

# United Kingdom

NEIL THURMAN, SINA THÄSLER-KORDONOURI & IMKE HENKEL

## INTRODUCTION

The UK is a constitutional monarchy and a parliamentary democracy, traditionally dominated by two parties: the Conservatives and Labour. At the time of the survey (September–November 2023), the UK was governed by the Conservative Party but heading towards a general election the following year. After 13 years in power, the government was in crisis due to the polarizing exit from the European Union (“Brexit”; voted for in a referendum in June 2016, concluded in January 2020) and the subsequent frequent changes of prime minister (four in seven years). Economically the UK was in recession at the time of the survey, with unemployment at 4.3% and inflation (CPI) at 6.7% in September 2023. Inequality in the UK is relatively high. In 2022 it was the 9<sup>th</sup> most unequal of 38 OECD countries in terms of income.

The UK has a long journalistic tradition stretching back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Some present-day newspapers date back over 170 years, with one originating in the 18<sup>th</sup> century (*The Times* 1785), and several others in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (*The Guardian* 1821; *The Economist* 1843; *The Daily Telegraph* 1855).

The press comprises so-called ‘broadsheet’ (quality) newspapers, mid-market titles, and the ‘tabloid’ press (that focus on entertainment and scandals). The majority are politically to the right. In contrast, public service broadcasters are required to be impartial. The BBC, established in 1922, dominates public service broadcasting and employed over 5,500 journalists in 2023.

The UK’s local and regional media are in decline, with two out of three jobs lost between 2007 and 2022. There is a high concentration of ownership in UK journalism. Just three companies dominate 90% of the national newspaper market, and six companies 71% of the local. Several new outlets were launched in the years leading up to the survey. Most notably, perhaps, the right leaning television news channel, GB News (launched 2021).

## BACKGROUNDS OF JOURNALISTS

The proportions of male (49.4%) and female (50%) journalists in the UK sample were almost equal. Just 0.6% of respondents reported being an ‘other’ gender. Their average (mean) age was 45.1 (SD = 13.1; Median = 45). Over 90% of UK respondents had a degree from a higher education institution, with 47% having a bachelor’s degree, 41.1% a master’s and 2.6% a doctorate. Another 3.6% had studied at university but received no degree. Of the 5.6% who had not attended higher education, only 0.2% had not completed high school. Two-thirds (66.1%) of UK journalists had some formal education in journalism. Of those, 48% had received a university or college degree in journalism, 22.7% via an apprenticeship, and 55.2% had attended a short course in journalism.

Much more detailed descriptions and analyses of our data about UK journalists’ backgrounds, about the other themes summarised in this short report, and about topics this report omits due to space limitations can be found in our 76-page publication, [UK Journalists in the 2020s: Who they are, How they work, and What they Think](#).

## JOURNALISTS IN THE NEWSROOM

About two-thirds (65%) of UK respondents had a permanent contract, 3% a fixed-term contract, and 28% were freelance. Another 3.5% reported having an ‘other’ type of employment contract. A quarter (24.7%) reported receiving additional work-related income from outside journalism, however the survey excluded journalists who earned less than 50% of their income from journalism or worked less than 18.2 hours a week working as a journalist. The average (mean) number of years spent working as a journalist was 19.9 (SD = 12.4; Median = 19).

57% of journalists in the UK sample said that they worked on or supervised a specific beat or subject area. In terms of working hours, the average (mean) number of hours worked per week was 43.1 (SD = 7.7) with Median of 40 for journalists in full-time employment.

Around two thirds (63%) of 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.

Just over half (52.6%) reported being union members. Over half (54%) reported feeling stressed out ‘often’ or ‘very often’ in their work as a journalist during the previous six months.

For 13.2% of UK respondents, the main outlet they worked for had a local or regional reach and for three-quarters (75.4%) it had a national or transnational reach. The remainder (11.5%) did not work for a single main outlet. In terms of those outlets’ ownership, for most UK journalists their main outlet was private/commercially-owned (71.5%), as opposed to being publicly-owned (13.8%), community-owned (0.2%), state-owned (0.2%), a non-profit (1.7%), or having another type of ownership structure (1.2%). Again, the remainder (11.5%) did not work for a single main outlet.

Journalists were asked about the media cultural background – from newspaper to news agency – of their main employer or the main outlet where they worked. Excluding the 18% who either did not know or did not have one main employer, for 30.3% their main employer had a magazine background; for 29%, newspaper; for 15.8%, internet-native; for 10.6%, TV; for 7.3%, news agency; and for 6.9%, radio. Just 0.1% of journalists had a main employer with a telecommunications background.

SAFETY AND WORK-RELATED CONCERNS

The overwhelming majority (82.4%) of UK respondents had experienced some kind of safety threat related to their work in the five years prior to the survey (fielded in autumn 2023). Journalists working for local and regional media were significantly more likely to agree they had concerns about their physical, mental, and emotional well-being than those working for outlets with a national or transnational reach. Gender also played a significant role in UK journalists' experience of safety threats. For example, 59.4% of women reported that they had felt stressed out at work at least 'often' in the previous six months, compared to 48.5% of men. Close to a third of journalists were worried about losing their job within the next 12 months, with those who were aware of the use of two types of automation in their newsrooms being more worried about losing their job than those who were not aware of any such use. Furthermore, journalists felt stressed out at work more often the more distribution platforms they were producing for.

TABLE 1. EXPERIENCED THREATS

	N	Very often	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Demeaning or hateful speech directed at you	1126	4.4%	10.4%	30.7%	26.2%	28.2%
Public discrediting of your work	1126	4.4%	7.4%	27.7%	26.4%	34.1%
Surveillance	1103	0.3%	1.4%	5.9%	13.3%	79.1%
Hacking or blocking of social media accounts or websites	1118	0.4%	1.8%	9.4%	13.8%	74.6%
Arrests, detentions or imprisonment	1117	0.1%	0.1%	0.6%	1.6%	97.6%
Legal actions against you because of your work	1117	0.1%	0.7%	4.8%	11.2%	83.2%
Stalking	1111	0.2%	0.4%	2.9%	5.3%	91.3%
Other threats or intimidations directed at you	1120	1.0%	2.3%	12.7%	19.3%	64.7%
Sexual assault or sexual harassment	1108	0.6%	1.4%	4.4%	6.4%	87.1%
Other physical attacks	1104	0.0%	0.1%	0.5%	4.1%	95.3%

Question: "In the last five years, how often have you experienced any of the following actions related to your work as a journalist?"

TABLE 2. WORK-RELATED CONCERNS

	N	Agree/ strongly Agree	Mean	SD
Worried about losing job in journalism within the next 12 months	1123	31.2%	2.76	1.21
Concerned about physical well-being	1128	22.7%	2.44	1.20
Concerned about emotional and mental wellbeing	1126	45.7%	3.11	1.24
Concerned that those who harm journalists in the UK go unpunished	1121	53.7%	3.52	0.95

Question: "Thinking about your work, please tell me how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements." (Scale: 5 = Strongly agree; 4 = Agree; 3 = Neither agree nor disagree; 2 = Disagree; 1 = Strongly disagree.)

JOURNALISTIC ROLES

UK journalists consider the detached observer role to be one of their most important. However, in 2015, when the last UK WJS survey was conducted, they ascribed greater importance to this role. 'Providing the kind of news that attracts the largest audience' was also seen as less important than in 2015 (34.1% in 2023 vs. 46.6% in 2015). By contrast, UK journalists have become more interested in some other roles, such as 'monitoring and scrutinizing the powerful' and 'promoting peace and tolerance'.

TABLE 3. JOURNALISTIC ROLES

	N	Very/extremely important	Mean	SD
Be a detached observer	1130	68.7%	3.93	1.07
Monitor and scrutinize those in power	1130	64.6%	3.78	1.30
Shine a light on society's problems	1130	65.4%	3.78	1.30
Motivate people to participate in politics	1130	15.3%	2.20	1.21
Provide analysis of current affairs	1130	56.0%	3.45	1.39
Let people express their views	1130	59.3%	3.58	1.19
Provide information people need to form political opinion	1130	41.4%	2.95	1.50
Advocate for social change	1130	30.1%	2.72	1.37
Influence public opinion	1130	27.8%	2.65	1.31
Set the political agenda	1130	15.8%	2.13	1.25
Promote peace and tolerance	1130	32.2%	2.77	1.39
Educate the audience	1130	88.1%	4.41	0.80
Point toward possible solutions to society's problems	1130	44.6%	3.16	1.34
Speak on behalf of the marginalized	1130	44.2%	3.14	1.39
Support national development	1130	19.6%	2.32	1.27
Support government policy	1130	2.7%	1.34	0.76
Convey a positive image of political leaders	1130	0.9%	1.18	0.53
Provide entertainment and relaxation	1130	40.9%	3.07	1.40
Provide the kind of news that attracts the largest audience	1130	34.1%	2.93	1.27
Provide advice, orientation and direction for daily life	1130	21.9%	2.37	1.32
Tell stories that emotionally move the audience	1130	47.5%	3.25	1.31
Support efforts to protect public health	1130	31.4%	2.66	1.41
Counteract disinformation	1130	71.1%	3.94	1.25
Discuss future implications of current events	1130	60.3%	3.60	1.23

Question: "Please tell me how important it is to do each of the following in your daily work." (Scale: 5 = Extremely important; 4 = Very important; 3 = Moderately important; 2 = Slightly important; 1 = Not at all important.)

## JOURNALISTIC EPISTEMOLOGIES

A large majority (82.3%) of UK journalists agreed that interpretation is necessary to make sense of facts. 69% of UK journalists agreed it is possible to represent objective reality in reporting. 22.7% of UK journalists agreed that it is impossible for journalists to withhold their personal beliefs from their reporting. 47.6% of UK journalists agreed that truth is inevitably shaped by those in power. Only 17.3% of UK journalists agreed that things are either true or false with no in-between, reflecting a rejection of dogmatic thinking.

**TABLE 4. JOURNALISTIC EPISTEMOLOGIES**

	N	Agree/ strongly Agree	Mean	SD
Interpretation is necessary to make sense of facts	1063	82.3%	4.01	0.75
Truth is inevitably shaped by those in power	1063	47.6%	3.27	1.03
It is impossible for journalists to withhold their personal beliefs from reporting	1063	22.7%	2.69	0.97
Things are either true or false, there is no in-between	1063	17.3%	2.49	1.01
It is possible to represent objective reality in reporting	1063	69.0%	3.68	0.87

Questions: "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." / "Using the same scale, please tell me how strongly you agree or disagree with the following beliefs." (Scale: 5 = Strongly agree; 4 = Agree; 3 = Neither agree nor disagree; 2 = Disagree; 1 = Strongly disagree.)

## JOURNALISTIC ETHICS

UK journalists' ethical orientations have seen some change since the last WJS UK survey. In 2015, 94.1% of UK journalists agreed that 'what is ethical for journalists should always be determined by professional standards, regardless of situation and personal judgement'. In 2023, just 58.8% of UK journalists agreed with a similar statement. In 2015, 23.8% of UK journalists thought it justified on occasion to publish stories with unverified content. By 2023, this proportion had increased to 30.7%. Female journalists were more disapproving of some ethical practices, for example paying for confidential practices, than their male colleagues.

**TABLE 5. ETHICAL ORIENTATIONS**

	N	Agree/ strongly Agree	Mean	SD
What is ethical for journalists should always be determined by professional standards regardless of situation and personal judgment	1130	58.8%	3.59	1.08
What is ethical for journalists should be determined by professional standards unless extraordinary circumstances require disregarding them	1130	66.5%	3.71	0.98
What is ethical for journalists should depend on each specific situation	1130	40.4%	3.01	1.18
What is ethical for journalists should be a matter of personal judgment	1130	18.1%	2.37	1.10

Question: "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." (Scale: 5 = Strongly agree; 4 = Agree; 3 = Neither agree nor disagree; 2 = Disagree; 1 = Strongly disagree.)

**TABLE 6. JUSTIFICATION OF CONTROVERSIAL REPORTING METHODS**

	N	Always justified	Justified on occasion
Claiming to be somebody else	1130	0.1%	54.9%
Using hidden recording devices	1130	0.9%	78.7%
Using confidential business or government documents without authorization	1130	6.5%	78.2%
Using the personal materials of powerful people, such as documents and photos, without their permission	1130	2.8%	77.0%
Using the personal materials of ordinary people, such as documents and photos, without their permission	1130	0.7%	46.5%
Paying people for confidential information	1130	0.6%	45.2%
Accepting money from sources	1130	0.1%	6.0%
Accepting a free product or service from sources	1130	1.1%	42.9%
Producing content that mimics news stories but hides its promotional nature	1130	0.3%	8.8%
Publishing or broadcasting stories with information that is not yet verified	1130	0.1%	30.7%

Question: "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?"

## EDITORIAL AUTONOMY AND MEDIA FREEDOM

UK journalists' views on the UK news media's level of freedom were polarised, with some perceiving good levels of media freedom and others seeing it as insufficient. It is worrying that, in total, 42.8% of respondents considered the UK news media to have only 'some', 'little', or 'no media freedom' at all. Similarly polarised opinions can be found in relation to editorial autonomy, with around a third of journalists perceiving they had only 'some', 'little' or 'no' freedom to select and shape stories.

**TABLE 7. PERCEPTIONS OF EDITORIAL AUTONOMY AND MEDIA FREEDOM**

	N	A great deal/ complete freedom	Mean	SD
Freedom in selecting the news stories	1127	62.8%	3.67	0.88
Freedom in deciding which aspects of a story should be emphasized	1127	67.1%	3.78	0.80
Media freedom in the UK	1110	57.2%	3.54	0.66

(Scale: 5 = Complete freedom; 4 = A great deal of freedom; 3 = Some freedom; 2 = Little freedom; 1 = No freedom at all.)

## EDITORIAL INFLUENCES

UK journalists perceived that their work was influenced – for better or for worse – by various factors, especially editors and supervisors, access to information, journalistic ethics, and editorial policies. Government censorship, government officials, the police, and politicians were perceived as ‘not influential’ by many respondents. Scientists or health experts were viewed as more influential than PR, advocacy groups, or religious institutions.

**TABLE 8. EDITORIAL INFLUENCES**

	N	Very/extremely influential	Mean	SD
Peers on the news staff	980	43.2%	3.29	0.98
Editorial supervisors and higher editors	997	66.3%	3.75	0.96
The business managers of the news organization	893	19.9%	2.36	1.23
The owners of the news organization	837	20.9%	2.28	1.30
Editorial policy	1063	59.8%	3.60	1.04
Advertising considerations	849	16.4%	2.20	1.22
Profit expectations	829	22.7%	2.38	1.29
Audience research and data	1019	40.2%	3.11	1.21
Availability of news-gathering resources	1021	47.5%	3.35	1.08
Time limits	1070	58.4%	3.61	1.04
Journalism ethics	1047	64.6%	3.74	1.06
Self-censorship	922	20.5%	2.43	1.20
Personal values and beliefs	1032	37.5%	3.01	1.22
Colleagues in other media	1056	16.1%	2.59	0.99
Friends, acquaintances and family	1026	6.2%	2.00	0.95
Feedback from the audience	1074	28.6%	2.91	1.00
Competing news organizations	1044	23.0%	2.80	1.01
Media laws and regulation	1034	52.8%	3.44	1.21
Access to information	1055	65.0%	3.75	0.97
Government censorship	765	8.0%	1.68	1.04
Government officials	814	7.6%	1.75	1.02
Politicians	817	8.8%	1.82	1.04
Business people	926	14.0%	2.11	1.18
Public relations	1031	15.3%	2.33	1.11
Relationships with news sources	1011	35.7%	3.02	1.17
Police	688	6.4%	1.66	1.00
Issue advocacy groups	860	12.4%	2.20	1.07
Scientists or health experts	868	28.1%	2.70	1.26
Religious groups and institutions	677	2.5%	1.48	0.78

Question: "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." (Scale: 5 = Extremely influential; 4 = Very influential; 3 = Moderately influential; 2 = Slightly influential; 1 = Not at all influential.)