



Country Report

Journalists in the United States

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Backgrounds of Journalists

The typical American journalist is a white, college-educated, 47-year-old man who specialized in journalism or communication in his university degree program. Of the 414 journalists surveyed here, just over one-quarter were women (27.1%), even though women typically constitute a majority of the majors in university journalism programs in the U.S. The vast majority (90.7%) of the respondents identified their ethnicity as white. The average age of journalists was 46.91 ($s=11.92$), and the median age was slightly higher (49 years). Education across the sample was relatively high: 72.6 percent held a college degree, 20.8 percent had completed a Master's degree or its equivalent, and 0.2 percent reported having earned a doctoral degree. Another 4.8 percent had undertaken but not completed a college degree and 1.5 percent reported high school as their highest educational attainment. American journalists who hold a college or university degree typically specialized in journalism (59.2%), communication (15.0%), or both (5.9%) while in college. Roughly one-fifth (19.9%) of the respondents did not specialize in journalism or communication, and 43.4 percent reported having specialized in a field related to what they cover as journalists.

Journalists in the Newsroom

The vast majority (98.8%) of American survey respondents held full-time jobs in journalism, a result that may be a function of the sampling strategy for the survey and not necessarily the structure of professional journalism in the U.S. only. Less than 1.0 percent of respondents were freelancers (.7%) or employed part-time (.2%); the rest described their employment as "other." The majority (85.7%) indicated that they did not have other paid jobs outside of journalism; the remaining 14.3 percent reported having other paid employment.

The American journalists interviewed averaged 22.74 years of experience ($s=12.03$), with half reporting that they had spent more than 24 years in the profession and half fewer than 24 years. On average, American journalists worked for 1.01 newsrooms ($s=.11$). Most journalists (79.3%) were generalists, working on various topics and subjects; about one-fifth (20.7%) reported working on a specific beat, such as politics or sports. Just over half (52.2%) of those surveyed were members of a professional journalism association.

The majority of American journalists in the survey worked for daily newspapers (58.5%), a category that included both print and online versions of those newspapers. Just 1.7 percent reported working at a stand-alone online news outlet. Television was the second most common media type, with 29.0 percent of respondents working in commercial or public television. (Many television stations in the United States also have online outlets. As with the newspapers, these were not categorized separately.) Another 6.0 percent of journalists surveyed indicated they worked in commercial or public radio. The remaining journalists reporting working at a news agency (4.1%) or magazine (0.7%).

Journalistic Roles

When it came to professional roles, the U.S. journalists most embraced the roles of reporting things as they are, educating the audience, and providing information people need to make political decisions (see Table 1). Nearly the entire sample, with little deviation, deemed the role of reporting things as they are as extremely or very important. Other traditional roles also found traction: monitoring and scrutinizing political leaders and businesses, letting persons express their views, and being a detached observer.

Meanwhile, roles that were explicitly supportive of the status quo – supporting government policy and conveying a positive image of political leadership – found little support among the U.S. journalists sampled. However, journalists also rated as low roles that expressed explicitly crusading forms of journalism, namely setting the political agenda and influencing public opinion. Taken together, the picture of journalistic roles in the U.S. is one in which the classic monitorial roles hold great importance. Roles that suggest an active pursuit of partisan ends fair poorly.

Overall, the roles that express political service elicit the strongest responses – positive when largely nonpartisan in outlook and negative when perceived as partisan – while other, civic-oriented roles – such as promoting tolerance and cultural diversity and providing entertainment and relaxation – evoke tepid responses.

Table 1: Roles of journalists

	N	Percentage saying “extremely” and “very important”	Mean	Standard Deviation
Report things as they are	412	98.3	4.82	.48
Educate the audience	413	92.7	4.55	.70
Provide information people need to make political decisions	412	88.8	4.41	.85
Monitor and scrutinize political leaders	409	86.1	4.33	.94
Let people express their views	411	76.6	4.21	1.03
Be a detached observer	413	75.5	4.09	.94
Monitor and scrutinize business	410	69.3	3.89	.97
Provide analysis of current affairs	411	63.7	3.79	1.00
Provide the kind of news that attracts the largest audience	410	53.2	3.52	1.13
Promote tolerance and cultural diversity	408	51.0	3.43	1.21
Motivate people to participate in political activity	411	46.0	3.29	1.23
Advocate for social change	412	29.6	2.72	1.32
Provide entertainment and relaxation	411	29.0	2.87	1.09
Provide advice, orientation and direction for daily life	411	26.0	2.84	1.10
Influence public opinion	406	19.0	2.40	1.22
Be an adversary of the government	407	18.2	2.30	1.28
Support national development	372	13.7	2.33	1.19
Set the political agenda	407	11.3	2.09	1.11
Convey a positive image of political leadership	409	3.9	1.51	.92
Support government policy	411	3.6	1.49	.88

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

Codes of professional ethics, and not personal judgment, are key to ethical journalism practice, according to the American journalists surveyed. The idea that journalists should always follow ethics codes received almost unanimous agreement among respondents, while the notion that ethics is a matter of personal judgment received support from only one in ten journalists (see Table 2). Similarly, a

situational approach to ethics was rejected by nearly two-thirds of the respondents, and an even larger majority said that even extraordinary circumstances were not enough to warrant setting moral standards aside.

Journalists' responses regarding the use of specific, sometimes controversial, reporting practices seem to reflect this reliance on professional codes, which in the U.S. offer few blanket prohibitions. Three practices – the unauthorized use of confidential government or business documents, using hidden cameras or microphones, and exerting pressure on unwilling informants to get information – were considered always or occasionally justified by a majority of the respondents (see Table 3). In all three cases, the proportion of respondents who considered these practices “always justified” was much smaller than those who agreed they were “justified on occasion.” At the other end of the spectrum, respondents offered virtually no support for the idea that altering or fabricating quotes from sources or accepting money from sources could be justified, even occasionally. Other practices were considered acceptable by solid minorities of journalists: using re-creations, undercover reporting, and using personal documents (such as letters) without permission. Most journalists considered publishing unverified content, altering photographs, claiming to be someone else, and paying people for confidential information to be unacceptable.

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	414	93.2	4.66	.65
What is ethical in journalism depends on the specific situation	413	34.6	2.67	1.44
It is acceptable to set aside moral standards if extraordinary circumstances require it	406	14.8	2.11	1.18
What is ethical in journalism is a matter of personal judgment	414	10.1	1.93	1.07

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	409	13.4	62.3
Using hidden microphones or cameras	412	8.7	55.1
Exerting pressure on unwilling informants to get a story	411	5.4	47.7
Using re-creations or dramatizations of news by actors	405	4.2	31.1
Getting employed in a firm or organization to gain inside information	412	3.4	34.0
Making use of personal documents such as letters and pictures without permission	409	2.9	38.1
Altering or fabricating quotes from sources	413	2.7	1.2
Publishing stories with unverified content	411	2.4	8.0
Accepting money from sources	412	2.4	1.0
Altering photographs	413	2.4	7.7
Claiming to be somebody else	413	2.2	9.4
Paying people for confidential information	411	1.0	11.7

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

U.S. journalists on the whole report a consistently high degree of professional autonomy, particularly in how they report the news. Of the journalists surveyed, 91.4 percent said they had “complete” or a “great deal” of freedom in deciding what aspects of a story to emphasize. Only slightly fewer journalists (89.2%) indicated they had freedom in selecting news stories to report. While journalists had less autonomy to participate in editorial coordination – 77.8 percent said they participate in editorial coordination either “always” or “very often” – this is still a sizeable percentage of journalists.

Table 4: Perceived influences

	N	Percentage saying “extremely” and “very influential”	Mean	Standard Deviation
Journalism ethics	412	92.7	4.59	.79
Information access	411	75.4	4.01	.87
Media laws and regulation	412	73.5	4.01	1.11
Time limits	413	67.3	3.82	.97
Editorial supervisors and higher editors	363	66.1	3.72	1.05
Editorial policy	404	64.9	3.74	1.23
Availability of news-gathering resources	406	63.5	3.85	.92
Managers of the news organization	391	56.5	3.44	1.20
Your personal values and beliefs	414	47.8	3.39	1.24
Feedback from the audience	414	46.6	3.37	.96
Relationships with news sources	412	42.7	3.22	1.05
Your peers on the staff	411	42.3	3.25	1.01
Audience research and data	407	38.3	3.10	1.09
Owners of the news organization	400	28.8	2.64	1.33
Competing news organizations	413	27.6	2.85	1.05
The military, police and state security	413	26.4	2.85	1.11
Colleagues in other media	414	19.3	2.64	1.02
Censorship	389	17.0	2.15	1.29
Government officials	411	11.9	2.14	1.07
Friends, acquaintances and family	414	11.4	2.21	1.06
Politicians	412	7.8	1.95	1.01
Profit expectations	403	6.2	1.86	.98
Business people	413	5.8	1.99	.93
Public relations	413	4.6	2.00	.90
Advertising considerations	406	3.7	1.72	.90
Pressure groups	411	2.4	1.65	.81

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.

While journalists report a high level of autonomy, they nevertheless perceive a number of influences that shape the news they are able to produce (Table 4). The vast majority of journalists report that journalism ethics are “extremely” or “very influential” on their work – far and away the highest cited influence. Journalists also perceive influence rooted in the routines of their work, such as limited information access and limited time, and from unavoidable exogenous factors, such as media laws and regulations, and endogenous factors, such as editorial supervisors and editorial policy.

While journalists relate regularly with public relations and media relations specialists and to some extent with critics of their work, they nevertheless perceive these social actors as having very little impact on their actual work. Pressure groups and bloggers barely registered as influential on journalistic work. Advertising considerations and public relations also merited little regard. Similar



kinds of influences were also largely dismissed: businesspersons, profit expectations, politicians, and news industry consultants. This speaks again to autonomy as a central value in American journalism.

Journalism in Transition

Like journalism around the world, U.S. journalism is going through a time of transition. Technological and economic factors garner the most attention and have left their mark on the field of journalism. The top four changes facing American journalists related to digitization: the use of search engines, the use of social media to promote and do work, and needed technical skills all are seen to have increased in importance over the last five years (see Table 5). Economic turmoil in the field has meant that journalists are working longer hours than five years ago. Meanwhile, U.S. journalists reported that, more than any other factor, time available for researching news stories had declined. The result, it would seem, was a decline in the credibility of journalism.

Table 5: Changes in journalism

	N	Percentage saying has "increased"	Percentage saying has "decreased"
The use of search engines	379	94.7	.5
Technical skills	379	93.1	.8
Average working hours of journalists	378	74.1	4.2
Interactions of journalists with their audiences	376	68.9	9.3
The relevance of journalism for society	378	51.6	21.7
Having a university degree	377	38.5	12.7
Journalists' freedom to make editorial decisions	374	27.5	15.8
Having a degree in journalism or a related field	376	25.8	21.0
The credibility of journalism	378	12.7	53.4
Time available for researching stories	377	7.7	75.3

Question: Please tell me whether you think there has been an increase or a decrease in the importance of following aspects of work in the United States. 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 or Facebook	379	90.8	4.0
Competition	378	72.0	10.1
User-generated contents, such as blogs	378	69.3	14.3
Audience feedback	377	68.2	5.3
Profit making pressures	373	63.5	10.7
Audience involvement in news production	373	59.5	10.5
Audience research	375	46.4	15.2
Advertising considerations	370	37.6	19.7
Pressure toward sensational news	377	34.0	25.7
Journalism education	370	22.2	32.7
Public relations	373	21.7	29.5
Ethical standards	377	17.0	45.1

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

U.S. journalists saw the biggest change in influences on journalism coming from social media, such as Twitter and Facebook (see Table 6). Other factors, each based on the digitization of journalism, have also strengthened in influence: competition, user-generated content, and audience feedback. Interestingly, journalism ethics was

the influence that the most journalists said had weakened in the last five years. Other influences that some journalists said had weakened included public relations and journalism education.

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

Journalistic Trust

American journalists evinced little trust in political and societal institutions, including the news media. Indeed, none of the ten institutions included on the survey were considered completely or mostly trustworthy by a majority of respondents. Journalists indicated relatively greater trust in the news media, the military, and the judiciary – roughly 38 percent said they had complete or a great deal of trust in those institutions – than the police or religious leaders. Only one in ten respondents said they trusted the executive branch of the government, and even fewer said they trusted the U.S. Congress. Trust in political parties and politicians was virtually non-existent.

Table 7: Journalistic trust in institutions

	N	Percentage saying “complete” and “a great deal of trust”	Mean	Standard Deviation
The news media	404	38.9	3.32	.76
The military	400	38.8	3.26	.89
The judiciary/the courts	399	38.6	3.27	.77
The police	401	35.7	3.19	.82
Religious leaders	399	22.1	2.77	.97
The government [The executive branch]	399	10.8	2.52	.88
Trade unions	398	7.0	2.44	.83
The parliament [The US Congress]	400	3.8	2.27	.79
Political parties	400	1.3	1.82	.76
Politicians in general	400	1.3	2.16	.74

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

- Size of the population:* 91,410 working journalists (estimated)
- Sampling method:* stratified proportionally systematic sampling for newsrooms and purposively chosen based on quota for journalists within newsrooms
- Sample size:* 414 working journalists
- Interview methods:* telephone
- Response rate:* 68.5%
- Period of field research:* 04/2013-07/2013