

Country Report

Journalists in Sierra Leone

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Backgrounds of Journalists

Male journalists in Sierra Leone constitute a majority. Of the 220 journalists interviewed for this research, only 29.1 percent are females. The average age of Sierra Leonean journalists is 30 with a mean age of 31.59 years ($s=7.59$). Education is still a challenge in the country; 40.4 percent of journalists have some form of university education, 73.1 percent have either a Diploma or Bachelor's degree, thereby specializing in both Journalism and Communication and only 26.9 percent of the respondents are educated in other fields. Only 37.0 percent of our interviewees have a Bachelor's degree. Just 3.4 percent held graduate or master's degree and apparently there was no practicing journalist interviewed with a doctoral degree. The second highest number of respondents only had secondary/high school education (32.7%) and 26.4 percent have some university studies but no degree.

Journalists in the Newsroom

The Sierra Leonean journalists interviewed mainly have full time employment. Out of the 224 journalists who responded to the question, 65.2 percent held full time employment, 20.5 percent worked part time and 10.3 percent as freelancers. A large number of respondents reported that they have a permanent position, that is 195 journalists (76.9%). Most journalists in training and community radio journalists in Sierra Leone are volunteers earning a stipend for their work, so this group was also considered in the data.

The mean score for Sierra Leonean journalists is 5.79 years of working experience ($s=3.53$). There are not so many with many years of experience in the field, as only one of the respondents had over 20 years of journalistic experience. The median of the working experience is five. Most of the Journalists in Sierra Leone are generalists (71.0%), meaning they work on various topics and subjects without purely specializing in any. It is only the remaining 29.0 percent of the journalists who work on specific beats like politics, health, local news etc. They worked for a mean of 1.18 newsrooms ($s=4.69$). Only 22.1 percent of respondents in Sierra Leone admitted to having additional jobs outside the area of journalism. Union membership for journalists in Sierra Leone is important, as 79.2 percent of the respondents are part of one of the professional journalists' associations.

Many of the journalists interviewed in Sierra Leone worked for radio (57.8%). Our print journalists interviewed worked for daily newspapers (25.3%) and weekly newspapers (6.7%). Only 8.9 percent of our respondents work for news agencies and just 2.7 percent of journalists work for television. There are not so many magazines in Sierra Leone, which is showed in the number of magazine journalists in our data (1.7%). Online Journalism is still at its infant stages in Sierra Leone with only 0.4 percent of the respondents working either for stand-alone online news or online media of an offline news outlet.

Journalistic Roles

In their professional role orientations, Sierra Leonean journalists found it most important to educate the audience, let people express their views, report things as they are, support national development and advocate for social change (see Table 1). The respondents believe it is not their job to convey a positive image of political leadership, support government policy, and neither do they want to be an adversary of the government as shown in Table 1.

Even though the journalists do not believe so much that they should be responsible to set the political agenda, they supported the role of providing the information people need to make political decisions. For many of the journalists in Sierra Leone it is important to promote tolerance and cultural diversity, provide orientation for daily life, tell stories of the world, provide the kind of news that attracts the largest audience and monitor and scrutinize political leaders.

Table 1: Roles of journalists

	N	Percentage saying "extremely" and "very important"	Mean	Standard Deviation
Educate the audience	217	95.9	4.61	.63
Let people express their views	216	95.4	4.58	.65
Report things as they are	216	94.9	4.59	.67
Provide analysis of current affairs	214	91.6	4.43	.76
Support national development	219	91.3	4.56	.77
Advocate for social change	217	90.3	4.52	.76
Promote tolerance and cultural diversity	216	88.4	4.39	.78
Monitor and scrutinize political leaders	218	79.8	4.17	1.05
Provide information people need to make political decisions	213	79.8	4.14	1.04
Tell stories about the world	216	76.9	4.12	.91
Provide advice, orientation and direction for daily life	217	76.0	4.07	.88
Provide the kind of news that attracts the largest audience	214	72.4	4.01	1.29
Be a detached observer	200	68.5	3.89	1.15
Influence public opinion	204	68.1	3.87	1.13
Motivate people to participate in political activity	213	59.6	3.59	1.28
Provide entertainment and relaxation	210	59.0	3.60	1.22
Monitor and scrutinize business	211	55.5	3.50	1.13
Set the political agenda	209	55.5	3.49	1.22
Support government policy	210	46.2	3.25	1.22
Convey a positive image of political leadership	209	35.4	2.77	1.38
Be an adversary of the government	197	32.5	2.64	1.35

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

Sierra Leonean journalists responded positively and express their acceptance for professional ethical standards of journalism. Except for a few, almost all (97.3%) agreed that journalists should always adhere to codes of professional ethics regardless of situation and context (see Table 2).

Most respondents believed that getting employed in a firm or organization to gain inside information is always justified (see Table 3). The second highest justification variable is using hidden microphones and cameras to get information, which another good number of them said is also justified on some occasions. Accepting money from sources and publishing stories with unverified content were the most unacceptable controversial reporting methods respondents did not justify whether it was always or on some occasions.

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	220	97.3	4.80	.53
It is acceptable to set aside moral standards if extraordinary circumstances require it	216	65.3	3.72	1.31
What is ethical in journalism depends on the specific situation	215	62.8	3.53	1.41
What is ethical in journalism is a matter of personal judgment	215	42.8	2.99	1.52

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"
Getting employed in a firm or organization to gain inside information	210	26.2	54.3
Using hidden microphones or cameras	213	21.6	58.2
Using re-creations or dramatizations of news by actors	202	20.3	43.1
Claiming to be somebody else	196	15.3	39.8
Paying people for confidential information	205	12.2	40.0
Exerting pressure on unwilling informants to get a story	207	10.1	30.9
Using confidential business or government documents without authorization	204	8.8	35.8
Altering photographs	195	8.2	19.5
Making use of personal documents such as letters and pictures without permission	212	7.5	30.7
Altering or fabricating quotes from sources	201	6.5	9.5
Accepting money from sources	199	3.5	12.6
Publishing stories with unverified content	208	3.4	11.5

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

In Sierra Leone, the journalists' responses showed that they have a high degree of autonomy. Out of 219 respondents 76 reported they have some freedom in choosing their stories, that is 34.7 percent. 71 reported they have complete freedom (32.6%) and 43 journalists said they had a great deal of freedom in their selection

of stories (19.6%). On the freedom of deciding what aspects of a story should be emphasized, 53.8 percent of the 221 journalists interviewed say they either have complete freedom in such decisions or they have a great level of freedom. More than half of the journalists interviewed however reported that they attended or participated in editorial meetings. Some 76.9 percent reported they “always” or “very often” take part in editorial coordination activities in their newsrooms.

Among the influences on news production on Sierra Leonean journalists, journalism ethics scored the highest of all the variables (see Table 4). They reported the lack of information access also had a high influence on their work, together with time limits and availability of news gathering sources. Internally journalists felt they were highly influenced by the managers of the news organizations and their editorial supervisors and higher editors.

Sierra Leonean journalists’ main external influences were media laws and regulations and feedback from the audience. Other external factors that fairly influenced their news making decisions were audience research and data, Public relations and colleagues in other media. They felt little influenced by politicians, business people, pressure groups, government officials, religious considerations and only had little influence from friends, family and acquaintances. Economic factors like profit expectations and advertising considerations were not seen as having a strong influence on the work of Sierra Leonean journalists.

Table 4: Perceived influences

	N	Percentage saying “extremely” and “very influential”	Mean	Standard Deviation
Journalism ethics	216	86.6	4.44	.93
Media laws and regulation	214	84.1	4.22	.95
Editorial policy	216	82.4	4.29	1.00
Information access	213	82.2	4.23	.89
Availability of news-gathering resources	215	79.1	4.14	.97
Time limits	210	76.2	4.10	.94
Editorial supervisors and higher editors	215	74.0	4.02	1.10
Owners of the news organization	208	69.7	3.85	1.21
Managers of the news organization	207	68.6	3.85	1.08
Feedback from the audience	215	62.8	3.76	1.13
Audience research and data	197	60.4	3.73	1.12
Your personal values and beliefs	190	55.3	3.48	1.35
Censorship	193	53.9	3.34	1.33
Public relations	210	51.0	3.30	1.27
Competing news organizations	211	49.8	3.34	1.24
Advertising considerations	191	49.7	3.40	1.15
Relationships with news sources	211	48.8	3.32	1.31
Colleagues in other media	215	45.1	3.20	1.28
Your peers on the staff	194	44.8	3.14	1.20
Profit expectations	180	37.2	2.99	1.27
Religious considerations	181	35.9	2.90	1.44
Pressure groups	211	34.6	2.89	1.25
Government officials	210	31.9	2.74	1.35
Business people	213	31.0	2.75	1.26
Military, police and state security	208	29.8	2.64	1.42
Politicians	214	22.9	2.52	1.30
Friends, acquaintances and family	205	17.1	2.23	1.26

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 change in journalism worldwide also affects Sierra Leonean journalists. In the past five years the relevance of journalism for society and the interactions of journalists with audience have greatly changed (see Table 5). The need for having a university degree and a degree in journalism or a related field also increased over these years, together with the need to acquire technical skills. Most journalists felt the credibility of journalism has increased and so have their average working hours. The use of search engines, which were not available before, the journalists reported has increased too, showing the spread of technology and its use in journalism worldwide.

Journalism education has also become relevant with an increasing influence of social media (like Facebook and WhatsApp) in the last five years (see Table 6). Many Sierra Leonean journalists believed ethical standards and audience feedback have been strengthened a lot in the last five years. The journalists reported that profit making pressures had been weakened during these past years.

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 relevance of journalism for society	134	91.0	5.2
Having a degree in journalism or a related field	134	88.1	4.5
Interactions of journalists with their audiences	134	87.3	3.0
Technical skills	134	86.6	3.7
Having a university degree	131	82.4	6.9
The use of search engines	126	77.8	8.7
The credibility of journalism	132	77.3	13.6
Average working hours of journalists	132	69.7	6.8
Journalists' freedom to make editorial decisions	133	69.2	14.3
Time available for researching stories	131	61.1	18.3

Question: Please tell me whether you think there has been an increase or a decrease in the importance of following aspects of work in Sierra Leone. 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"
Journalism education	133	92.5	4.5
Competition	130	92.3	3.1
Social media, such as Facebook and Whatsapp	134	90.3	6.0
Audience feedback	131	86.3	2.3
Audience involvement in news production	127	83.5	8.7
Ethical standards	134	82.1	9.7
Pressure toward sensational news	125	76.8	6.4
User-generated contents, such as blogs	123	75.6	15.4
Public relations	130	75.4	14.6
Advertising considerations	128	74.2	7.8
Audience research	125	69.6	10.4
Western ways of practicing journalism	133	67.7	9.0
Profit making pressures	122	63.1	18.0

Question: Please tell me to what extent these influences have become stronger or weaker during the past five years in Sierra Leone. 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

The highest trust in public institutions by Sierra Leonean journalists for our respondents was the news media. The journalists reported to trust religious leaders, the military and trade unions more than all other institutions. They trust major political institutions like government, parliament and the judiciary less whilst the police, political parties and politicians in general seem not to be trusted by our respondents owing to the low percentage they scored on the question of trust.

Table 7: Journalistic trust in institutions

	N	Percentage saying "complete" and "a great deal of trust"	Mean	Standard Deviation
The news media	216	73.6	4.00	.90
Religious leaders	215	70.7	3.91	.98
The military	215	54.0	3.53	1.07
Trade unions	214	35.0	3.09	1.14
The government	214	18.2	2.69	.98
The parliament	217	17.1	2.71	1.01
The judiciary/the courts	213	13.1	2.35	1.13
The police	215	11.2	2.25	1.03
Political parties	210	8.6	2.20	1.01
Politicians in general	210	7.6	2.01	1.01

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>	350 working journalists (estimated)
<i>Sampling method:</i>	members of Sierra Leone Association of Journalists (SLAJ), Sierra Leone Reporters Union (SLRU) & Women in the Media Sierra Leone (WIMSAL) for newsrooms and convenience sample for journalists within newsrooms
<i>Sample size:</i>	225 working journalists
<i>Interview methods:</i>	face-to-face and online
<i>Response rate:</i>	75%
<i>Period of field research:</i>	04/2014-06/2015 and 10/2015-11/2015