



## Country Report

# Journalists in Belgium

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## Backgrounds of Journalists

The Belgian media landscape is divided in two distinct markets, the Flemish and the Walloon one, but the two populations share many common points. The typical journalist in Belgium is male, is 38.16 years old on average ( $s=10.83$ ) and holds a university/college degree (96.3%), in general from journalism and/or communication: 50.4 percent had specialized in journalism, 9.2 had studied in another communication field and 6.8 percent had specialized in both journalism and another communication field). Another 0.9 percent of the journalists had obtained a doctoral degree. Latest Labor Force Surveys in Belgium show that Belgian journalists are not the only ones to be progressively more educated. The raising of the level of education among the Belgian population is a global trend.

One third of the sample practices the profession without any specialization, reflecting the fact that there is no legally required training in Belgium. Of the 592 interviewed journalists, 216 were women, making for a proportion of 36.5 percent of the overall sample. Despite the slow feminisation of the professional group, women are thus still underrepresented, although they tend to be more numerous among the younger journalists (less than 35 years old).

## Journalists in the Newsroom

The majority of journalists interviewed in Belgium held a full-time position (74.5%), whereas 6.6 percent of the respondents indicated that they had part-time employments, and 18.1 percent worked as freelance journalist. Of those with full or part-time employment, 89.7 percent said they held permanent positions.

On average, the respondents have worked as journalists for 12.64 years ( $s=9.89$ ), which shows the relative shortness of the careers and the quite high staff rotation among the newsrooms. About a quarter of them had 20 years of professional experience (or more). Less than a half of them worked at a specific desk (48.6%), such as politics, local news, or sports. 51.4 percent of the respondents indicated that they worked on various topics and subjects. On the whole, Belgian journalists worked for less than two newsrooms (1.52 for the whole sample; 1.32 in Flanders and 1.75 in Walloon;  $s=1.36$ ). 24.7 percent of the sample had additional jobs outside the area of journalism. This information has to be considered with the low level of part-time jobs and might mean that a significant minority of journalists looks for other sources of income. This is particularly true for the freelancers. Nearly two third (66.23%) of the interviewed journalists were members of a professional association (62.3%). Most of them belong to the same professional union, which is divided in two wings, the Flemish and the French-speaking ones.

Across the whole sample, 23.5 percent of the interviewees were true multimedia journalists, as they indicated that they worked for various media types simultaneously. The majority of Belgian journalists in the sample worked for print media: 32.3 percent contributed to daily newspapers (there are still 15 newspapers

in Belgium), 6.5 percent to weekly newspapers, and 13.4 percent to magazines. Another 24.0 percent of the journalists worked for private or public service television, and 13.1 for private or public radio. Only 1.4 percent of the journalists reported they worked for news agencies (Belgium has only one national news agency). Despite the increasing number of web journalists these last years, they are still a little minority: 6.5 percent of the respondents work for online newsrooms of traditional media, and 2.9 for stand-alone online news sites.

## Journalistic Roles

The four most important tasks according to the Belgian journalists are observing reality as it is, being a detached observer, providing analysis of current affairs and telling stories about the world. The Belgian journalists also give a certain value to their educational role. There is a large consensus about the unimportance of conveying a positive image of political leadership, supporting government policy or being an adversary of its. The survey shows some minor difference between the two linguistic groups. For instance, Flemish journalists seem to give a little bit more importance to the role of detached observer and the willingness to report things as they are. More than their Flemish counterparts, Walloon journalists want to provide information people need to make political decisions (3.59 W vs 3.30 F). They are also more interested in motivating people to participate in political activity (3.01 W vs 2.09 F), and letting them express their views (3.73 W vs 3.33 F). We see the same kind of difference for what concerns the education of the audience and the promotion of tolerance and cultural diversity.

*Table 1: Roles of journalists*

	N	Percentage saying "extremely" and "very important"	Mean	Standard Deviation
Report things as they are	590	94.2	4.59	.63
Be a detached observer	586	85.3	4.34	.85
Provide analysis of current affairs	582	70.4	3.85	.96
Tell stories about the world	566	69.3	3.86	1.10
Educate the audience	564	59.0	3.71	1.20
Provide information people need to make political decisions	573	58.5	3.43	1.30
Promote tolerance and cultural diversity	568	57.0	3.59	1.17
Monitor and scrutinize political leaders	565	55.0	3.38	1.28
Let people express their views	584	53.1	3.52	1.10
Monitor and scrutinize business	571	46.2	3.25	1.25
Provide advice, orientation and direction for daily life	580	32.6	2.96	1.11
Provide the kind of news that attracts the largest audience	585	32.0	2.90	1.22
Provide entertainment and relaxation	585	29.2	2.78	1.19
Set the political agenda	561	26.7	2.76	1.17
Advocate for social change	569	21.6	2.59	1.15
Motivate people to participate in political activity	569	22.5	2.52	1.24
Support national development	544	16.9	2.38	1.14
Influence public opinion	569	15.5	2.48	1.06
Be an adversary of the government	556	2.2	1.45	.74
Support government policy	559	1.1	1.49	.74
Convey a positive image of political leadership	562	1.1	1.50	.75

Question: Please tell me how important each of these things is in your work. 5 means you find them extremely important, 4 means very important, 3 means somewhat important, 2 means little importance, and 1 means unimportant.

## Professional Ethics

Belgian journalists demonstrate a strong commitment to professional standards of ethics. The respondents almost unanimously agree that journalists should always adhere to the codes of professional ethics, regardless of situation and context (see Table 2). Only half of the journalists agree with the view their ethical decisions are a matter of personal judgment. The role of context seems to be less important than common rules. Those results are consistent with the fourth statement, which stresses the fact that personal judgment can't lead journalists' ethical orientations.

Only five “controversial” reporting methods are justified according to (at least) half of the Belgian journalists: Getting employed in a firm or organization to gain inside information; using hidden microphones or cameras; using confidential business or government documents without authorization; claiming to be somebody else; using re-creations or dramatizations of news by actors. Others methods are judged unfair and not justified. For example, most of the Belgian journalists refuse to pay someone for confidential information; they won't accept money from sources, or alter photographs and quotes from sources. Given the importance of reporting things as they are (see above), it is not surprising that publishing stories with unverified content is another method with which Belgian journalists strongly disagree.

*Table 2: Ethical orientations of journalists*

	N	Percentage saying “strongly” and “somewhat agree”	Mean	Standard Deviation
Journalists should always adhere to codes of professional ethics, regardless of situation and context	589	91.2	4.39	.70
What is ethical in journalism depends on the specific situation	583	53.0	3.29	1.26
It is acceptable to set aside moral standards if extraordinary circumstances require it	575	30.3	2.73	1.25
What is ethical in journalism is a matter of personal judgment	584	16.8	2.32	1.12

Question: The following statements describe different approaches to journalism. For each of them, please tell me how strongly you agree or disagree. 5 means you strongly agree, 4 means somewhat agree, 3 means undecided, 2 means somewhat disagree, and 1 means strongly disagree.

*Table 3: Justification of controversial reporting methods by journalists*

	N	Percentage saying “always justified”	Percentage saying “justified on occasion”
Using confidential business or government documents without authorization	586	18.3	61.1
Getting employed in a firm or organization to gain inside information	582	14.9	63.7
Using hidden microphones or cameras	586	12.8	70.6
Using re-creations or dramatizations of news by actors	562	8.7	42.5
Claiming to be somebody else	589	5.9	50.1
Exerting pressure on unwilling informants to get a story	575	4.3	36.5
Paying people for confidential information	580	3.3	29.7
Making use of personal documents such as letters and pictures without permission	583	2.9	33.1
Altering or fabricating quotes from sources	566	2.7	8.8
Publishing stories with unverified content	587	2	9.2
Accepting money from sources	586	1.7	1.5
Altering photographs	561	1.2	21.6

Question: Given an important story, which of the following, if any, do you think may be justified on occasion and which would you not approve of under any circumstances?

## Professional Autonomy and Influences

Journalists in Belgium report a significant degree of professional autonomy in their daily practice. Two thirds of the respondents (67.0%) say that they have complete or a great deal of freedom in their selection of stories. It seems that the respondents have even more freedom in deciding over what aspects to emphasize in a news story (75.6%). Two thirds of the journalists report that they participate in editorial coordination activities (such as meetings and news management) “always” or “very often” (66.7%). Freelance journalists, who generally don’t work in the newsrooms, do not often participate to this kind of activities.

Once again, key findings about professional autonomy and influences firstly refer to ethics standards. It is no surprise that information access and time limits are the two others most important sources of influences. Table 4 also allows to assess the importance of internal constraints such as editorial supervisors, higher editors and managers of the news organizations. Editorial supervisors have a stronger influence than owners and managers of the media outlets, but both of them are considered very influential by less than the half of the sample. Belgian journalists claim a remarkable editorial freedom in respect of public/official actors like military forces, police and state security, government officials, pressure groups and business people. Following the slow secularization of the Belgian society during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, religious considerations do not play any role in the journalistic professional group.

Table 4: Perceived influences

	N	Percentage saying “extremely” and “very influential”	Mean	Standard Deviation
Journalism ethics	587	75.8	4.03	.97
Information access	580	59.3	3.64	.96
Time limits	580	56.2	3.56	1.02
Editorial policy	580	51.7	3.45	1.02
Editorial supervisors and higher editors	568	46.0	3.24	1.05
Availability of news-gathering resources	578	45.7	3.32	1.00
Media laws and regulation	578	42.7	3.16	1.19
Your personal values and beliefs	584	40.1	3.19	1.06
Your peers on the staff	583	30.2	2.94	.97
Relationships with news sources	587	29.3	2.87	1.12
Audience research and data	565	22.7	2.65	1.11
Managers of the news organization	557	17.4	2.33	1.14
Feedback from the audience	588	15.6	2.54	.95
Competing news organizations	588	13.8	2.50	.98
Owners of the news organization	546	11.4	1.91	1.13
Colleagues in other media	589	10.9	2.35	.98
Public relations	580	10.7	2.07	1.04
Profit expectations	541	10.4	1.82	1.13
Friends, acquaintances and family	591	10.3	2.15	.99
Business people	585	7.9	1.70	1.02
Politicians	580	7.1	1.72	.97
Censorship	570	6.8	1.66	1.00
Advertising considerations	553	6.7	1.73	1.00
Pressure groups	581	6.7	1.82	.99
Military, police and state security	559	4.5	1.57	.89
Government officials	579	2.1	1.47	.76
Religious considerations	531	1.9	1.32	.67

Question: Here is a list of potential sources of influence. Please tell me how much influence each of the following has on your work. 5 means it is extremely influential, 4 means very influential, 3 means somewhat influential, 2 means little influential, and 1 means not influential.



## Journalism in Transition

The most significant changes in the Belgian journalistic landscape are about technologies and new tools. The use of search engines is on the head of the list below. The need for technical skills follows and has increased according to more than 80 percent of the journalists. Regarding the changes in influences on journalism, the use of social media (Twitter and Facebook) has become much more important, as well as user-generated contents. Many journalists (78.8%) feel more competition between media outlets, which can be partly explained by the small size of the Belgian market and the competition of foreign actors (for instance, many French-speaking Belgians regularly watch French TV news or read French magazines).

Another major change concerns the average working hours of journalists. A large majority of the sample assumes that their job takes more time than before, confirming most of the recent studies over journalists' labor conditions. Some trends underline a growing concern among professionals: the lack of time for searching new stories and the credibility of journalism, which has decreased according 58 percent of the sample.

The questions about changes in journalism were only presented to journalists who had five years or more of professional experience.

Table 5: Changes in journalism

	N	Percentage saying has "increased"	Percentage saying has "decreased"
The use of search engines	408	90.2	1.2
Technical skills	405	83.0	4.2
Average working hours of journalists	407	70.8	5.9
Interactions of journalists with their audiences	403	59.6	7.2
Having a degree in journalism or a related field	395	32.4	17.2
The relevance of journalism for society	404	31.4	23.5
Having a university degree	396	29.8	20.2
Journalists' freedom to make editorial decisions	404	12.6	32.9
The credibility of journalism	402	11.4	58.0
Time available for researching stories	407	8.6	78.6

Question: Please tell me whether you think there has been an increase or a decrease in the importance of following aspects of work in Belgium. 5 means they have increased a lot, 4 means they have somewhat increased, 3 means there has been no change, 2 means they have somewhat decreased, and 1 means they have decreased a lot.

Table 6: Changes in influences on journalism

	N	Percentage saying has "strengthened"	Percentage saying has "weakened"
Social media, such as Twitter and Facebook	398	93.5	1.5
User-generated contents, such as blogs	403	78.9	5.5
Competition	406	78.8	3.9
Audience research	398	60.8	5.8
Audience involvement in news production	397	60.2	6.0
Profit making pressures	399	59.4	8.3
Audience feedback	385	55.3	6.5
Pressure toward sensational news	401	53.9	8.0
Journalism Education	368	48.4	15.2
Advertising considerations	396	50.3	10.6
Public relations	398	35.2	13.3
Western ways of practicing journalism	105	32.4	7.6
Ethical standards	401	26.9	25.7

Question: Please tell me to what extent these influences have become stronger or weaker during the past five years in Belgium. 5 means they have strengthened a lot, 4 means they have somewhat strengthened, 3 means they did not change, 2 means they have somewhat weakened, and 1 means they have weakened a lot.

## Journalistic Trust

No institution is trusted by half of the Belgian journalists. This general mistrust is certainly one of the most remarkable results of the survey. The most “trusted” institutions are the judicial system and the parliament (40%). We must point out that Belgian journalists deal with different parliaments (the federal one and those of the federated entities) and they had to give one response for all of them. We need to keep in mind that some journalists probably do not trust all the parliaments and governments in the same way. Some differences may arise between Flemish and Walloons journalists: Political parties, politicians, the police and religious leaders are more trusted by Flemish journalists than by their Walloons counterparts.

Disagreement was most pronounced for religious leaders, politicians in general and political parties.

Table 7: Journalistic trust in institutions

	N	Percentage saying “complete” and “a great deal of trust”	Mean	Standard Deviation
The judiciary/the courts	523	40.7	3.27	.80
The parliaments (federal and regional)	527	40.6	3.34	.69
The news media	529	39.9	3.30	.73
The government (federal and regional)	524	35.7	3.25	.71
The police	525	34.3	3.16	.76
The military	507	27.4	2.95	.89
Trade unions	526	18.6	2.83	.80
Politicians in general	526	10.6	2.74	.71
Political parties	525	10.3	2.68	.74
Religious leaders	514	7.4	2.14	.94

Question: Please tell me on a scale of 5 to 1 how much you personally trust each of the following institutions. 5 means you have complete trust, 4 means you have a great deal of trust, 3 means you have some trust, 2 means you have little trust, and 1 means you have no trust at all.

## Methodological Information

<i>Size of the population:</i>	5082 working journalists (estimated)
<i>Sampling method:</i>	Flanders: purposive quota sampling and convenience sampling for newsrooms and simple random, convenience sampling for journalists within newsrooms Wallonia: stratified proportionally random sampling for newsrooms and convenience sampling for journalists within newsrooms
<i>Sample size:</i>	592 working journalists
<i>Interview methods:</i>	Flanders: telephone, mail/e-mail and online Wallonia: face-to-face and telephone
<i>Response rate:</i>	Flanders: Not possible to calculate due to snowball sampling Wallonia: 37%
<i>Period of field research:</i>	Flanders: 01/2013-05/2013 and 01/2014-07/2014 Wallonia: 11/2012-06/2013