sup> Only a small proportion (4%) of respondents saw competition from other news organisations as 'extremely influential', with 19% regarding it as 'very influential' (reduced from 6% and 27% respectively in the 2015 survey). This decline may be attributed to the growing shift towards online news consumption (Ofcom 2024b), reducing reliance on traditional news media and potentially diminishing the influence of competing (traditional) news organisations.

Overall, the influence of the audience on journalistic work was perceived as strong, although less so than in the 2015 survey (see Figure 7.8). Most frequently, the respondents viewed audience research and data – for example, ratings, circulation, and web metrics – and feedback from the audience as having a 'moderate' influence (28% and 38%, respectively). Only a small proportion regarded feedback from the audience and audience research and data as having 'no' influence on their work (9% for the former and 11% for the latter, which were 3% and 8% respectively in the 2015 survey). Feedback from the audience was considered by 29% of respondents as either 'extremely' or 'very influential' (the proportion was 44% in the 2015 survey). The proportion of respondents regarding audience research and data as either 'extremely' or 'very influential' was 41%, which is the same as found in 2015. The finding that UK journalists and editors appeared to feel less influenced by audience feedback than they did in 2015 is somewhat unexpected and worthy of further investigation.

**FIGURE 7.8: PROPORTION OF UK JOURNALISTS WHO THINK EACH IS INFLUENTIAL ON THEIR WORK**

Few regard feedback from the audience and audience research and data as having no influence on their work.



**influr.** Here is another list. Again, please tell me how influential each of the following is in your work. Base: 1074. Note: Those who selected 'Not relevant' were excluded.

**7.3.5 INFORMATION ACCESS, THE AVAILABILITY OF NEWS-GATHERING RESOURCES, AND TIME LIMITS**

In journalism practice, information access, the availability of news-gathering resources, and time limits are three key factors that directly influence journalistic work. The survey suggests they are all perceived as having a strong influence. Of the three, 'Access to information' was viewed as the strongest influence by UK journalists, with 91% considering it 'extremely' (22%), 'very' (43%), or 'moderately' (26%) influential (see Figure 7.9).

The influence of time limits was also a strong influence on journalists' work. Some 86% of respondents regarded it as either 'extremely' (20%), 'very' (38%), or 'moderately' (28%) influential.

UK journalists' work can also be greatly influenced by the availability of news-gathering resources, such as communication technologies. Most frequently, the respondents considered this as 'very influential' (34%). However, compared with the 2015 survey, the proportion of respondents who saw it as either 'extremely' or 'very' influential dropped from 60% to 48%. This may be due to the wider availability of cheaper, smaller, and easier-to-use information and communication technologies.

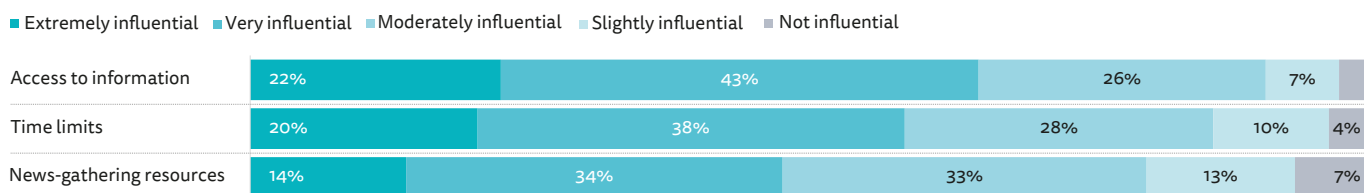
These three influences come directly from the news production process. Journalists experience them firsthand. This is probably why respondents found them so influential. Other factors, such as commercial and political influences, are more distant from daily journalism practices. Their presence may not have been experienced directly by many respondents for various reasons, including their roles and ranks within their organisation.

<sup>39</sup> In the 2015 survey the equivalent category was 'somewhat influential'.



**FIGURE 7.9: PROPORTION OF UK JOURNALISTS WHO THINK EACH IS INFLUENTIAL ON THEIR WORK**

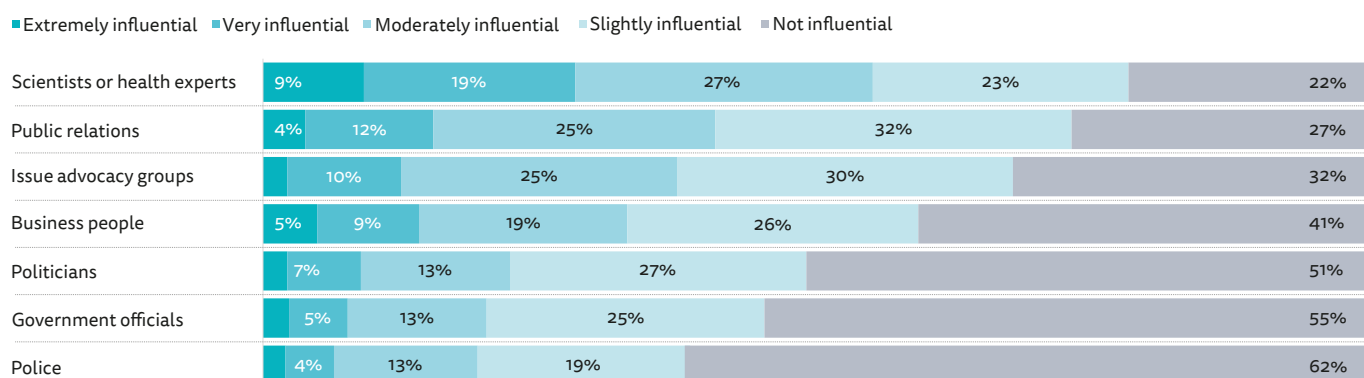
Journalists think that their work is heavily influenced by access, time, and resources.



**influ1.** Here is another list. Again, please tell me how influential each of the following is in your work. Base: 1074. Note: Those who selected 'Not relevant' were excluded.

**FIGURE 7.10: PROPORTION OF UK JOURNALISTS WHO THINK EACH IS INFLUENTIAL ON THEIR WORK**

Journalists consider politicians, government officials, and the police as largely not influential on their work.



**influ1.** Here is another list. Again, please tell me how influential each of the following is in your work. Base: 1074. Note: Those who selected 'Not relevant' were excluded.

## 7.3.6 NEWS ACTORS

Overall, UK journalists most commonly viewed news actors as not having a strong influence over their work. Among news actors, scientists or health experts were considered the most influential, followed by public relations, issue advocacy groups, and businesspeople. Health-related events such as the COVID-19 pandemic may have boosted the influence of scientists or health experts. Even so, only 28% of respondents held the view that scientists or health experts were either 'extremely' (9%) or 'very' (19%) influential (see Figure 7.10). Most frequently, 27% of respondents saw this group of news actors as having a 'moderate' influence on their work.

UK journalists considered politicians, government officials, and the police as largely not influential. Only 9% of respondents saw politicians as either 'extremely' (2%) or 'very' (7%) influential. Most of them felt 'no' (51%) or 'little' (27%) influence from politicians on their work. Similar patterns can be found for government officials and police. Most frequently, UK journalists regarded the police (62%) and government officials (55%) as having no influence. Only very small proportions of the respondents were political or crime reporters. Therefore, most respondents to the survey were not directly reliant on this group of news actors.

## 7.4 CONCLUSION

This chapter has described UK journalists' perceptions of their editorial autonomy, media freedom in the UK, and the extent to which they felt various influences on their work. Our analysis has shown participants' divided views on editorial autonomy and media freedom. Although over half of journalists perceived the UK to have a good or excellent level of media freedom, a substantial proportion disagreed. A similar, polarised position is evident in their perception of editorial autonomy. While the majority considered they had good levels of editorial autonomy in selecting and framing news stories, a significant proportion were not positive. While the perceptions of relatively high levels of media freedom and editorial autonomy in the UK by most journalists are encouraging, it is concerning that a considerable proportion of journalists did not share these views. The influences that UK journalists perceived most strongly were those they directly experienced via news production processes and editorial procedures. Political and economic influences were mostly not perceived as strong, which is somewhat surprising given the current environment, which has become more politically restrictive and financially challenging for UK news media. This may be because these influences are exerted indirectly, for example through editorial supervisors. The decrease in the perceived influence of news sources and information access since 2015 may be due to technological change, while the decrease in the perceived influence of personal values and beliefs and journalistic ethics may be due to cohort replacement. These later changes raise questions about the consequences for journalistic content, which we would encourage the academy to investigate.

# 8 EXAMINING JOURNALISTS' EPISTEMOLOGICAL BELIEFS: WHAT DO UK JOURNALISTS BELIEVE ABOUT TRUTH, OBJECTIVITY, AND INTERPRETATION?

CRAIG T. ROBERTSON

## 8.1 INTRODUCTION

We all have beliefs, explicit or not, about how we know things are true. These are what is called 'epistemological beliefs' – beliefs about the nature of knowledge and knowing (Hofer and Pintrich 1997). They are beliefs about how we come to know things or find the truth. An example is the belief that we know something exists by observing it, such as a tree or a flower. For journalists, observing is one of the cornerstones of their profession. But there are also other ways of getting to the truth, such as by collecting testimony or documentation about a person or event.

Understanding the beliefs journalists have is important because these beliefs can shape how information is gathered and reported to the public. If a journalist believes there is no real objectivity, they might feel comfortable sprinkling subjective opinions into their work more frequently. On the other hand, if a journalist strictly adheres to a 'just the facts' approach, their work might lack contextual information beyond the simple what, where, and when of news.

It is for these reasons that, in the 2023 survey, UK journalists were presented with five epistemological belief statements relevant to their work and asked if they agreed or disagreed with them. These statements, which are not exhaustive of all the forms of beliefs journalists might have, but which are nevertheless important to understanding how they think, were:

1. Interpretation is necessary to make sense of facts
2. Truth is inevitably shaped by those in power
3. Things are either true or false, there is no in-between
4. It is possible to represent objective reality in reporting
5. It is possible for journalists to withhold their personal beliefs from reporting<sup>40</sup>

For the rest of this chapter, I will discuss these beliefs under three headings.<sup>41</sup> The first heading is for what I will call 'empiricist beliefs', encompassed by the statements 'it is possible to represent objective reality' and 'it is possible to withhold personal beliefs'. The second heading is for what I will call 'interpretive beliefs', encompassed by the statements 'interpretation is necessary' and 'truth is shaped by those in power'. The third is for what I will call 'dogmatic beliefs', reflected in the statement that 'things are either true or false, there is no in-between'.

These three belief sets are not mutually exclusive – journalists may variously agree with all or none of them – and again are not exhaustive of all the possible philosophical beliefs journalists might have about the processes of knowledge and knowing. But they do represent some common epistemological beliefs in and outside of journalism (Robertson 2020).

## 8.2 EMPIRICIST BELIEFS

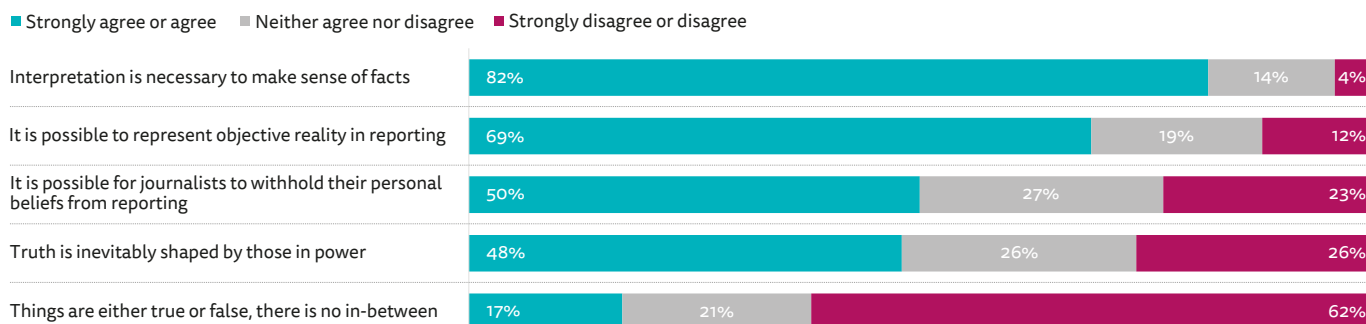
Objectivity, neutrality, impartiality, and other related concepts are core components of the ideology of Western journalism. They were not always at the core of what journalists believe in, but came to be so with the professionalisation of journalism through the 20th century (Schudson 2001).

<sup>40</sup> This statement was originally worded in the negative as 'It is impossible for journalists to withhold their personal beliefs from reporting'. It was re-coded to be consistent with the other positively expressed statements.

<sup>41</sup> A factor analysis of responses to these five statements, looking for commonalities in patterns of response, gave these three groupings of beliefs.

**FIGURE 8.1: PROPORTION OF UK JOURNALISTS WHO AGREE OR DISAGREE WITH EACH STATEMENT**

The substantial majority of UK journalists believe it is 'possible to represent objective reality in reporting'.



**epist1.** The following statements deal with beliefs related to how journalists know what they know. For each of them, please tell me how strongly you agree or disagree. Base: 1063.

One of the core assumptions of this ideology, which was drawn from the world of science, is that the external world can be reported on faithfully, the way a scientist may watch and record their observations. The strong belief in this idea is reflected in the 2023 data, which show that the substantial majority of UK journalists (69%) believed it is 'possible to represent objective reality in reporting' (see Figure 8.1). Half of UK journalists (50%) also believed it is possible to withhold personal beliefs from reporting. In other words, they believed they could prevent their subjective biases from influencing what and how they reported.

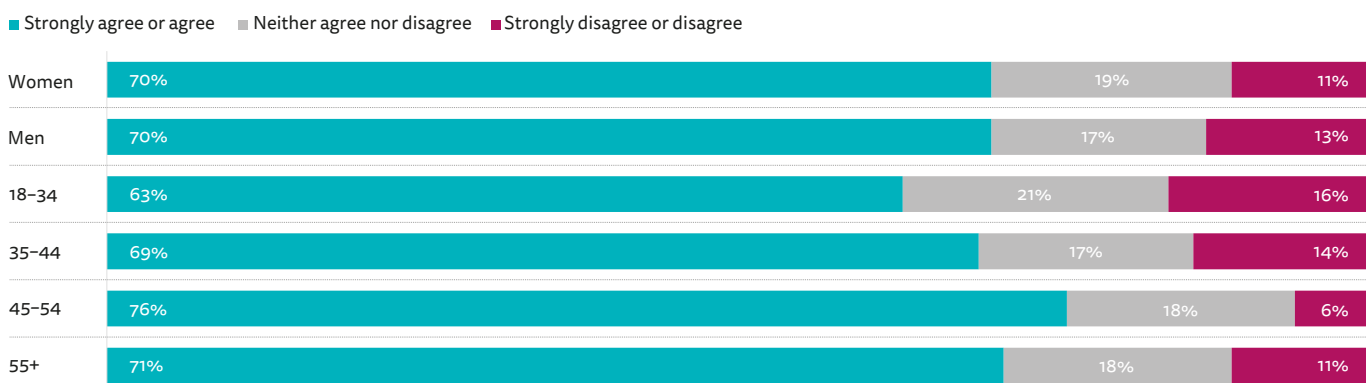
I describe these as beliefs because they are precisely that. These are assumptions that the objective reporting of reality is possible, free from the influences of our own personal experiences and subjective lenses.

The established nature of this belief in empirical reporting – sometimes reflected in the notions of journalists as stenographers or recorders of history – is indicated by the consistency of

agreement across demographic groups. Both male and female journalists equally believed that it is possible to represent objective reality in reporting (see Figure 8.2). Older journalists were somewhat more likely to agree with this statement than younger journalists, but the vast majority across all age groups said that truly objective reporting is possible. The same is true for journalists at different levels of work experience. Among journalists with 0–4 years of experience, 58% said it is possible to be objective. For journalists with 20+ years of experience, this rose to 72%. It may be that journalists who are older and have more experience are more confident in their ability to be objective, having done the job for much longer than new recruits. An alternative explanation may be that journalists' attitudes towards their role in society has begun to shift in the younger generation who – in the face of multiple political, economic, social, and ecological crises – are more prepared to move away from the role of objective reporter towards a more activist understanding of what it means to be a journalist (see Chapter 9).

**FIGURE 8.2: PROPORTION OF UK JOURNALISTS IN EACH DEMOGRAPHIC WHO BELIEVE IT IS POSSIBLE TO REPRESENT OBJECTIVE REALITY IN REPORTING**

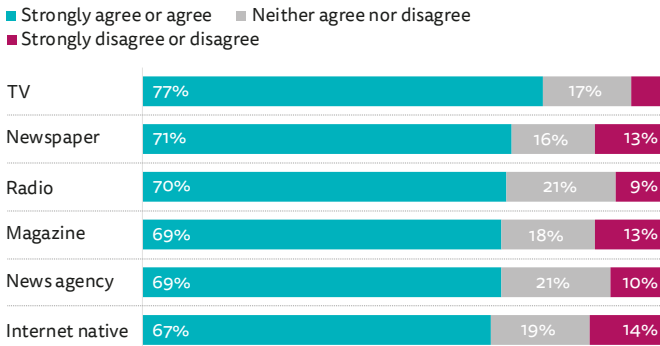
Older journalists are more likely to agree that it is possible to represent objective reality in reporting.



**epist1.E.** The following statements deal with beliefs related to how journalists know what they know. For each of them, please tell me how strongly you agree or disagree. It is possible to represent objective reality in reporting. Base: Men = 503, Women = 509, 18–34 = 256, 35–44 = 220, 45–54 = 218, 55+ = 264.

**FIGURE 8.3: PROPORTION OF UK JOURNALISTS WHO WORK FOR EACH TYPE OF EMPLOYER WHO BELIEVE IT IS POSSIBLE TO REPRESENT OBJECTIVE REALITY IN REPORTING**

Journalists whose main employer has a television background are slightly more likely to agree that it is possible to be objective.



**epist1\_E.** The following statements deal with beliefs related to how journalists know what they know. For each of them, please tell me how strongly you agree or disagree. It is possible to represent objective reality in reporting. Base: TV = 98, Newspaper = 268, Radio = 64, Magazine = 280, News agency = 67, Internet native = 146.

Another factor that may play a role in shaping beliefs is where journalists work. Belief in true objectivity and the ability to withhold personal beliefs from reporting varied by the type of medium journalists worked in and the type of outlet they worked for. For instance, journalists whose main employer had a television background were slightly more likely to agree that it is possible to be objective (see Figure 8.3).

The trend is similar if we look at the main format journalists produced content in (e.g. text, audio, video), with journalists working in video slightly more likely to agree than journalists working primarily in text (72% vs 68%). A reason for this may be that video journalists work with moving visual images that are meant to represent objective reality. Humans have a bias towards believing in the truth of visual representations (Munro 2021), reflected in the idea that ‘seeing is believing’.

The fact that UK television journalists appear to have a stronger belief in objective reporting than other journalists may also be somewhat influenced by the fact that they are required by law to be impartial. Ofcom regulations hold television (and radio) journalists to standards of due impartiality and accuracy. Part of the historical reason for these regulations, and why they apply to television broadcasters in particular, is the idea that moving images have a lot more power and sway over people, so they are required not to favour any one point of view (Seymour-Ure 1996). These rules are also to apply to the BBC News website.<sup>42</sup>

The impartiality standards publicly owned media are held to are reflected in the data. Just under half (48%) of journalists working in commercial media (which includes newspaper journalists but also some broadcast journalists bound by impartiality requirements) said that it is possible to withhold personal beliefs from reporting, around the same as the whole sample (50%), but 63% of those working for publicly owned media believed so – a 15pp difference (see Figure 8.4).

**FIGURE 8.4: PROPORTION OF UK JOURNALISTS WHO WORK FOR EACH TYPE OF ORGANISATION WHO AGREE IT IS POSSIBLE TO WITHHOLD PERSONAL BELIEFS FROM REPORTING**

Journalists whose main employer is publicly owned media are more likely to agree that it is possible to withhold personal beliefs from reporting.



**epist1\_C.** The following statements deal with beliefs related to how journalists know what they know. For each of them, please tell me how strongly you agree or disagree. It is possible for journalists to withhold their personal beliefs from reporting. Base: Publicly owned media = 149, Commercial media = 763. Note: Percentages are for ‘Strongly agree’ and ‘Agree’.

### 8.3 INTERPRETIVE BELIEFS

Not all people agree that true objectivity is possible. People generally have an understanding that humans are not always fair-minded or rational. A quintessential example is fans of rival football teams viewing a referee’s decisions during a match as being unfair to each of them.

When it comes to news and journalism, many scholars will argue that the notion of true objectivity is a philosophical fiction and that journalists are not uniquely unburdened from the built-in subjective biases that we all carry (Durham 1998; Steiner 2018). Journalists will also acknowledge that a big part of their job is interpreting and making sense of things – in other words, using subjective judgement. In fact, the statement UK journalists agreed with most (82% agreeing) was that ‘interpretation is necessary to make sense of facts’. Here there is the recognition that news is not just about facts, but also what those facts mean in context. Interpretation becomes a necessary part of the reporting process.

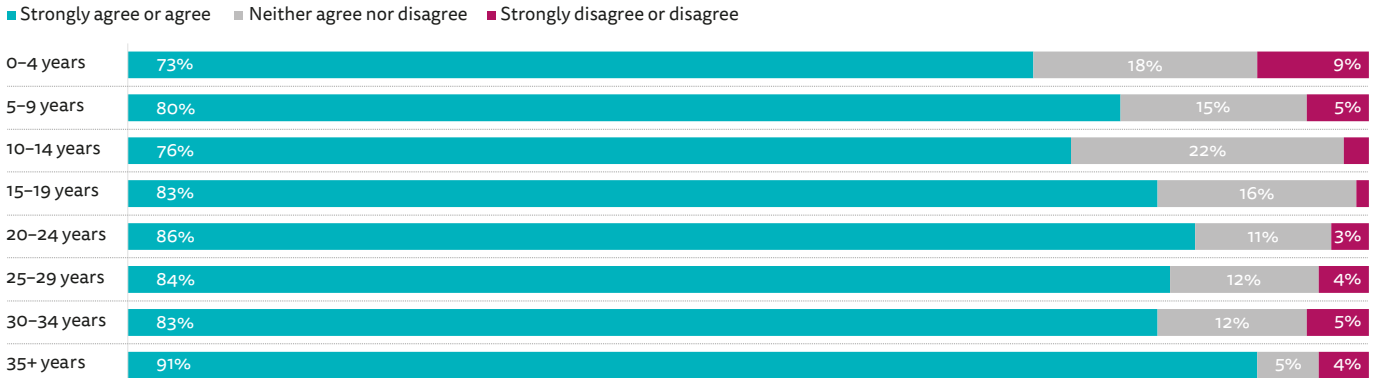
But there is debate within the journalism world about how much of an interpretive layer should be put on top of facts. Scholars have argued that there has been an ‘interpretive turn’ in journalism – from the 1960s onwards in the US, in particular – which has increased the amount of explanation, interpretation, and opinion in the news (Barnhurst 2016). Some blame has been put on this interpretive turn for the decline in audience trust and increased political polarisation in the news media. While this is difficult to prove on the whole, it is part of the narrative.

Within this context, there is some variation in the belief about the necessity of interpretation among UK journalists. Interestingly, male journalists were, by 10pp, more likely to agree that interpretation is necessary than female journalists (87% agreed, while only 77% of female journalists agreed). Journalists with more years of work experience were also more likely to agree (see Figure 8.5). It may be that journalists with more experience are in job positions where more interpretation is asked of them, given their expertise, or because they have come to see the necessity for it. Fully 91% of journalists with the most experience (35+ years) said interpretation is necessary.

<sup>42</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-68041713>

**FIGURE 8.5: PROPORTION OF UK JOURNALISTS WITH DIFFERENT AMOUNTS OF WORK EXPERIENCE WHO AGREE THAT INTERPRETATION IS NECESSARY TO MAKE SENSE OF FACTS**

Journalists with more experience are more likely to agree that interpretation is necessary to make sense of facts.



**epist1\_A.** The following statements deal with beliefs related to how journalists know what they know. For each of them, please tell me how strongly you agree or disagree. Interpretation is necessary to make sense of facts. Base: 0-4 years = 116, 5-9 years = 153, 10-14 years = 127, 15-19 years = 139, 20-24 years = 132, 25-29 years = 136, 30-34 years = 109, 35+ years = 151.

A different part of interpretive journalism – reporting that tries to make better sense of the world – is the recognition that some (or, maybe, quite a lot) of what we know or come to accept as truth is shaped by those in power. ‘History is written by the victors’ is an old adage about the ability of those in control to influence how the past is seen. When it comes to news and journalism, the powerful actors shaping what we know about the world are the politicians, judges, police, businesspeople, and others who have the ability to divulge or withhold important information.

Far fewer UK journalists (48%) agreed with the statement ‘truth is inevitably shaped by those in power’ than with the other interpretive statement (82%). The difference here may come down to the fact that journalists are not beholden to what powerful people say. They can dig deeper and try to uncover information, not simply letting the powerful dictate what is seen as true.

Interestingly, there is a stark difference in beliefs between journalists of different political leanings. Journalists who leant left politically were far more likely to agree with the notion that truth is shaped by those in power (55%) than those who leant right (33%) (see Figure 8.6).

Younger journalists were also somewhat more likely to agree that truth is shaped by those in power. Among journalists aged 18-44, 51% agreed with the statement that truth is shaped by those in power, while 45% of those aged 45+ agreed.

**8.4 DOGMATIC BELIEFS**

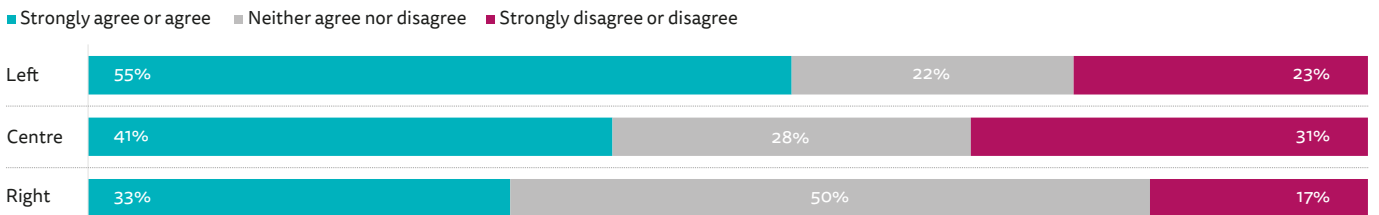
The last statement on epistemic beliefs included in the survey was the notion that ‘things are either true or false, there is no in-between’. This is the statement UK journalists agreed with the least (17%), by a large margin.

This is perhaps unsurprising, given the statement itself is so rigid. But it is phrased this way precisely so that it brings out those individuals whose thinking is rigid. I call this ‘dogmatic belief’ because this type of thinking is straightforward and black-and-white in nature (Pryor 2000).

Looking at the UK journalists who were more likely to hold this type of belief, they tended to be male (see Figure 8.7). The stronger dogmatic position among these journalists may reflect the type of assertiveness, self-certainty, and confidence in the beliefs of some men (Baxter Magolda 1992; Kessels 2013).

**FIGURE 8.6: PROPORTION OF UK JOURNALISTS WITH DIFFERENT POLITICAL LEANINGS WHO AGREE THAT TRUTH IS INEVITABLY SHAPED BY THOSE IN POWER**

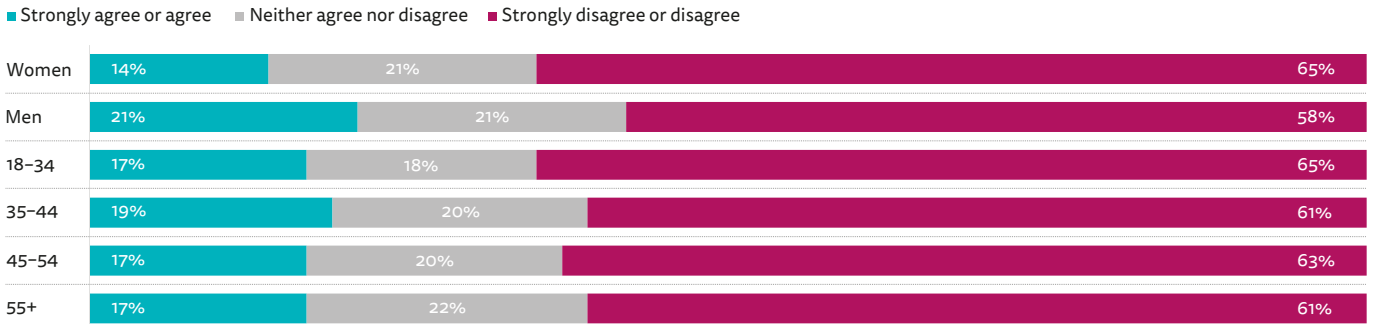
Journalists who lean left politically are more likely to agree with the notion that truth is shaped by those in power.



**epist1\_B.** The following statements deal with beliefs related to how journalists know what they know. For each of them, please tell me how strongly you agree or disagree. Truth is inevitably shaped by those in power. Base: Left = 506, Centre = 387, Right = 48. Note: Percentages for ‘Right’ should be treated with caution because of small base.

## FIGURE 8.7: PROPORTION OF UK JOURNALISTS IN EACH DEMOGRAPHIC WHO AGREE THAT 'THINGS ARE EITHER TRUE OR FALSE, THERE IS NO IN-BETWEEN'

Men are more likely to think that 'things are either true or false, there is no in-between' – but most do not think this.



**epist1\_D.** The following statements deal with beliefs related to how journalists know what they know. For each of them, please tell me how strongly you agree or disagree. Things are either true or false, there is no in-between. Base: Women = 509, Men = 503, 18-34 = 256, 35-44 = 220, 45-54 = 218, 55+ = 264.

## 8.5 CONCLUSION

Of the belief statements presented to them, UK journalists in the survey mostly agreed that interpretation is necessary to make sense of facts (82% agreement). They also expressed strong belief in the possibility and value of objectivity (69% agreement). They were much less likely to view truth in black-and-white terms (17% agreement) or say that truth is inevitably shaped by those in power (48% agreement). They were overall split on whether it was possible for journalists to withhold their personal beliefs from reporting.

What do these findings mean for UK news and journalism? For one, they show how UK journalists express a strong belief in the need for interpretation – to add context and understanding to stories. This belief is perhaps, in part, born out of the need to help audiences understand the increasingly difficult issues of our time, such as climate change, war, and migration. Given the complexity of many issues, only a small number of UK journalists expressed a belief in black-and-white truths.

Although there has been consternation around claims of 'bias' in the news media, it seems that UK journalists see interpretation as very separate from opinion. Instead, there is agreement on the need to explain and contextualise stories. The need to connect with audiences and help them navigate the world may see newsrooms continue in their efforts to add interpretation, using formats such as explanatory journalism that have become popular with audiences.

Alongside the belief in the need for interpretation, there is also a continued commitment to the ideology and practice of objectivity. It has become a cornerstone of Western journalism, and associated concepts like impartiality continue to be reflected in,

for example, the BBC's most recent commitment to double down on impartiality following a debate over sports presenter Gary Lineker's use of social media to criticise the Conservative government at the time.<sup>43</sup> It is clear from BBC Director-General Tim Davie's comments in response to this story that being objective and impartial are seen as clearly linked to trust: 'Impartiality is the bedrock of the BBC. It's utterly critical that looking forward people have total trust in the BBC,' he said.

Objectivity seems likely to remain as a core belief, especially in light of declining audience trust in the UK news media (Newman et al. 2024), but there is a question as to whether support for strong objectivity is waning. There is some ambivalence among many UK journalists about the possibility of keeping their own beliefs fully out of the news. Just half (50%) of UK journalists agreed that they could withhold their personal beliefs from reporting, while the rest were unsure (27%) or disagreed (23%) that this is possible. This sits alongside the large number of journalists saying interpretation is necessary in the news.

Finally, just under half (48%) of UK journalists agreed that truth is shaped by those in power. Journalists are in a key position to question those in power and try to get at the truth – it's their job. For this reason, it may be somewhat surprising that almost half of UK journalists believed that 'truth is inevitably shaped by those in power'. But this almost cynical feeling could come down to the fact that those in political power, especially, are difficult for journalists to work with. If journalists are stonewalled, avoided, or impeded from getting information, it makes it hard for journalists to find out what is true, hence agreement with the idea of truth being shaped by the powerful. At the same time, powerful people are among the primary sources relied on by journalists to know what is going on, so they have an inherent ability to influence not just what journalists but all of us know.

<sup>43</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/uk/bbc-star-gary-lineker-takes-pay-cut-as-new-boss-doubles-down-on-impartiality-idUSKBN2661M9/>



# 9 HOW UK JOURNALISTS PERCEIVE THEIR ROLES IN SOCIETY

IMKE HENKEL, LEA HELLMUELLER, AND RANA ARAFAT

During a 2024 edition of the BBC podcast *When it Hits the Fan*, the journalist and presenter Amol Rajan painted a gloomy picture of his profession. Journalists, Rajan stated, had ‘lost their role as gatekeepers’ and their ‘monopoly on public information’. He concluded that journalism was ‘in a bad way’, and that the glass is ‘not just [...] half empty but it is smashed into a billion pieces and we’re all bleeding of the shards’ (BBC 2024a).

Rajan described the confusion that many journalists feel about their changed role in society (Gottfried et al. 2022; Henkel 2025). Even their most fundamental roles are increasingly under threat, be it to inform and to hold the powerful to account (Esser and Neuberger 2019), be it as gatekeepers (Bell and Owen 2017), or as those who select what is newsworthy for their audiences (Thurman et al. 2019). Moreover, political, societal, and cultural events in the UK have put the profession under increased pressure. In the aftermath of Brexit, journalists have been accused of failing the country (Lewis 2019), so-called ‘mainstream media’ have come under increased attack by alternative media (Cushion 2022), and news media have been accused of amplifying disinformation spread on social media (Wring and Ward 2019). In addition, journalists’ traditional values, such as objectivity, have been questioned in the face of the war in Ukraine (Onishenko 2022), social movements such as Black Lives Matter (Lowery 2020; Schmidt 2024), and global threats such as climate change (Robbins and Wheatley 2021).

This chapter explores how UK journalists think about their present role in society. The survey asked journalists to assess the

importance of 24 journalistic roles, rating each from ‘not at all important’ to ‘extremely important’.

Most of the role questions were included in the 2015 survey (Thurman et al. 2016), which allowed us to analyse whether and how journalists’ role perceptions changed over the subsequent eight years.<sup>44</sup>

We divided the 24 roles into five groups, according to underlying commonalities between the roles that emerged from factor analysis of the survey data:

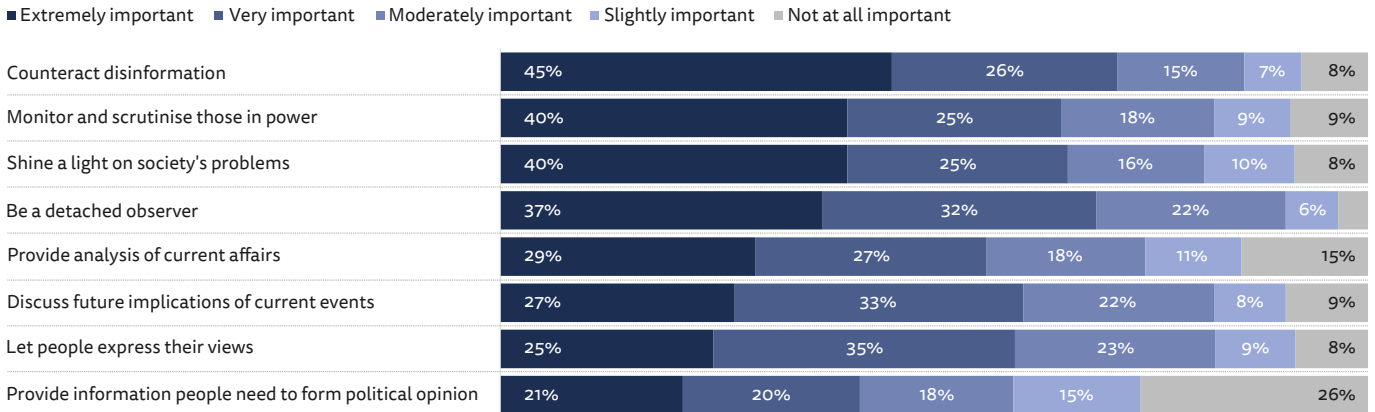
1. **Informer and watchdog roles**, which are: ‘be a detached observer’, ‘provide analysis of current affairs’, ‘provide information people need to form political opinion’, ‘discuss future implications of current events’, ‘monitor and scrutinise those in power’, ‘shine a light on society’s problems’, ‘counteract disinformation’, and ‘let people express their views’.
2. **Advocating and interventionist roles**, which are: ‘set the political agenda’, ‘influence public opinion’, ‘advocate for social change’, ‘motivate people to participate in politics’, ‘promote peace and tolerance’, ‘point towards possible solutions to society’s problems’, ‘speak on behalf of the marginalised’, and ‘support efforts to promote public health’.
3. **Audience-oriented roles**, which are: ‘provide entertainment and relaxation’, ‘provide the kind of news that attracts the largest audience’, ‘provide advice, orientation, and direction for daily life’, and ‘tell stories that emotionally move the audience’.
4. **Loyal facilitator roles**, which are: ‘support national development’, ‘support government policy’, and ‘convey a positive image of political leaders’.
5. **Educator role** to ‘educate the audience’.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>44</sup> The survey added seven new role questions and left out three that were asked in 2015. For six roles the wording of the question was slightly changed, including one instance where two questions were merged into one (for the full 2023 questionnaire see Thurman et al. 2024a).

<sup>45</sup> The loadings of this variable on all other factors are very weak, below .20, indicating minimal association.

### FIGURE 9.1: PROPORTION OF UK JOURNALISTS WHO THINK EACH INFORMER AND WATCHDOG ROLE IS IMPORTANT

Over two thirds consider being a detached observer very or extremely important.



role. Please tell me how important it is to do each of the following in your daily work. Base: 1130.

## 9.1 INFORMER AND WATCHDOG ROLES

To inform their audiences, to provide context for the information they deliver, and to scrutinise those in power are still what UK journalists believe to be among their most important roles. Scholars and professionals alike have long considered these roles to be central to the purpose of journalism (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2014, 50). As in 2015, we find that UK journalists in 2023 continued to emphasise these traditional reporting roles, as do many journalists around the globe (Hanitzsch et al. 2019).

However, the survey also reveals that journalists’ attitudes towards these classic roles have changed since 2015.

In 2023, as in 2015, the survey asked journalists about the importance of being a ‘detached observer’, a role that has been linked to the journalistic value of objectivity (Firmstone 2024, 99). Over two thirds (69%) considered it as very or extremely important (see Figure 9.1). Although still prominent, being a detached observer was significantly less important to journalists than it was eight years previously (77%) (Thurman et al. 2016, 31).

Moreover, the data suggest a generational shift. The 2023 survey shows that older journalists ascribed greater weight to the classic role of being a detached observer. Three quarters (74%) of those 40 years and older held it to be very or extremely important, compared with under two thirds (60%) of those under 40.

Three questions in the survey related to roles that provide context: ‘provide analysis of current affairs’, ‘provide information people need to form political opinion’, and ‘discuss future implications of current events’.

Just over half of the journalists in the sample (56%) found it

very or extremely important to ‘provide analysis of current affairs’, down from 67% in 2015 (Thurman et al. 2016, 31). Again, compared with 2015, this role has lost importance. In the 2023 survey, only journalists working for news outlets with the legacy media backgrounds of newspaper, TV, or radio (see Chapter 3) held this analytical role to be almost as important as all journalists did in 2015.<sup>46</sup>

Journalists’ role to ‘provide information people need to form political opinion’ was considered by 42% as very or extremely important – not significantly different from 2015. However, there is a striking difference between the high level of importance journalists working for local or regional news outlets gave to this role (60% considered it as very or extremely important) and the lesser level given by their colleagues at outlets with national or transnational reach (just 39%). This considerable gap confirms the vital role local and regional media have for a functioning democracy and the dangers inherent in the dramatic decline of local and regional media (Ponsford 2024c), as the Cairncross Review highlighted (Cairncross et al. 2019, 17).

To ‘discuss future implications of current events’, a role that was not included in the 2015 survey, was considered as very or extremely important by 60% of the respondents, making it one of the most important roles for journalists in the 2023 sample.

The classic watchdog role to ‘monitor and scrutinise those in power’ was considered by two thirds of the respondents (65%) as very or extremely important. The 2015 survey asked this question in two parts: ‘monitor and scrutinise political leaders’ (48% found this very or extremely important) and ‘monitor and scrutinise business’ (59%). Therefore, journalists’ emphasis on this role seems to have grown. The broader scope of the new question, though, may have contributed to the increased perceived importance of this role. As with ‘providing analysis’, the traditional watchdog role of monitoring and scrutinising was

<sup>46</sup> In this chapter ‘legacy media background’ refers to news outlets with a newspaper, TV, or radio background. We did not include outlets with a magazine, news agency, or telecommunications background as ‘legacy’.

more likely to be considered important among journalists working at outlets with a specific media culture. Four out of five (79%) journalists working for outlets with a legacy background found this role very or extremely important, as compared with 62% of journalists working for internet-native media. Geographical reach also matters. Four out of five (82%) journalists working for local and regional media found ‘monitoring and scrutinising those in power’ very or extremely important, against only 64% who mainly worked for media outlets with a national or transnational reach.

The emphasis journalists put on their role as watchdogs is further confirmed by the weight respondents gave to two new roles that were introduced for this survey. Two thirds of UK journalists in the sample (65%) deemed the role to ‘shine a light on society’s problems’ very or extremely important. Even more (71%) considered the role to ‘counteract disinformation’ very or extremely important. ‘Shining a light on society’s problems’ was seen as more important by those working for legacy media, those working for local media, and journalists under 40. To ‘counteract disinformation’ was significantly more important for those working for outlets with a legacy media culture than for their colleagues working for news media with an internet-native media culture.

To ‘let people express their views’ was deemed very or extremely important by 60% of the respondents as compared with 54% in 2015.<sup>47</sup> Journalists working for local or regional outlets found this role significantly more important (71%) than their colleagues working for national or transnational media (58%). Journalists who were 40 years and older also found ‘letting people express their views’ slightly more important than their younger colleagues (61% vs 58%).

## 9.2 ADVOCATING AND INTERVENTIONIST ROLES

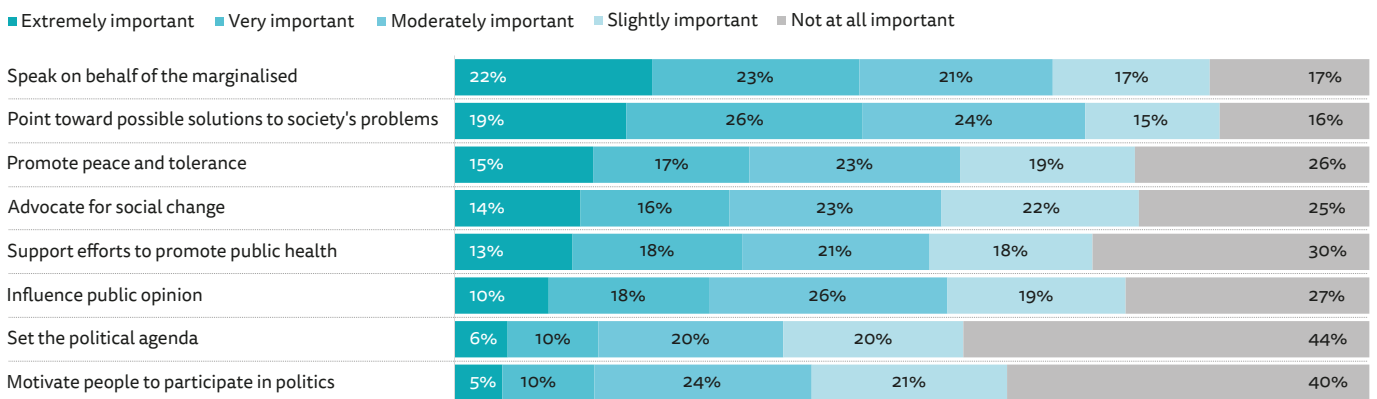
While journalists’ informer and watchdog roles can be seen as ‘neutral’ in some sense (Hanitzsch 2011, 485), this cannot be said of the advocating and interventionist roles. Research on journalists’ role perceptions has for some time distinguished between the ‘advocacy-neutral’ and the ‘participant-observational’, where ‘advocacy’ refers to journalists ‘expressing subjective values and beliefs’ and ‘participant’ describes journalists ‘actively seeking to influence the political process’ (Donsbach 2015, 317). Another often-used term that we will adopt here is ‘interventionist’ roles, which means that ‘journalists pursue a particular mission and promote certain values’ (Hanitzsch 2007, 372).

Eight items in the questionnaire reflect these roles. Neither ‘setting the political agenda’ nor ‘influencing public opinion’ were very important for UK journalists (see Figure 9.2). Only 16% found it very or extremely important to ‘set the political agenda’, with journalists working for newsrooms with a legacy media culture background being more inclined to this role than their colleagues at internet-native outlets. To ‘influence public opinion’ was considered by 28% as very or extremely important – with no major change since 2015.

To ‘advocate for social change’ was considered by 30% of the journalists in the sample as very or extremely important. Only 15%, though, found to ‘motivate people to participate in politics’ very or extremely important. UK journalists ascribed more importance to the role of ‘promote peace and tolerance’, although just a third (32%) found this role very or extremely important. The importance of this role has decreased by 14pp compared with the 2015 survey.<sup>48</sup>

**FIGURE 9.2: PROPORTION OF UK JOURNALISTS WHO THINK EACH ADVOCACY AND INTERVENTIONIST ROLE IS IMPORTANT**

Just 16% think it is ‘very’ or ‘extremely’ important to ‘set the political agenda’.



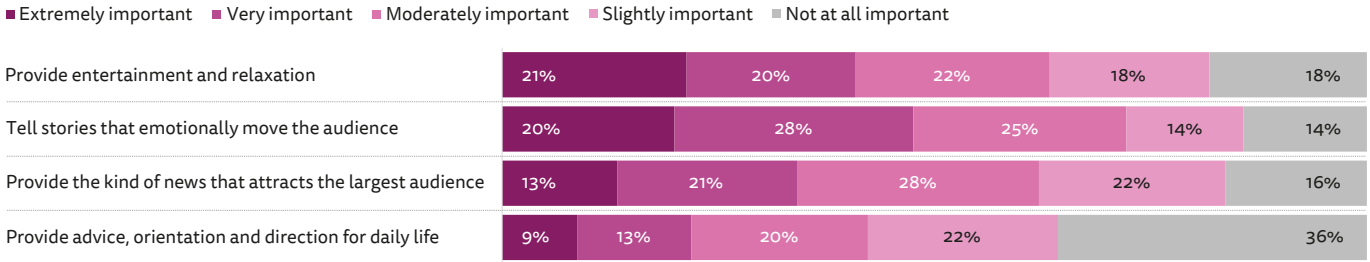
role. Please tell me how important it is to do each of the following in your daily work. Base: 1130.

<sup>47</sup> This role grouped with the informer and watchdog roles in the factor analysis. Theoretically an argument could be made that it fits better here than with the audience-oriented roles (see Section 9.3) because letting (some) people express their views informs the wider audience about public views.

<sup>48</sup> The role was phrased slightly differently in 2015 as ‘promote tolerance and cultural diversity’; 46% of respondents found this very or extremely important in 2015. The decrease in importance may also be linked, at least in part, to the different wording of the question.

### FIGURE 9.3: PROPORTION OF UK JOURNALISTS WHO THINK EACH AUDIENCE-ORIENTED ROLE IS IMPORTANT

Around half think that it is 'very' or 'extremely' important to tell stories that emotionally move the audience.



role. Please tell me how important it is to do each of the following in your daily work. Base: 1130.

In response to recent developments, three roles were included for the first time in the 2023 survey. To 'point towards possible solutions to society's problems' speaks to the rise of solution or constructive journalism (Lough and McIntyre 2023). Just under half (45%) believed this role to be very or extremely important. To 'support efforts to promote public health', a role that was particularly pertinent during the COVID-19 pandemic, was considered very or extremely important by 31% of the respondents to the survey. The third role that was asked about for the first time in the 2023 survey was 'speak on behalf of the marginalised'; it was very or extremely important for 45% of respondents.

Younger journalists considered 'advocating for social change' (38% for journalists under 40 vs 25% for journalists 40 years and older) and to 'speak on behalf of the marginalised' (54% vs 39%) more important than their older colleagues, which indicates cultural-political differences between the generations (see Chapter 1). Female journalists put more emphasis on 'advocating for social change', 'promoting peace and tolerance', 'pointing towards possible solutions to society's problems', and 'speaking on behalf of the marginalised' than their male colleagues. Journalists working for newsrooms with a legacy media culture background (newspapers, TV, and radio) put a slightly higher emphasis on these roles than their colleagues working for internet-native media.

## 9.3 AUDIENCE-ORIENTED ROLES

In 2015, UK journalists considered reaching large audiences and fulfilling commercial interests (Hanitzsch 2007, 375) as their most important aims when it came to how they thought about their audiences. Eight years later, these goals have lost some of their prominence for UK journalists. Specifically, since 2015, to 'provide entertainment and relaxation' and to 'provide the kind of news

that attracts the largest audience' have become less important to UK journalists. The proportions considering these roles to be very or extremely important have declined from 50% to 41% and from 45% to 34%, respectively.

As in 2015, in 2023 journalists ascribed less importance to the audience-oriented role 'provide advice, orientation, and direction for daily life'. It was deemed very or extremely important by around one fifth (22%) of the respondents – little changed from 2015.

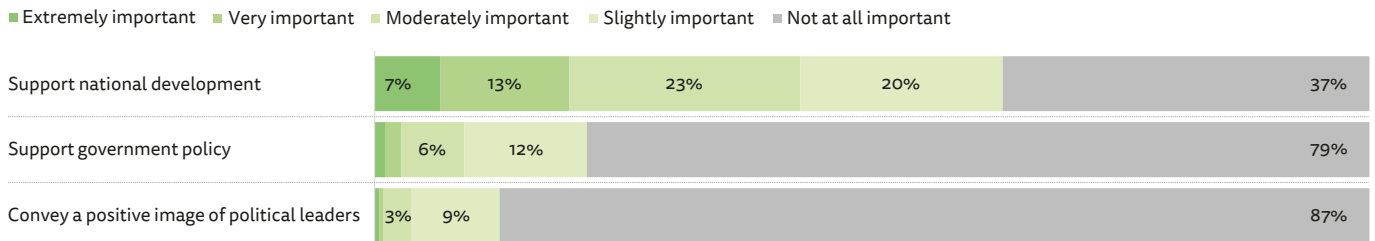
To 'tell stories that emotionally move the audience', which was included for the first time in 2023, has become the most important audience-oriented role for UK journalists, with 48% of respondents considering it as very or extremely important (see Figure 9.3). It was more popular among local and regional journalists: nearly two thirds (66%) of them found this role very or extremely important, whereas considerably less than half (45%) of national and transnational journalists did. This role was also considerably more favoured by journalists working for newsrooms with a legacy background (60%) than by journalists working for a newsroom with an internet-native media culture background (35%).

## 9.4 LOYAL FACILITATOR ROLES

The three roles that centre around promoting the state and political leadership, which are usually categorised as the 'loyal facilitator role' (Mellado 2015, 605), are prominent in some parts of the world but, unsurprisingly, were roundly dismissed by journalists in the UK (see Figure 9.4). To 'support national development' was considered very or extremely important by 20% of the journalists in the sample, but just 3% of respondents found to 'support government policy' very or extremely important and under 1% of respondents found to 'convey a positive image of political leaders' very or extremely important.

## FIGURE 9.4: PROPORTION OF UK JOURNALISTS WHO THINK EACH LOYAL FACILITATOR ROLE IS IMPORTANT

UK Journalists do not tend to think loyal facilitator roles are very important.



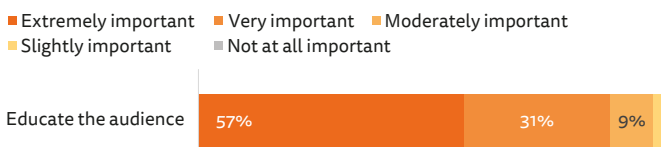
role. Please tell me how important it is to do each of the following in your daily work. Base: 1130.

## 9.5 EDUCATOR ROLE

The role to 'educate the audience' is an outlier in terms of the strength of support it attracted. Among all 24 roles that were included in the survey, the educator role had a 17pp lead over the rest, making it by far the most important role for UK journalists. Nine out of ten (88%) of the journalists in the sample found this role very or extremely important (see Figure 9.5). In 2015, journalists also considered this role their most important one (Thurman et al. 2016, 33–34). Then, 79% believed it to be very or extremely important.

### FIGURE 9.5: PROPORTION OF UK JOURNALISTS WHO THINK THE EDUCATOR ROLE IS IMPORTANT

The educator role is the most important role for UK journalists.



role. Please tell me how important it is to do each of the following in your daily work. Base: 1130.

The importance of this role among journalists is aligned with audience preferences. In their 2022 survey among 3,044 respondents across the UK, Gibson et al. (2022) found that 83% thought that 'to educate' was one of journalists' top roles (Gibson et al. 2022, 10). Similarly, the 2024 *Digital News Report* established that, across 47 different news markets, audiences saw 'educate me' (67%) as their second most important need behind 'update me' (72%); with UK audiences being among those who considered 'understanding', a category that includes the 'educate me' need, their top priority (Newman et al. 2024, 44–45).

It may be, then, that the emphasis UK journalists gave to the educator role is a reaction to what they felt their audiences wanted. However, even if this was the case, it would only partly explain why the educator role was considered the most important by UK journalists, as audiences' clear interest in journalists'

informer and watchdog roles (Newman et al. 2024) was not met by an equally strong emphasis from journalists.

Again, age matters. UK journalists under 40 were slightly more interested in the 'to educate' role (93% of those under 40 found this role very or extremely important) than journalists who were 40 years old or older (86%). However, any expectation that journalists working for publicly owned media are more invested in the educator role because it was included in Lord Reith's famous founding mission for the BBC 'to inform, to educate, to entertain' is not borne out by the data. There is no statistically significant difference in how much journalists valued the educator role between those who worked for publicly owned media and those who did not.

There is, though, a significant correlation between the importance journalists put on the educator role and the platform for which they produced. Journalists who produced either for radio or for podcasts gave it significantly more emphasis than journalists on average did.

## 9.6 HAVE JOURNALISTS SHIFTED TOWARDS ACTIVIST ROLES?

Although UK journalists still considered their traditional roles as informers and watchdogs to be the most important, the emphasis they gave to these roles has shifted. Overall, the informer roles have decreased in importance, while watchdog roles have increased. In addition, some roles that were newly introduced to the 2023 survey and that also speak to journalists' watchdog function have attracted strong support: 71% of respondents found it very or extremely important to 'counteract disinformation' and 65% to 'shine a light on society's problems'. Furthermore, the educator role not only remained the most important for UK journalists but, since 2015, the proportion of journalists who thought it was very or extremely important has risen by 9pp to 88%.

Ranking those roles that more than 60% of respondents considered very or extremely important, we find the following six roles to be the most important for UK journalists in 2023:

- **Educate the audience:** 88% – up 9pp since 2015.
- **Counteract disinformation:** 71% – not asked in 2015.
- **Be a detached observer:** 69% – down 8pp since 2015.
- **Shine a light on society's problems:** 65% – not asked in 2015.
- **Monitor and scrutinise those in power:** 65% – up; but asked differently in 2015.<sup>49</sup>
- **Discuss future implications of current events:** 60% – not asked in 2015.

Five of these six most important roles are linked to an activist conception of journalists' societal role. In particular the increased importance of the activist 'monitor and scrutinise' role and the decreased importance of the neutral 'detached observer' role suggest that UK journalists' attitudes towards their roles in society have turned more activist since 2015. That journalists emphasised their role as educators even more than they already did in 2015 seems to confirm this trend.

These findings call for more research. A number of questions could be explored using the data from the survey. Four suggestions: Firstly, what has caused the upheaval that we observe in journalists' traditional role orientations? Secondly, what lies behind the significantly greater emphasis, shown in the data, that journalists working for local and regional outlets put on democratically relevant roles? Thirdly, is journalists' turn towards activist roles accompanied by a move away from institutional politics as they appear to favour socially engaged roles over those with a traditional political focus? Finally, why – as suggested by the data – are journalists working for outlets with a legacy media culture more attracted to activist journalism roles than their colleagues working for newsrooms with an internet-native media culture?<sup>50</sup>

## 9.7 CONCLUSION

This chapter presented new data that suggest that UK journalists are turning towards roles that attempt to tackle societal problems. This stands in contrast to 2015, when commercially driven roles such as 'providing the kind of news that attracts the largest audience' were central to journalists' conception of their role in society in addition to their traditional role as detached and neutral reporters (Thurman et al. 2016, 34). The move away from commercial roles that treat audiences as consumers and from the detached observer role towards watchdog and activist roles that involve audiences as citizens may be a reaction to the painful experience of journalists that Amol Rajan colourfully described of losing their essential importance as gatekeepers to a fractured and multifaceted information universe while living through a time of profound political, economic, and socio-cultural upheaval.

<sup>49</sup> This role was split into two in the 2015 survey. The importance of the role increased by 17pp against 'monitor and scrutinise political leaders', and by 6pp against 'monitor and scrutinise business'.

<sup>50</sup> Proposals for collaborative research projects are welcome and may be addressed to [i.henkel@leeds.ac.uk](mailto:i.henkel@leeds.ac.uk)



# 10 UK JOURNALISTS' VIEWS ON ETHICS AND THE ACCEPTABILITY OF ETHICALLY QUESTIONABLE REPORTING PRACTICES

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## 10.1 INTRODUCTION

Perceptions about what constitutes ethical behaviour on the job are a core component of how journalists see themselves and their role in democratic society. In an information age when anyone can be a publisher, practitioners commonly cite normative standards in making the argument that this does not mean anyone can be a journalist. This chapter draws on responses to the survey of UK journalists in 2023 – and its predecessor in late 2015 (Thurman et al. 2016) – to outline changes and consistencies in their understanding of what is and is not ethical.

At the time of the 2015 survey, the findings of the Leveson Inquiry into British newsroom practices (Leveson 2012) seemed very much on journalists' minds. That inquiry, spurred by the fallout from the notorious phone-hacking scandal in the 2000s, reviewed British media ethics, highlighted deficiencies in press oversight procedures, and made recommendations for changing them.

The reaction from the British press was decidedly mixed. Now, more than a decade after publication of the Leveson recommendations, the regulatory picture remains murky. At the same time, the move of UK journalists into positions of authority at prominent international media outlets based in the US – including the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, and CNN – is shining a spotlight on what constitutes acceptable ethical practice on both sides of the Atlantic (Grynbaum 2024).

Within this context, this chapter examines UK journalists' responses to two sets of questions related to occupational

ethics. The first of these asked about journalists' general ethical orientations and views about the importance of overarching professional standards, while the second sought to understand what they consider appropriate actions in particular situations, including those related to:

- Payments and other inducements connected to sourcing information.
- The need for permission and, conversely, the use of subterfuge in obtaining information.
- The use of unverified content.

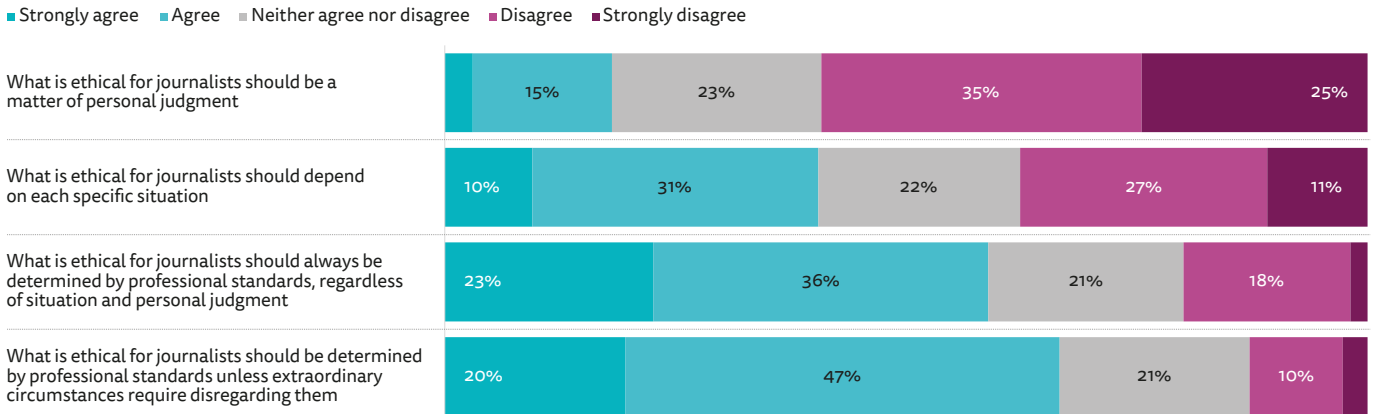
Our analysis of these data included looking for differences according to journalists' employment status, gender, and rank.

## 10.2 GENERAL ETHICAL ORIENTATIONS

Around 60% of UK journalists agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that 'what is ethical for journalists should always be determined by professional standards, regardless of situation and personal judgement'. That sounds like a clear – if perhaps not ringing – endorsement of ethical guidelines. But support for an overarching professional ethos was far greater in 2015 (Thurman et al. 2016), when a whopping 94% of journalists agreed that 'Journalists should always adhere to codes of professional ethics, regardless of situation and context'. Although some variation might be expected because of the change in phrasing, such a large disparity suggests a shift away from an overwhelmingly dominant view that professional codes or standards are essential sources of ethical guidance.

### FIGURE 10.1: PROPORTION OF UK JOURNALISTS WHO AGREE WITH EACH ETHICS STATEMENT

Journalists are more likely to agree that ‘what is ethical for journalists should be determined by professional standards unless extraordinary circumstances require disregarding them.



**ethics A-D.** The following statements describe different responses journalists may have to ethical problems. For each of them, please tell me how strongly you agree or disagree. Base: 1130.

In 2023, UK practitioners were more likely to agree that ‘what is ethical for journalists should be determined by professional standards unless extraordinary circumstances require disregarding them’ [emphasis added]. As Figure 10.1 shows, this statement garnered agreement from roughly two thirds (67%) of the UK respondents, nearly twice the proportion who agreed with a comparable statement in 2015. In the earlier survey, more than 40% of respondents felt such circumstances were relatively unimportant; in 2023, only 14% were willing to ignore them, suggesting a shift away from one-size-fits-all guidelines and towards more situational ethics. Again, a slight change in the wording of the statement – particularly the change from ‘moral standards’ in 2015 to ‘professional standards’ in 2023 – could have affected how journalists thought about this question. Nevertheless, the extent of the change in perspective is notable.

This said, the two other statements in this question set revealed uncertainty among UK journalists about both situational ethics and the role of personal judgement in ethical decision-making. Asked for their views on the statement ‘What is ethical for journalists should depend on each specific situation’, respondents in 2023 were nearly evenly divided; in 2015, a clearer majority agreed with the statement, a difference that is statistically significant. Opinions about the role of personal judgement also reflected considerable uncertainty. Although 60% of UK journalists in 2023 disagreed that ‘What is ethical for journalists should be a matter of personal judgement’ – the statement generating the clearest level of disapproval among the four options – nearly a quarter still registered a neutral view. In 2015, this statement garnered statistically significant higher levels of agreement.

A closer look shows a moderate correlation between these two statements, both of which acknowledge the innate subjectivity in ethical evaluation: Journalists who agreed that what is ethical for journalists depends on the specific situation were also significantly more likely to agree that what is ethical for journalists is a matter of personal judgement. The increased resistance to subjective ethical decision-making in 2023 may be

linked to the uncertainty surrounding who qualifies as a journalist and a push for a more unified professional understanding of ethics in the UK journalism industry.

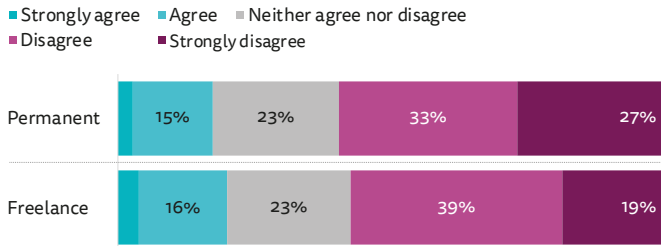
### 10.2.1 FREELANCERS ON THE RISE: EMPLOYMENT SITUATION AND ETHICS

Incorporating data related to employment status and gender adds nuance to our findings. Over the past quarter-century, journalistic work has become increasingly precarious (Chadha and Steiner 2021), with industry reports suggesting around 8,000 journalism staff jobs were lost in 2023 in the UK, US, and Canada alone (Aberneithie and Tobitt 2024). Cuts continued in 2024 for journalists across a range of UK outlets (Tobitt 2024). It is no surprise, then, that freelancing has been described as ‘one of journalism’s few growth sectors’ (Crowley 2024). The survey confirms the rise in the number of journalists working freelance in the UK, from 17% of respondents in the 2015 survey to 28% in 2023. Freelancers tend to work from home, often for multiple clients on multiple projects, and their earnings are typically significantly lower than the salaries of less precariously employed reporters (Thurman et al. 2016; Gollmitzer 2024). Despite these differences, the survey data suggest that freelancers and staff journalists share broadly similar views on whether and when questionable reporting practices – such as payments, inducements, and verification – are justified. This is discussed further below.

A clear majority in both groups disliked the idea of relying on personal judgement for ethical decisions (see Figure 10.2). Similar percentages of freelancers (60%) and journalists with a permanent contract (58%) agreed that ethical decisions should always be guided by professional standards (see Figure 10.3). Disagreement with the statement that ethics should always follow professional standards also was nearly identical, at just under 20%.

### FIGURE 10.2: PROPORTION OF UK JOURNALISTS WHO AGREE 'WHAT IS ETHICAL FOR JOURNALISTS SHOULD BE A MATTER OF PERSONAL JUDGEMENT', BY EMPLOYMENT STATUS

A clear majority of both permanent staff and freelancers disliked the idea of relying on personal judgement for ethical decisions.

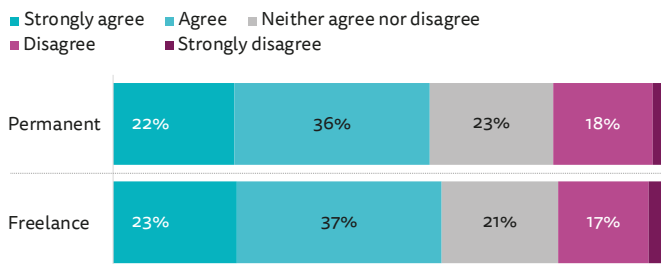


**empl.** Which of the following categories best describes your current working situation as a journalist? **ethic1\_D.** The following statements describe different responses journalists may have to ethical problems. For each of them, please tell me how strongly you agree or disagree. Base: Permanent = 739, Freelance = 316.

Research indicates that journalists increasingly labour in what can be termed a transitional work environment, with many having experienced traditional newsrooms before transitioning to independent work (Holton 2016). Both freelancers and staffers may therefore have had similar exposure to considerations of ethics and regulation.

### FIGURE 10.3: PROPORTION OF UK JOURNALISTS WHO AGREE 'WHAT IS ETHICAL FOR JOURNALISTS SHOULD ALWAYS BE DETERMINED BY PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS, REGARDLESS OF SITUATION AND PERSONAL JUDGMENT', BY EMPLOYMENT STATUS

Similar percentages of freelancers and journalists with permanent contracts agree that ethics should be determined by professional standards.



**empl.** Which of the following categories best describes your current working situation as a journalist? **ethic1\_A.** The following statements describe different responses journalists may have to ethical problems. For each of them, please tell me how strongly you agree or disagree. Base: Permanent = 739, Freelance = 316.

## 10.2.2 ETHICAL ORIENTATION: DOES GENDER MATTER?

The survey corroborates previous research (Antunovic et al. 2019) indicating women constitute a majority of the freelance workforce, with around 58% of the freelance respondents identifying as female. In contrast, among journalists with fixed or part-time contracts (which includes journalists working in full-time permanent, part-time permanent, full-time fixed-term, and part-time fixed-term contracts), 47% identified as female, while 52% identified as male. So, does gender matter to UK journalists' ethical orientation?

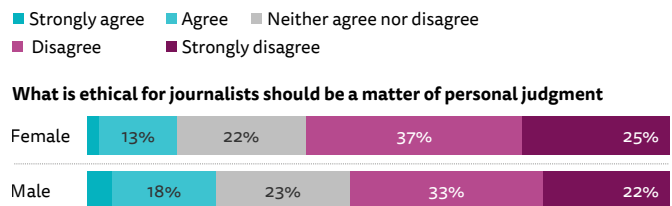
The answer is that it seems to matter more than employment status. Journalists who identified as male were more likely to support the idea that ethics is a matter of personal judgement: although 62% of females rejected this idea, only 55% of males did, a difference that is statistically significant (see Figure 10.4). Interpreting this finding is complicated by the fact that male journalists were more likely to be in management positions or on hard-news beats; however, our findings are in line with previous work identifying gender as significantly affecting UK journalism students' views on ethics (Ball et al. 2006).

Conversely, female journalists were more likely to agree with the statement that 'What is ethical for journalists should be determined by professional standards unless extraordinary circumstances require otherwise': 72% of female journalists supported this idea, compared with 64% of male journalists, a finding that is, again, statistically significant (see Figure 10.4).

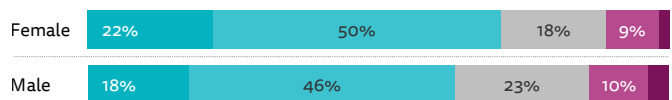
We turn now to UK journalists' views on specific actions that raise ethical questions. Our findings indicate greater stability of perspectives over time but also some new disparities among groups of practitioners.

### FIGURE 10.4: PROPORTION OF UK JOURNALISTS WHO AGREE WITH EACH ETHICAL STATEMENT

Male journalists are more likely to support the idea that ethics is a matter of personal judgement. Female journalists are more likely to agree that ethics should be determined by professional standards.



### What is ethical for journalists should be determined by professional standards unless extraordinary circumstances require otherwise



**gender.** What is your gender? **ethic1\_A/D.** The following statements describe different responses journalists may have to ethical problems. For each of them, please tell me how strongly you agree or disagree. Base: Female = 509, Male = 503.

## 10.3 ETHICALLY QUESTIONABLE ACTIONS

### 10.3.1 JOURNALISTS’ RELATIONSHIP WITH THEIR SOURCES: PAYMENTS AND INDUCEMENTS

One set of ethically questionable practices in the survey related to journalists’ perceptions about ethical issues in their interactions with sources. Here, we found minor change since these questions were asked in 2015.

First was the question of payments, both to and by journalists. While just over half of UK journalists in 2023 believed it is unethical to pay sources for confidential business or government information under any circumstances, 45% felt doing so could be justified on occasion compared with 51% who thought this in 2015. Such payment is permissible under UK professional codes, which allow for the possibility of public interest exceptions to general guidelines that frown on paying sources – but prohibit doing so in some specific circumstances, for instance paying criminals or witnesses in a criminal trial (IPSO 2024).

But what about inducements to journalists themselves? The survey indicates almost all UK journalists (94%) considered accepting payments from sources to be unacceptable. This question was not new to the 2023 survey; 96% felt accepting money was never acceptable in 2015. No journalists in either survey felt the practice was always justified.

Two new questions were asked in this survey about these potentially blurred boundaries. While nine out of ten journalists

(91%) in 2023 said they would not approve of producing promotional stories under any circumstances, ‘freebies’ were a greyer area: 56% said they would not approve of getting a free product or service under any circumstances, but 43% said they could see freebies as justified on occasion. Although we can only speculate about the reasons for these responses, they may relate to the precarity of journalism, tight newsroom budgets, and perhaps the role of influencers on social media, where it is acceptable to promote partnerships with commercial brands (see Figure 10.5).

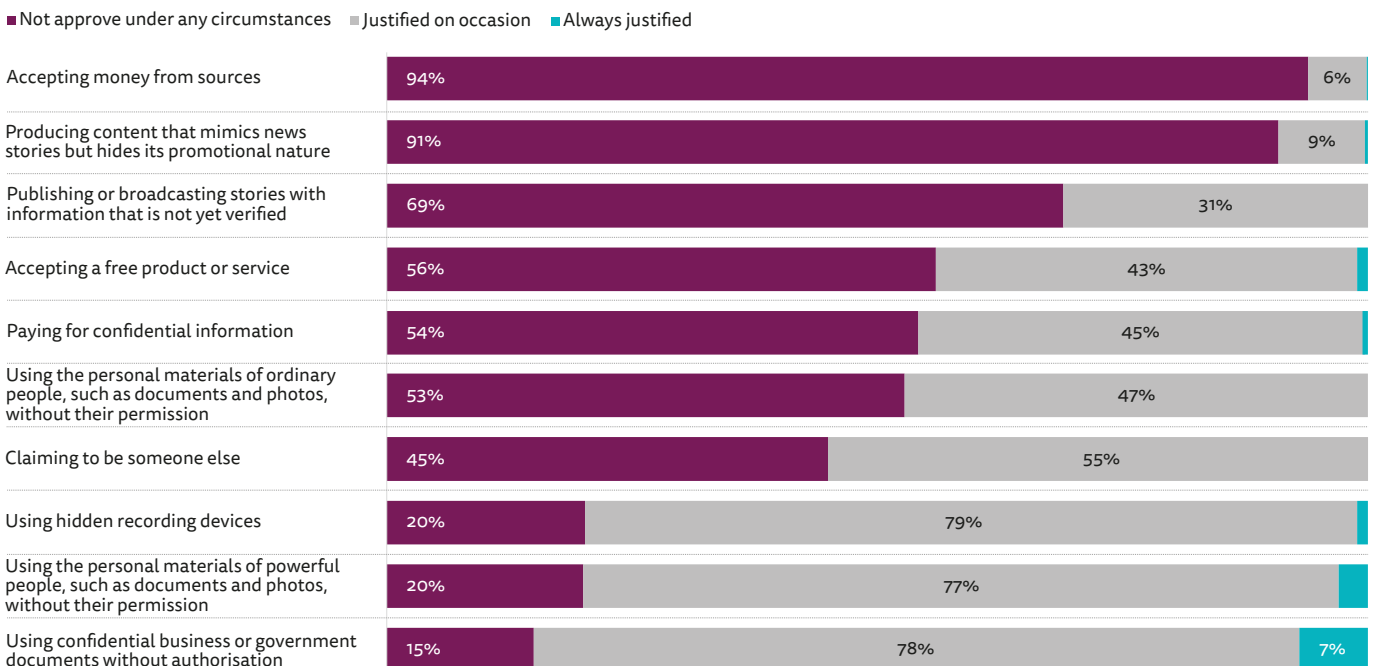
### 10.3.2 PERMISSIONS AND SUBTERFUGE

The collection and use of material for stories is another potentially fraught ethical area. The survey asked three questions about using information without permission, but in a slightly different way from the 2015 survey, which split questions between ‘official’ and ‘personal’ documents without specifying the owners of such material. Most UK journalists in 2023 found using confidential documents without authorisation to be acceptable: 78% believed doing so is justified ‘on occasion’, and around 7% thought that it is ‘always justified’.

In 2015, journalists were asked whether ‘personal materials’ should be used, and only 47% thought use could be justified on occasion. In 2023, the question was modified, and journalists were asked to consider two kinds of personal materials: those owned by ‘powerful’ and ‘ordinary’ people. The numbers remained almost the same as in 2015 when journalists considered powerful people, presumably politicians, celebrities, and those in public life: 77% in 2023 thought using personal materials about these people was justified on occasion, and 3% thought it was always justified. However, the feelings were mixed on the use of such materials

**FIGURE 10.5: PROPORTION OF UK JOURNALISTS WHO SAY THEY DO NOT APPROVE OF EACH UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCES**

Journalists think that some questionable practices are justified on occasion, but the vast majority think it is always unacceptable to accept money from sources and produce promotional stories.



ethics. Which of the following, if any, do you think may be always justified, or justified on occasion, and which would you not approve of under any circumstances? Base: 1130.

about those who have not put themselves into the public eye: around half (53%) thought this was never justifiable, with another 47% saying it was only justified on occasion (see Figure 10.5).

Professional codes, such as the UK Editors Code of Practice, stress individuals have a right to a reasonable expectation of privacy, stating that ‘account will be taken of the complainant’s own public disclosures of information and the extent to which the material complained about is already in the public domain or will become so’ (IPSO 2024). Journalists’ views expressed in the survey may reflect unease or confusion around what can acceptably be put in the public domain via social media (Rumbold and Wilson 2019) but also increasing awareness of the laws of data protection.

UK codes of practice also say that misrepresentation and subterfuge ‘can generally be justified only in the public interest and then only when the material cannot be obtained by other means’ (IPSO 2024). Journalists in the survey, however, had mixed views on this issue. Around 55% believed pretending to be someone else is never justified, while 45% thought it is justified on occasion. There was far stronger support for other forms of misrepresentation, however. More than three quarters of journalists (79%) thought it is justified on occasion to use hidden recording devices, with only 20% thinking it is never justified.

### 10.3.3 VERIFICATION

The survey also asked whether publishing unverified content is justified. Compared with 75% in 2015, 69% of UK journalists in 2023 thought doing so is unacceptable under any circumstances, but the rest thought it is justified on some occasions. This response may reflect the rapidity of the news cycle, the use of user-generated content to satisfy the demands of online news, and the practice of lifting stories from others’ websites. In their work in other European countries, Nygren and Widholm talk about the ‘softer’ attitude to verification in a liquid news environment, where journalists feel audiences may have lower expectations of veracity for news published online and find it acceptable for verification to be done ‘during the process rather than before publication’ (2018, 48).

In relation to specific actions, our findings again suggest a complex relationship between gender and journalistic ethics, perhaps influenced by cultural and organisational factors

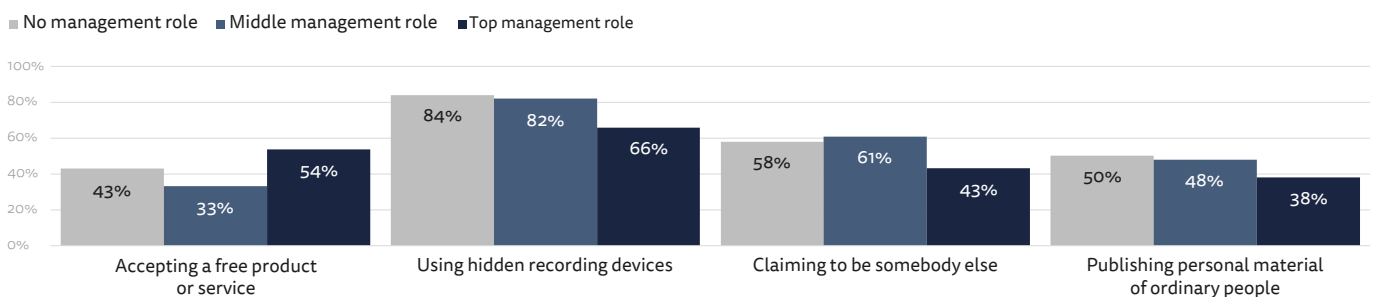
(Hanitzsch and Hanusch 2012), such as the greater prevalence of men in management and on hard-news beats. But in general, the survey supports previous research that found gender to be a significant factor in UK journalism students’ attitudes towards using confidential business, government, or personal documents without authorisation, with female students notably less approving of methods associated with privacy invasion (Ball et al. 2006). The 2023 survey shows female journalists were significantly less likely to approve of the personal materials of either ordinary or powerful people being published. Only 41% of female journalists, compared with 53% of the males, said publishing personal material from ordinary people can be justified on occasion. And although both genders were more open to publishing personal materials about powerful people, 81% of male journalists found it justified on occasion compared with 74% of female journalists, a difference that is statistically significant.

When it comes to publishing confidential business or government documents, 20% of female journalists disapproved, while 9% of the male journalists disapproved. In fact, 10% of male journalists thought publishing such materials is always justified, compared with 3% of female journalists. The survey revealed similar statistically significant gender disparities related to the acceptability of paying for confidential information: 60% of female journalists, but just 48% of males, did not approve under any circumstances. On the other hand, more than half the male journalists believed paying for confidential information is justifiable on occasion, compared with fewer than 40% of female journalists.

Journalists’ ethical decision-making can vary based on organisational constraints and social context (Berkowitz and Limor 2003). In the survey, we found that rank within the organisation mattered in relation to ethical decision-making. For example, journalists in top management positions were more likely to agree that it is appropriate to accept a free product or service: 54% of journalists working in top management found doing so to be justified on occasion, compared with 43% in non-managerial roles and 33% in middle management positions (see Figure 10.6). That said, most of the ethically questionable practices were less likely to be justified by journalists in management positions. Claiming to be somebody else, using hidden recording devices, and publishing confidential documents were all seen as less justifiable by news organisations’ top managers than by other workers.

### FIGURE 10.6: PROPORTION OF JOURNALISTS WITH NO, SOME, OR HIGH LEVELS OF MANAGEMENT RESPONSIBILITY WHO THINK EACH ETHICALLY QUESTIONABLE REPORTING PRACTICE IS ‘ALWAYS JUSTIFIED’ OR ‘JUSTIFIED ON OCCASION’

Most of the ethically questionable practices asked about are less likely to be seen as justifiable by those in top management roles.



**UK\_job\_title\_rec.** What is your current job title or position? **ethic2.** Which of the following, if any, do you think may be always justified, or justified on occasion, and which would you not approve of under any circumstances? Base: No management role = 715, Middle management role = 148, Top management role = 266.

## 10.4 CONCLUSIONS

Our findings about the ethics of UK journalists, a continuing area of industry debate and public criticism, indicate growing ambivalence about industry codes and greater sensitivities to how people who are not in the public eye should be treated. The 2023 survey also revealed starker differences in ethical perspectives between male and female journalists than between freelance practitioners and those on staff.

In the 2015 survey, conducted while the aftershocks of the Leveson Inquiry were still reverberating, journalists were more likely to favour the safe harbour of professional codes of ethics to guide their behaviour. By 2023, more respondents felt that full faith in industry-wide guidelines was misplaced, but there was also uncertainty about how best to steer an ethical course without them. They were more willing to acknowledge a need to consider the circumstances surrounding an ethical decision yet unwilling to fully endorse situational ethics – and less willing still to trust their own personal judgement. The waves of media change since the mid-2010s seem to have left UK journalists without a collective ethical anchor.

Another key finding from the 2023 survey was the disparity between how male and female journalists respond to the ethical choices they face. Those identifying as women were more likely to support professional codes and less likely to rely on personal judgement in making ethical decisions; they also were somewhat less accepting than those identifying as men of such controversial ethical practices as publishing personal materials of ordinary people, publishing confidential business or government information, or paying for information. Although the differences were not large, these findings suggest male and female journalists in the UK may make different ethical choices – a divergence that may be especially important given the greater numbers of men in managerial positions and the greater numbers of women working as freelancers, who hold less power in the newsroom hierarchy.



# 11 SURVEYING A REPRESENTATIVE SAMPLE OF UK JOURNALISTS: METHODOLOGY

NEIL THURMAN

This report is based mainly on an online survey carried out between 27 September and 30 November 2023. The survey was carried out as part of the Worlds of Journalism Study. Three of the editors of this report (Neil Thurman, Imke Henkel, and Sina Thäsler-Kordonouri – hereafter ‘the team’) oversaw the sampling and the data collection, processing, and cleaning. The other editor, chapter authors, and the Reuters Institute were not involved in the sampling, survey design, data collection, data processing, or data cleaning, but carried out secondary analysis of the final anonymised UK Worlds of Journalism Study dataset.

After data cleaning, the survey’s sample had 1,130 responses, a sample that is broadly representative of the total population of UK journalists. Of this total, 1,024 journalists answered every question and a further 106 only answered the questions that were mandatory. In this section, we lay out the methodology in detail, describing the ongoing, collaborative, international, and comparative survey project – the Worlds of Journalism Study – that is the source of this report’s questionnaire and overall approach, and assessing the representativeness of the sample.

## 11.1 THE QUESTIONNAIRE

The questionnaire used in this study was developed as part of the third wave of an international project, the Worlds of Journalism Study, involving researchers and academics worldwide. Between 2021 and 2024 (inclusive), using the same core questions, researchers surveyed journalists in over 70 countries, gathering

data on journalists’ personal characteristics and diversity, employment conditions, and working routines as well as their opinions on ethics and standards; the influences on their work and perceptions of press freedom and editorial autonomy; their role in society; truth, interpretation and objectivity; and their safety and well-being.

The survey we discuss here localised some questions in the Worlds of Journalism Study’s questionnaire to the UK context, for example the questions on religious affiliation, salary, and ethnicity. Furthermore, it added two questions related to journalists’ socio-economic backgrounds. The full UK questionnaire is available on Figshare (Thurman et al. 2024a).

The complete set of data from all the countries involved in the Worlds of Journalism Study was not available in time to be used in this publication, which focuses on the UK data. However, further publications are planned, which will include comparisons between journalists in the UK and their colleagues in around 72 countries.<sup>51</sup>

## 11.2 SAMPLING STRATEGY

In order to build the sample, the team first obtained a list of journalists’ names, email addresses, and professional affiliations from the Roxhill Media database. In the Roxhill database, journalists are associated with particular ‘outlet types’, such as ‘National (newspapers)’. Contact details were downloaded for UK-based journalists working across all of Roxhill’s outlet types, specifically: blogs, business ‘trade’ magazines, consumer magazines, national and regional newspapers, news and picture agencies and newswires, podcasts, national and regional radio stations, national and regional TV stations, and ‘Freelance’ (also a Roxhill outlet type).

<sup>51</sup> Proposals for collaboration should be directed to Neil Thurman: [neil.thurman@ifkw.lmu.de](mailto:neil.thurman@ifkw.lmu.de), Imke Henkel: [I.Henkel@leeds.ac.uk](mailto:I.Henkel@leeds.ac.uk), or Sina Thäsler-Kordonouri: [Sina.Thaesler-Kordonouri@ifkw.lmu.de](mailto:Sina.Thaesler-Kordonouri@ifkw.lmu.de).

To include UK foreign correspondents – journalists working for UK publications from overseas – the team also downloaded from Roxhill the contact details of journalists based outside the UK.<sup>52</sup> To eliminate journalists from this list who did not work for UK-based publications, a list of all UK media outlets was downloaded from Roxhill (n=12,831). Only journalists who worked for at least one of these UK media outlets were retained.

With each of the lists of UK-based journalists and UK foreign correspondents, the team removed contact details that had no contact email address and attempted to remove all contacts that were to generic news desks (e.g. 'News desk', 'Foreign Desk', 'Sports Desk'). Because some journalists were associated with more than one outlet type (e.g. national radio and national television), a deduplication process was also undertaken. This resulted in a list of 35,775 UK-based journalists and a list of 4,463 UK foreign correspondents. These two lists were combined. After some duplicates and further contacts with generic email addresses were removed, a final list of 40,040 was left.

There is no official record of the population of journalists in the UK (or journalists working for UK-based publications outside the UK). However, at the time of writing in February 2025, data were available from the 2021 Census for England, Wales, and Northern Ireland on the numbers of people living in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland who declared they were employed as editors, journalists, and reporters, using these two 2020 Standard Occupational Classifications:

- **SOC 2491:** Newspaper, Periodical and Broadcast Editors
- **SOC 2492:** Newspaper, Periodical and Broadcast Journalists and Reporters

The 2021 Census estimates 30,060 people worked as 'newspaper, periodical and broadcast editors' in England and Wales in March to May 2021 (ONS 2023). Another 24,630 people were estimated to be working as 'newspaper, periodical and broadcast journalists and reporters', a total of 54,690. The 2021 Census also estimated that there were 674 'newspaper and periodical journalists and reporters' and 324 'newspaper, periodical and broadcast editors' in Northern Ireland (NISRA 2023). That makes a total for England, Wales, and Northern Ireland of 55,688.

Because equivalent data from the 2022 Scottish Census were not available at the time of writing, the team had to estimate the number of journalists in Scotland. The UK's Office for National Statistics' Labour Force Survey (ONS 2021) showed that, in February, March, and April 2021 (around the time the 2021 Census was taken) the number of people aged 16 and over in employment for the countries in the UK was as follows:

- **England and Wales:** 28,712,314
- **Northern Ireland:** 823,215
- **Scotland:** 2,638,571

Therefore, approximately 0.19% of the employed population of England and Wales were journalists and approximately 0.12% of the employed population of Northern Ireland. Taking the higher proportion for Scotland (0.19%) gives an estimate that 5,026 journalists were working in Scotland. That brings the estimated total number of journalists in the UK to 60,714 (but excluding

foreign correspondents working for UK publications). This means that the list of journalists (based in the UK) generated by the Roxhill database represents around 59% of the total population of journalists in the UK.

If the list of 4,463 foreign correspondents working for UK publications generated by the Roxhill database also represents around 59% of the total population of journalists, then the total population of foreign correspondents would be 7,565. Adding that to the estimated total number of journalists in the UK (60,714) equals 68,279.

Because the team wanted the sample size to have a confidence level of at least 95% and a maximum error margin of 3%, with an estimated population of 68,279, they aimed for a sample size of at least 1,051. Based on experience of the previous UK leg of the Worlds of Journalism Study survey in 2015 (Thurman et al. 2016), they expected the response rate to the online survey to be relatively low for this hard-to-reach group. As a result, they decided to send email invitations to a random selection of 16,497 journalists from the list of 40,040.

Including reminders, journalists received up to 11 email invitations to participate in the survey between 27 September and 29 November 2023. Participation was by invitation only. The survey was closed on 30 November 2023. The survey was hosted on the Qualtrics online survey platform. In an attempt to increase the response rate, the later email invitations stated that a donation of £1,050 would be made to a journalism charity once the 1,050th survey was completed. As this target was met, the team made this donation to Reporters Without Borders. The project was submitted for ethical review at Birkbeck, University of London, and received approval on 2 June 2023.

## 11.3 EXCLUSIONS

The team conducted extensive research – including via LinkedIn, X/Twitter, the Roxhill Media database, and news outlets featuring the journalists' work – to be sure each respondent met the definition of a journalist. Respondents were excluded if:

- they did not work for a news outlet with an identifiable focus on providing news,
- they did not work for a news outlet that had a UK base and was aimed, at least in part, at a UK audience, and
- they did not earn at least 50% of their income from journalism or work for at least 18.2 hours per week as a journalist (which is 50% of a regular working week in the UK).

Furthermore, respondents were excluded if they did not complete the survey up to and including the question asking them about how strongly they agreed or disagreed with the following statement: 'I am concerned that those who harm journalists in the United Kingdom go unpunished', a question that appeared approximately 42% into the survey.

After these exclusions were made, the final sample was 1,130. If we take the total population of UK journalists to be 68,279 (see above), the survey's sample size can be considered to be robust by the standards of social survey research, with a margin of error of

<sup>52</sup> UK foreign correspondents were not included in the previous UK Worlds of Journalism Study survey in 2015 (Thurman et al. 2016).

between 2.89% and 3.04% at a confidence level of 95%.<sup>53</sup> As such, throughout the report, we do not consider differences of +/- 3pp or lower to be meaningful. Combined percentages for different response options do not always add up to 100% due to rounding. Where we refer to percentages for grouped responses in the text we sum the proportions of rounded individual responses in order to match the figures.

## 11.4 ADDITIONAL VARIABLES

As required by the Worlds of Journalism Study, of which this survey is part, values for four variables were manually assigned to each respondent by the team: the journalists' rank [no operational or strategic authority, operational authority, strategic authority] and the reach [local, regional, national, transnational], ownership [private/commercial media, public service media, state-run media, community media, non-profit media], and location [London, other city, rural] of the main outlet (if any) they worked for. The rank coding was done with reference to the answers each journalist had given to relevant questions in the survey, such as job title/position, as well as, if necessary, additional online research. The coding of the characteristics of the main outlet (if any) they worked for was done via extensive online research.

## 11.5 DATA CLEANING AND ANONYMISATION

Each response to each question was examined and some changes were made. For example, a respondent who classified their ethnicity as 'Any other ethnic group, please write in.' was reclassified to one of the items in the predefined list ('Any other White background') because they had written their ethnicity was 'white European'. After data cleaning, an anonymised version of the data was shared with the Reuters Institute and the other authors of this report.

## 11.6 RESPONSE RATE AND REPRESENTATIVENESS

Although the team sent email invitations to a random selection of 16,497 journalists from the list of 40,040, not all invitations were received. Invitation emails were sometimes rejected as spam, or journalists never received them because they were away on holiday. It was common for between a quarter and a third of the emails sent in each distribution to 'fail' or 'bounce'. If we assume that all journalists whose email inboxes rejected at least one invitation did successfully receive an invitation on another occasion, the response rate (calculated with reference to the journalists kept in the final sample) would be 6.9%. However, this assumption is implausible because spam policies are unlikely to reject one email and allow another, some journalists (e.g. those on parental leave) were out of the office for the whole of the two months of the survey fieldwork, and some email addresses were out of date because journalists had moved employers. Therefore, we believe the actual response rate to be higher than 6.9%, although we cannot say by how much.

Although there is 'no central, all-inclusive list of journalists' in the

UK (NCT) 2012, 12), the team used data – from the 2021 Census of England and Wales – on the population of journalists in England and Wales to help judge the representativeness of the sample of UK-based journalists. However, in interpreting the comparisons made, it is important to bear the following differences in mind: the sample includes journalists living in Scotland and Northern Ireland; the sample excluded journalists who did not earn at least 50% of their income from journalism or work for at least 18.2 hours per week as a journalist; it also excluded journalists who worked for outlets that were deemed not to have an identifiable focus on providing news or did not have a UK base and were aimed, at least in part, at a UK audience. The 2021 Census classified individuals as journalists solely on the basis of their self-identification as such.

Keeping these limitations in mind, as well as the differences in the timing of the respective fieldwork, as shown in Table 11.1, the sample (49% male) is very similar to the journalists recorded in the 2021 England and Wales Census data (who were 48% male) in terms of gender/biological sex at birth. The 2023 sample is, however, a little older (63% are over 39 compared with 53% in the England and Wales Census). This difference could, in part, be due to the minimum requirements set regarding journalists' income and working hours, which may have excluded some younger, part-time journalists included in the 2021 Census data.

Although UK-based respondents in the sample skew a little older than those who identified as journalists in the 2021 Census of England and Wales, we believe that this difference is not an indication of any fundamental flaw in the sampling strategy or of response bias, but rather, as discussed above, the result of differences in the respective inclusion criteria used.

**TABLE 11.1: COMPARISON OF THE AGE AND GENDER DISTRIBUTIONS OF UK-BASED JOURNALISTS SAMPLED IN THE SURVEY AND IN THE 2021 CENSUS OF ENGLAND AND WALES**

Variable	Our survey (27 September to 30 November 2023)	2021 England and Wales Census data on journalists and editors (March to May 2021)
Age: Under 25	3%	6%
Age: 25–29	11%	14%
Age: 30–39	23%	27%
Age: 40–49	24%	23%
Age: 50 and over	39%	30%
Gender/biological sex at birth (male)	49%	48%

*Note: The survey includes journalists working in Scotland and Northern Ireland, but the 2021 Census data used do not. To generate this comparative table, respondents in the survey who classified themselves as UK foreign correspondents were removed, because foreign correspondents living outside the UK may have not been counted in the 2021 Census. The Census data presented here correspond to biological sex at birth whereas this survey asked respondents about their gender.*

<sup>53</sup> A margin of error range is given because some questions were answered by 1,024 journalists rather than by the full sample of 1,130.

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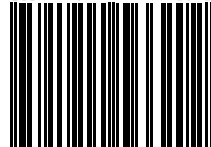


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