Journalists in Belgium

WJS3 Country report

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Introduction

Belgium is a federal country in which the linguistic communities—Flemish, French-speaking and German-speaking—enjoy substantial autonomy in a wide range of policy areas, including media. Although Belgium is a wealthy country, it faces a significant public debt (103.1% of the country's GDP in 2023). Marked economic disparities also exist between Flanders (the more prosperous northern region), Brussels (the capital and home to many European Union institutions), and Wallonia (the southern region).

Belgium enjoys a high level of press freedom and journalist protection (Belgium ranks 18th out of 180 countries in the 2025 World Press Freedom Index). However, the context of the past few years has shown clear signs of increasing intimidation, threats, and assaults—both online and physical—targeting journalists. Journalists have also increasingly reported threats of legal action aimed at discouraging investigation or the publication of their work. Despite its small population (11.7 million inhabitants) divided in different media markets, the country still hosts a relatively high number of print, radio, television, and digital media outlets. Nevertheless, the ongoing trend of media market concentration raises concerns among many observers, particularly regarding issues of pluralism and economic sustainability.

Backgrounds of Journalists

The average age of Belgian journalists is 45 years (median age: 44; standard deviation: 11.56). The majority of journalists are men (61.8%). While the profession is gradually becoming more gender-balanced, the pace of feminization remains slow. 82.2% journalists hold a master's degree (14.5% hold a bachelor's degree or equivalent), and 62.1 % of the profession has completed specialized training in journalism, most commonly through a university or high school program.

Journalists in the Newsroom

A total of 69.5% of Belgian journalists work full time under a permanent contract, while 8.4% hold part-time permanent contracts. Freelancers represent 17.8% of the total, and 2% are employed full time on fixed-term contracts. Overall, 83.7% of journalists derive their entire income from journalistic work, while the remainder most often supplement their earnings through employment in the education sector and audiovisual production. Additionally, 18.1% of respondents hold managerial or supervisory positions in their newsroom.

More than two-thirds of Belgian journalists (67%) work for private media outlets. A total of 31.1% are employed by public service broadcasters operating within the country's three linguistic communities. Less than one percent report working for other types of media, such as community media. Due to the size of their newsrooms and the number of titles, the daily newspaper sector is the country's largest media employer (33.1%), followed by televisions (22.8%), magazines (18.2%), radios (7%), and news agencies (6.7%). The majority of Belgian journalists (68.5%) work for local or regional news media, and this is partly due to the weight of the language factor in Belgium (each linguistic community has its own media market, and there are very few truly national media outlets in terms of scope).

Belgian journalists have an average of 16.5 years of professional experience (median experience: 15 years; standard deviation: 10.1), raising some concern about the stability of the journalistic career, especially among women. On average, they report working 42 hours per week (median: 40 hours;

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standard deviation: 11.28). A total of 42.7% of respondents report experiencing work-related stress from time to time, while 30% report feeling it often and 13.2% very often.

Finally, 88% are members of a professional union.

Safety and Work-related Concerns

Without any doubts, safety concerns have raised among Belgian journalists, especially regarding online hateful speech directed at journalists or news media, public discrediting and the questioning of journalists' personal morality. Most of the threats listed below occur infrequently, yet the overall climate surrounding the profession has deteriorated—particularly due to the Covid-19 crisis and online intimidation—gradually prompting journalists to seek both individual and organizational responses. Legal actions against journalists have also increased, attracting growing media attention due to the threats they pose to the autonomy of journalistic work. Echoing the issue of work-related stress, 41.7% of the journalists are concerned about their emotional and mental wellbeing.

Table 1. Experienced threats

	N	*Very often*	*Often*	*Some-times*	*Rarely*	*Never*
Demeaning or hateful speech directed at you	573	2.4%	8.4%	33.3%	32.5%	23.4%
Public discrediting of your work	572	1.6%	7.2%	28%	30.8%	32.5%
Surveillance	562	0.7%	2.8%	12.8%	20.8%	62.8%
Hacking or blocking of social media accounts or websites	571	0.4%	0.7%	3.2%	10.9%	84.9%
Arrests, detentions or imprisonment	572	0%	0%	0.2%	2.3%	97.6%
Legal actions against you because of your work	573	0%	0.8%	4.4%	12.7%	82%
Stalking	573	0.5%	0.2%	5.1%	13.4%	80.8%
Other threats or intimidations directed at you	571	0.4%	1.9%	12.8%	30.3%	54.6%
Sexual assault or sexual harassment	573	0%	0.2%	1.2%	5.2%	93.4%
Other physical attacks	571	0%	0.6%	2.8%	8.6%	88.1%
Coercion	552	0%	0.7%	2.7%	10.1%	86.4%
Questioning of your personal morality	557	0.5%	4.8%	16.7%	33.2%	44.7%
Others using your byline for fabricated or manipulated stories	556	0.2%	0%	2%	5.2%	92.6%
Others disseminating your personal information	556	0.2%	0.7%	5%	10.1%	84%
Workplace bullying	556	0.2%	0.5%	4.5%	8.8%	86%
Abductions	556	0%	0%	0%	0.4%	99.6%
Office raids or seizures or damage to equipment	557	0%	0%	1.1%	2.2%	96.8%
Intimidation that targets family	557	0.2%	0%	1.3%	3.1%	95.5%

Table 2. Work-related concerns

	N	*(Strongly) agree*	*Mean*	*SD*
Worried about losing job in journalism within the next 12 months	571	14.9%	2.07	1.15
Concerned about physical well-being	573	23.7%	2.35	1.23
Concerned about emotional and mental wellbeing	573	41.7%	2.93	1.24
Concerned that those who harm journalists in [country] go unpunished	572	37.6%	2.93	1.24

Journalistic Roles

Informational and instructive roles are central to the professional identity of Belgian journalists (being a detached observer, shedding light on society's problem and providing analysis on current affairs). Besides this deeply rooted trend, it is noteworthy that journalists strongly endorse roles such as educating audiences and countering disinformation. These functions reflect broader transformations in the perceived roles of journalism, shaped by the current information environment, increasing polarization, and the spread of online dis- and misinformation.

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Table 3. Journalistic roles

	N	Very/extremely important	Mean	SD
Be a detached observer	569	87.2%	4.25	0.75
Monitor and scrutinize those in power	572	63.1%	3.63	1.19
Shine a light on society's problems	574	88%	4.30	0.80
Motivate people to participate in politics	572	23.8%	2.61	1.17
Provide analysis of current affairs	570	81.4%	4.09	0.83
Let people express their views	570	57.6%	3.59	0.92
Provide information people need to form political opinion	573	63.3%	3.70	1.19
Advocate for social change	570	24.4%	2.70	1.11
Influence public opinion	568	12.7%	2.29	1.02
Set the political agenda	571	10.7%	2.18	1.02
Promote peace and tolerance	570	47.5%	3.29	1.19
Educate the audience	569	80.8%	4.07	0.85
Point toward possible solutions to society's problems	571	61.1%	3.60	1.02
Speak on behalf of the marginalized	566	36%	2.99	1.16
Support national development	563	13.7%	2.32	1.04
Support government policy	567	0.7%	1.31	0.61
Convey a positive image of political leaders	571	1.4%	1.43	0.71
Provide entertainment and relaxation	573	23.9%	2.58	1.25
Provide the kind of news that attracts the largest audience	572	22.1%	2.63	1.14
Provide advice, orientation and direction for daily life	572	28.5%	2.87	1.08
Tell stories that emotionally move the audience	571	34.8%	2.99	1.14
Support efforts to protect public health	569	36.9%	2.98	1.13
Counteract disinformation	574	87.5%	4.38	0.86
Discuss future implications of current events	559	71.9%	3.80	0.99

Journalistic Epistemologies

A large majority of the respondents (68%) think it is possible to represent "objective reality" in reporting and that journalists should let the facts speak for themselves (64.7%). At the same time, results show that interpretation is considered necessary to make sense of facts. Intuitions and professional instincts, at least without evidence-based approaches, receive little support among Belgian journalists.

Table 4. Journalistic epistemologies

	N	(Strongly) agree	Mean	SD
Interpretation is necessary to make sense of facts	565	69.2%	3.70	0.90
Truth is inevitably shaped by those in power	572	31.8%	2.83	1.05
It is impossible for journalists to withhold their personal beliefs from reporting	572	25.3%	2.76	1.01
Things are either true or false, there is no in-between	573	8.9%	2.09	0.92
It is possible to represent objective reality in reporting	573	68.2%	3.66	0.92
Journalists should trust their instincts in deciding what's true and what's not	540	7.2%	2.06	0.86
Journalists should intuitively know what the final story will be	537	27%	2.77	0.98
Journalists should let the facts speak for themselves	538	64.7%	3.60	0.86
Journalists should be part of a community to portray it accurately	538	13.6%	2.32	0.96
Journalists should make their standpoint transparent in their work	538	23.6%	2.60	1.10
Journalists should alert audiences when a source's claim is untruthful	539	91.7%	4.30	0.73

Journalistic Ethics

A majority of Belgian journalists (63.1%) believe they should primarily (and only) rely on professional standards when making decisions related to journalistic ethics. This does not prevent half of the respondents from agreeing that extraordinary circumstances might lead them to disregard these professional standards. In this context, personal judgment is not regarded as an appropriate basis for ethical decisions.

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Table 5. Ethical orientations

	N	*(Strongly) agree*	*Mean*	*SD*
What is ethical for journalists should always be determined by professional standards regardless of situation and personal judgment	570	63.1%	3.35	1.08
What is ethical for journalists should be determined by professional standards unless extraordinary circumstances require disregarding them	570	51.9%	3.34	0.98
What is ethical for journalists should depend on each specific situation	572	30.6%	2.77	1.09
What is ethical for journalists should be a matter of personal judgment	571	7.4%	1.90	0.93

Table 6. Justification of controversial reporting methods

	N	*Always justified*	*Justified on occasion*
Claiming to be somebody else	573	0.3%	68.2%
Using hidden recording devices	572	0.9%	91.1%
Using confidential business or government documents without authorization	572	11.2%	76.2%
Using the personal materials of powerful people, such as documents and photos, without their permission	572	3.3%	69.1%
Using the personal materials of ordinary people, such as documents and photos, without their permission	565	0.4%	32.2%
Paying people for confidential information	571	0.7%	25%
Accepting money from sources	574	0.3%	2.1%
Accepting a free product or service from sources	569	0.7%	33%
Producing content that mimics news stories but hides its promotional nature	572	0.5%	5.8%
Publishing or broadcasting stories with information that is not yet verified	574	0.3%	22.5%

Editorial Autonomy and Media Freedom

Media freedom is perceived as high for 72.9% of the respondents, and the same is true for the freedom in deciding which aspects of a story should be emphasized. A symbolically important aspect of journalistic work, the freedom in *selecting* news stories, scores lower, which indicates different influences, both internal and external, in editorial autonomy.

Table 7. Perceptions of editorial autonomy and media freedom

	N	*A great deal/ complete freedom*	*Mean*	*SD*
Freedom in selecting the news stories	573	62.8%	3.67	0.80
Freedom in deciding which aspects of a story should be emphasized	573	78%	3.94	0.70
Media freedom in Belgium	561	72.9%	3.76	0.65

Editorial Influences

On the intra-organizational level, major influences include colleagues, such as peers and editorial supervisors/higher editors. The other important internal influences are non-human: the availability of news-gathering resources, journalism ethics, time limits and the editorial policy of the media. External influences are potentially numerous. In Belgium, few of them are really perceived as very influential, except the access to information. Among the various stakeholders gravitating around journalists, scientists and health experts have gained a significant influence on journalists since the Covid-19 crisis.

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Table 8. Editorial influences

	N	*Very/extremely influential*	*Mean*	*SD*
Peers on the news staff	574	42%	3.44	1.13
Editorial supervisors and higher editors	574	59.8%	3.71	1.09
The business managers of the news organization	565	15.6%	2.49	1.72
The owners of the news organization	555	6.5%	2.35	1.98
Editorial policy	566	46.4%	3.41	1.21
Advertising considerations	557	4.1%	2.25	2.16
Profit expectations	556	9.2%	2.67	2.21
Audience research and data	559	18.6%	2.83	1.67
Availability of news-gathering resources	557	37.7%	3.38	1.45
Time limits	574	51.9%	3.58	1.17
Journalism ethics	573	56.2%	3.58	1.35
Self-censorship	558	3.5%	2.11	1.77
Personal values and beliefs	570	21.4%	2.78	1.26
Colleagues in other media	571	8.6%	2.42	1.20
Friends, acquaintances and family	572	4.6%	2.17	1.09
Feedback from the audience	573	8.9%	2.46	1.10
Competing news organizations	574	14.4%	2.67	1.14
Media laws and regulation	542	27.7%	2.87	1.37
Access to information	562	47.3%	3.45	1.16
Government censorship	563	1.7%	2.29	2.43
Government officials	558	1.8%	2.14	2.08
Politicians	568	4.3%	2.20	1.91
Business people	564	2.7%	2.12	2.00
Public relations	564	3.7%	2.11	1.69
Relationships with news sources	568	28%	3.00	1.45
Police	568	3.9%	2.63	2.47
Issue advocacy groups	567	5%	2.44	1.83
Scientists or health experts	569	20.4%	3.04	1.90
Religious groups and institutions	344	0.9%	2.37	2.48
Military	337	1.2%	2.57	2.74
Para-military groups, militias and similar groups	338	0.6%	2.62	2.88
Organized crime and criminal groups	548	0.6%	3.09	3.11
Terrorist groups	332	0.3%	2.76	2.96

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