



Country Report

Journalists in Switzerland

Filip Dingerkus, Guido Keel and Vinzenz Wyss, *ZHAW Winterthur*¹

30 November, 2016

Backgrounds of Journalists

The typical journalist in Switzerland is male, around 40 years old and holds a university degree. Of the 909 interviewed journalists, 350 were women, leading to a proportion of 38.5 percent of the overall sample. On average, Swiss journalists were 41.63 years old ($s=10.95$); more than one third of the journalists were younger than 35 years. Journalists tend to be well educated: 69.6 percent of the respondents held a university degree (Bachelor 24.0%; Master 42.3%; Doctorate 3.3%). 10.9 percent of the journalists have a high school degree, and 10.4 percent had undertaken some university studies but did not complete their studies. Of those respondents who held a university degree, a slight majority (52.7%) had not specialized in communication or journalism. Across the whole sample of Swiss journalists, 27.3 percent had specialized in journalism, 9.8 percent had studied in another communication field, and 10.2 percent had specialized in both journalism and another communication field.

Journalists in the Newsroom

The majority of journalists interviewed in Switzerland hold a full-time position (57.1%), whereas 35.2 percent of the respondents indicate that they were employed part-time, and 7.7 percent work as freelance journalists. Of those with full or part-time employment, 94.5 percent say they hold permanent positions, and 5.5 percent work on a temporary contract.

Swiss journalists are fairly experienced. On average, they have worked as journalists for 14.62 years ($s=9.75$), and one out of four of them has more than 20 years of professional experience. Half of the journalists work on a specific beat (47.8%), such as politics, local news, or sports. The remaining 52.2 percent of the respondents indicate that they work on various topics and subjects. On average, Swiss journalists work for 1.31 newsrooms ($s=0.91$); 21.3 percent of them have additional jobs outside the area of journalism. A slight majority of the interviewed journalists are members of a professional association (56.8%).

Across the whole sample, 30.1 percent of the interviewees are true multimedia journalists, as they indicate to work for various media types simultaneously. Among the “Pure players” in the sample, a majority work in print media: 29.6 percent contribute to daily newspapers, 13.6 percent to weekly newspapers, and 10.5 percent to magazines. Another 11.4 percent of the journalists work for private or public service television, and 20.1 for private or public radio. Few journalists in the sample reported they worked for news agencies (3.6%), for online newsrooms of traditional media (6.1%), and for stand-alone online news sites (5.0%), meaning online news-sites which are not part of an offline media, be it a newspaper, a radio or TV station.

¹ Data in French and Italian speaking Switzerland was gathered with the help of Annik Dubied and Vittoria Sacco, Université de Neuchâtel.

Journalistic Roles

With regard to professional role orientations, Swiss journalists find it most important to report things as they are, to be a detached observer, to provide analysis of current affairs, and to provide information people need to make political decisions (see Table 1). The relevance of these “classic” roles is fairly undisputed among the interviewed journalists as the relatively low standard deviations indicate. Likewise, there was a strong consensus among the respondents that supporting government policy and conveying a positive image of political leadership are less important journalistic functions.

Still, a majority of journalists in Switzerland find it important to let people express their views, to tell stories about the world and to promote tolerance and cultural diversity. Rather ambivalent are the results for the market/audience approach, which sees the journalist as someone providing the kind of news that attracts the largest audience and providing entertainment and relaxation. Politically more assertive roles, on the other hand, are supported by only a minority of respondents. The following traits belong to these roles: supporting national development, influencing public opinion, acting as adversary of the government, setting the political agenda, and advocating social change.

Table 1: Roles of journalists

	N	Percentage saying “extremely” and “very important”	Mean	Standard Deviation
Report things as they are	907	94.4	4.53	.64
Provide analysis of current affairs	906	84.0	4.21	.81
Be a detached observer	908	82.8	4.26	.84
Provide information people need to make political decisions	907	68.9	3.79	1.16
Let people express their views	906	56.1	3.54	1.06
Tell stories about the world	907	55.2	3.48	1.14
Promote tolerance and cultural diversity	904	50.4	3.45	1.09
Monitor and scrutinize political leaders	907	46.6	3.25	1.20
Provide the kind of news that attracts the largest audience	909	46.5	3.34	1.04
Motivate people to participate in political activity	904	45.2	3.24	1.15
Provide advice, orientation and direction for daily life	906	39.2	3.20	1.03
Monitor and scrutinize business	907	38.1	3.07	1.17
Educate the audience	899	36.7	3.11	1.05
Provide entertainment and relaxation	909	33.7	3.13	1.04
Be an adversary of the government	895	22.2	2.56	1.21
Advocate for social change	894	21.5	2.60	1.16
Set the political agenda	903	19.9	2.59	1.07
Influence public opinion	894	17.3	2.52	1.06
Support national development	893	11.9	2.26	1.05
Support government policy	898	.9	1.50	.71
Convey a positive image of political leadership	898	.4	1.29	.54

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

Swiss journalists generally 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). Furthermore, two thirds of the journalists disagree with the view their ethical decisions are a matter of personal judgment and that sometimes it is acceptable to set aside moral standards if extraordinary circumstances require it.

However, around half of the interviewees subscribe to the idea that journalists’ ethical decisions depend on the specific situation.

The picture is mixed with regard to a selected number of potentially controversial reporting techniques. A large majority of journalists in Switzerland find the use of confidential business or government documents without authorization, hidden microphones or cameras, re-creation or dramatization of news by actors as well as undercover research to gain inside information justifiable at least on occasion (see Table 3). Around half of the journalists think it is acceptable to pretend to be somebody else. Only a minority of journalists found it permissible to publish stories with unverified content, to make use of personal documents (such as letters and pictures) without permission, to pay people for confidential information and to exert pressure on unwilling informants to get a story. The practice of “brown envelope journalism” – that is, journalists taking money from sources, presumably in return for positive coverage – was almost unanimously condemned by Swiss journalists.

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	908	91.3	4.50	.73
What is ethical in journalism depends on the specific situation	902	51.4	3.24	1.24
What is ethical in journalism is a matter of personal judgment	903	12.8	2.17	1.05
It is acceptable to set aside moral standards if extraordinary circumstances require it	902	17.7	2.36	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	905	12.8	70.1
Using re-creations or dramatizations of news by actors	896	9.9	54.1
Getting employed in a firm or organization to gain inside information	900	3.8	59.4
Using hidden microphones or cameras	904	2.8	63.8
Claiming to be somebody else	900	1.4	48.3
Publishing stories with unverified content	904	1.0	31.9
Making use of personal documents such as letters and pictures without permission	903	.2	28.7
Paying people for confidential information	903	.7	27.8
Exerting pressure on unwilling informants to get a story	898	.6	25.1
Accepting money from sources	904	.0	1.1

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 Sources of Influence

Journalists in Switzerland report a fairly high degree of professional autonomy. Three out of four respondents (77.9%) say that they have complete or a great deal of freedom in their selection of stories. With a total of 85.5 percent, the number of respondents who in their eyes have complete or a great deal of freedom in deciding over what aspects to emphasize in a news story is even higher. But less than half of the

journalists report that they participated in editorial coordination activities (such as meetings or assigning reporters) “always” or “very often” (48.0%).

News production is influenced by a variety of factors. Among the potential sources of influence mentioned in the interview, “journalism ethics” fares at the top of the list among Swiss respondents (see Table 4). A majority of journalists find their work substantively constrained by time limits, by information access (or lack thereof) and by personal values and beliefs. Almost half of the respondents admit their work is influenced by the availability of news-gathering resources.

Overall, internal factors were found to be more influential than external constraints. Swiss journalists feel little influenced by sources from within the political and civic realm: the government, politicians, censorship, religion, the military, police and state security, pressure groups, business people, and owner of news organizations. They also report only minor influence from friends, acquaintances and family as well as from colleagues in other media. Likewise, economic influences – stemming from managers, market competition and profit expectations as well as advertising – seem to have little relevance in Swiss newsrooms.

Table 4: Perceived influences

	N	Percentage saying “extremely” and “very influential”	Mean	Standard Deviation
Journalism ethics	895	61.0	3.68	.92
Time limits	896	54.0	3.55	.99
Information access	897	50.9	3.49	.97
Your personal values and beliefs	897	50.2	3.51	.96
Availability of news-gathering resources	889	49.9	3.47	.96
Editorial policy	866	30.9	3.02	.99
Relationships with news sources	898	27.3	2.87	1.03
Editorial supervisors and higher editors	874	26.5	2.93	.90
Media laws and regulation	900	22.3	2.73	1.01
Your peers on the staff	883	19.8	2.82	.84
Audience research and data	837	12.9	2.45	.97
Feedback from the audience	904	12.5	2.54	.86
Competing news organizations	903	11.8	2.50	.87
Managers of the news organization	827	11.4	2.22	.97
Friends, acquaintances and family	904	9.8	2.30	.87
Public relations	899	8.9	2.24	.89
Profit expectations	767	8.9	2.12	.99
Advertising considerations	736	7.2	1.97	.96
Owners of the news organization	749	6.8	1.86	.93
Pressure groups	896	4.5	2.00	.81
Politicians	900	4.0	1.87	.82
Colleagues in other media	904	3.9	2.17	.74
Business people	899	3.8	1.89	.78
Government officials	901	3.0	1.75	.76
Military, police and state security	896	3.0	1.69	.78
Censorship	890	2.0	1.50	.73
Religious considerations	711	1.8	1.39	.68

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

Journalism is currently in a state of change. According to Swiss journalists, the importance of technical skills and the use of search engines have most profoundly changed their working situation over the last five years (see Table 5). Overall, the journalists’ responses point to a substantive deterioration of working conditions. A

large majority of respondents report an increase in their average working hours. Furthermore, most interviewed journalists feel that their professional freedom and the time available to research stories has decreased, as well as the public credibility of journalism. This is one of the major concerns for Swiss journalists.

Influences on journalism and news production have changed as well. With the exception of ethical standards, influences on journalists have increased for all sources mentioned in Table 6. Here, it is especially the influence of social media, competition and user-generated contents that has strengthened the most during the past five years. A majority of Swiss journalists reports an increase for market-related influences – such as profit-making pressure, advertising considerations, audience involvement in the news production, public relations, and pressure toward sensational news – as well as for audience research and audience feedback. Ethical standards are the only source of influence that has substantially lost in importance over the 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 use of search engines	755	91.4	.0
Technical skills	754	87.5	1.6
Average working hours of journalists	755	70.5	2.5
Interactions of journalists with their audiences	753	61.4	8.2
Having a degree in journalism or a related field	749	44.1	7.9
Having a university degree	750	40.8	11.7
The relevance of journalism for society	752	16.8	40.4
Journalists' freedom to make editorial decisions	752	10.1	37.1
The credibility of journalism	754	5.6	67.6
Time available for researching stories	754	6.0	78.9

Question: Please tell me whether you think there has been an increase or a decrease in the importance of following aspects of work in Switzerland. 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 Facebook and Twitter	754	95.9	.1
Competition	751	86.8	2.9
User-generated contents, such as blogs	751	83.0	1.3
Profit making pressures	748	78.3	1.2
Advertising considerations	749	71.7	1.3
Audience involvement in news production	750	69.2	2.4
Public relations	752	69.1	1.3
Pressure toward sensational news	753	68.5	2.4
Audience research	748	61.6	3.2
Audience feedback	744	59.5	3.5
Journalism education	748	58.4	12.0
Ethical standards	749	21.1	37.2

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

When it comes to trust in public institutions, Swiss journalists turn out to have reasonable faith in four institutions: the judicial system (the strongest), the police, the government and their own institution – the news media (see Table 7). The parliament is still found trustworthy by Swiss journalists, although respondents do not hold them in particularly high esteem. Trade unions enjoy neither high nor low trust. Remarkably, Swiss journalists seem to have more trust in the military than in politicians, political parties and religious leaders. The interviewed journalists have relatively little confidence in the latter two institutions. Overall, there is a fairly high agreement among the respondents over the question of institutional trust, as low standard deviation values indicate. Disagreement is most pronounced for religious leaders and the military.

Table 7: Journalistic trust in institutions

	N	Percentage saying “complete” and “a great deal of trust”	Mean	Standard Deviation
The judiciary/the courts	898	60.2	3.57	.75
The police	899	48.1	3.39	.78
The government [“Bundesräte & -regierung”]	895	47.2	3.38	.73
The news media	899	45.6	3.38	.67
The parliament [“National & Ständerat”]	895	37.1	3.22	.73
Trade unions	899	22.2	2.94	.81
The military	894	20.4	2.72	.95
Politicians in general	899	6.5	2.64	.66
Political parties	899	5.7	2.55	.68
Religious leaders	894	4.4	1.92	.88

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>	10,000 working journalists (estimated)
<i>Sampling method:</i>	stratified proportionally random sampling for newsrooms and simply systematic, purposively chosen based on quota for journalists within newsrooms (GER) and simply random sampling for newsrooms and purposively chosen based on quota for journalists within newsrooms (RO/TI)
<i>Sample size:</i>	909 working journalists
<i>Interview methods:</i>	online (GER) and mail/e-mail (RO/TI)
<i>Response rate:</i>	22% (GER) and 38% for French Swiss & 43% for Ticino
<i>Period of field research:</i>	10/2014-06/2015 (GER) and 11/2014-01/2015 (RO/TI)