

Country Report

Journalists in South Korea

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Backgrounds of Journalists

The typical journalist in South Korea is male, in his mid-thirties and holds a university degree in a field different from journalism or communication. Of the 355 interviewed journalists, 84 were women, making for a proportion of 23.7 percent of the overall sample. On average, South Korean journalists were 37.19 years old ($s=8.37$); half of the journalists were younger than 36 years. Journalists tend to be well educated: 74.6 percent of the respondents held a Bachelor's degree; another 21.8 percent held a Master's degree and 3.1 percent of the journalists obtained a doctoral degree. Across the whole sample of South Korean journalists, 46.0 percent had specialized in journalism and/or communication.

Journalists in the Newsroom

The majority of journalists interviewed in South Korea held a full-time position (96.9%), whereas 2.8 percent of the respondents indicated that they had part-time employments, and 0.3 percent worked as freelance journalist.

On average, South Korean journalists had worked as journalists for 11.30 years ($s=8.04$), and about half of them had more than ten years of professional experience. Most journalists worked on a specific desk (90.7%). The remaining 9.3 percent of the respondents indicated that they worked on various topics and subjects. The overwhelming majority of Korean journalists (94.1%) worked for a single newsroom; 4.5 percent of them had additional jobs outside the area of journalism. A majority of the interviewed journalists were members of a professional association (87.8%).

A large proportion of Korean journalists in the sample worked for print media: 38.1 percent contributed to daily newspapers, 0.6 percent to weekly newspapers, and 1.7 percent to magazines. Another 41.0 percent of the journalists worked for television channels, and 2.0 percent for radio stations. Few journalists in the sample reported they worked for news agencies (2.9%), while a substantive share of the interviewed journalists worked for stand-alone online news sites (12.2%) and for online newsrooms of traditional media (1.5%).

Journalistic Roles

With regards to professional role orientations, South Korean journalists found it most important to report things as they are, to provide analysis of current affairs, and to monitor and scrutinize business and political leaders (see Table 1). The relevance of these roles was fairly undisputed among the interviewed journalists as the relatively low standard deviations indicate. Likewise, there was a strong consensus among the respondents over the little importance of supporting government policy and conveying a positive image of political leadership.

Still, a majority of journalists in South Korea found it important to be a detached observer, to promote tolerance and cultural diversity, to set the political agenda, to provide information people need to make political decisions, to let people express their views, to advocate for social change, and to motivate people to participate in political activity. To provide entertainment and relaxation, as well as politically more assertive roles like supporting government policy and conveying a positive image of political leadership, were supported by only a minority of respondents.

Table 1: Roles of journalists

	N	Percentage saying "extremely" and "very important"	Mean	Standard Deviation
Report things as they are	352	92.9	4.55	.66
Provide analysis of current affairs	352	88.6	4.33	.69
Monitor and scrutinize business	349	88.3	4.37	.74
Monitor and scrutinize political leaders	350	86.0	4.34	.78
Be a detached observer	352	69.3	3.80	.76
Promote tolerance and cultural diversity	352	66.5	3.77	.91
Set the political agenda	350	66.0	3.75	.89
Provide information people need to make political decisions	351	63.5	3.68	.98
Let people express their views	351	61.8	3.65	.96
Advocate for social change	351	59.0	3.70	.92
Motivate people to participate in political activity	351	56.7	3.54	.97
Support national development	351	45.6	3.39	.99
Tell stories about the world	352	45.2	3.39	.86
Provide advice, orientation and direction for daily life	352	35.8	3.11	.95
Influence public opinion	351	27.4	3.02	.92
Provide the kind of news that attracts the largest audience	352	25.0	2.91	.97
Educate the audience	352	23.0	2.78	1.02
Be an adversary of the government	351	17.9	2.71	.95
Provide entertainment and relaxation	352	6.0	2.17	.87
Support government policy	351	5.1	2.15	.85
Convey a positive image of political leadership	350	3.7	1.99	.85

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

A majority of the respondents agreed that journalists should always adhere to the codes of professional ethics, regardless of situation and context (see Table 2). In line with this result, relatively few interviewees subscribed to the idea that journalists' ethical decisions are a matter of personal judgement or depend on the specific situation, and that it is acceptable to set aside moral standards if extraordinary circumstances require it.

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	355	87.9	4.36	.75
What is ethical in journalism is a matter of personal judgment	355	15.8	2.33	1.03
What is ethical in journalism depends on the specific situation	354	14.4	2.38	.96
It is acceptable to set aside moral standards if extraordinary circumstances require it	355	11.0	2.16	.94

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.

The picture was mixed with regards to a selected number of potentially controversial reporting techniques. A large majority of journalists in South Korea found the use of confidential business or government documents without authorization as well as claiming to be somebody else justifiable at least on occasion (see Table 3). Still, most journalists thought it was acceptable to use hidden microphones or cameras, to get employed in a firm or organization to gain inside information, to pay people for confidential information, and to exert pressure on unwilling informants to get a story. Only a minority of journalists found it permissible to publish stories with unverified content and to alter or fabricate photographs or quotes from sources. The practice of “brown envelope journalism” – that is, journalists taking money from sources, presumably in return for positive coverage – was almost unanimously condemned by South Korean journalists.

Table 3: Justification of controversial reporting methods by journalists

	N	Percentage saying “always justified”	Percentage saying “justified on occasion”
Claiming to be somebody else	354	4.8	81.1
Using confidential business or government documents without authorization	354	4.0	81.9
Getting employed in a firm or organization to gain inside information	354	3.4	60.7
Using hidden microphones or cameras	354	3.1	65.5
Using re-creations or dramatizations of news by actors	354	2.0	29.1
Exerting pressure on unwilling informants to get a story	355	1.7	53.0
Paying people for confidential information	352	1.1	60.8
Making use of personal documents such as letters and pictures without permission	353	.6	42.8
Publishing stories with unverified content	355	.3	7.9
Accepting money from sources	355	.3	3.4
Altering or fabricating quotes from sources	355	.3	14.6
Altering photographs	355	.3	15.8

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

Slightly less than half of the South Korean journalists (48.0%) said that they had complete or a great deal of freedom in their selection of stories. With a total of 38.6 percent, the number of respondents who had complete or a great deal of freedom in deciding over what aspects to emphasize in a news story was somewhat lower. Only one out of five journalists reported that they participated in editorial coordination activities (such as meetings and news management) “always” or “very often” (19.0%).

News production is influenced by a variety of factors. A majority of journalists found their work substantively constrained by information access (or lack thereof), by the availability (or non-availability) of news-gathering resources, by their personal values and beliefs, by editorial supervisors and higher editors, and by competing news organizations (see Table 4). Also, more than three out of five respondents admitted their work was influenced by journalism ethics, time limits, and feedback from the audience.

Overall, internal factors were found to be more influential than external constraints. South Korean journalists felt little influenced by sources from within the political and civic realm: censorship, business people, government officials, politicians, pressure groups, public relations, the military, police and state security as well as religious considerations. They also reported only minor influence from friends, acquaintances and family as well as from colleagues in other media.

Table 4: Perceived influences

	N	Percentage saying “extremely” and “very influential”	Mean	Standard Deviation
Information access	353	78.2	3.97	.69
Availability of news-gathering resources	354	75.1	3.96	.76
Your personal values and beliefs	354	74.6	3.97	.76
Editorial supervisors and higher editors	353	73.7	3.94	.71
Competing news organizations	353	72.8	3.81	.78
Journalism ethics	354	68.9	3.81	.80
Time limits	354	66.1	3.78	.81
Feedback from the audience	353	61.8	3.66	.80
Editorial policy	352	57.4	3.63	.87
Audience research and data	354	56.5	3.60	.84
Relationships with news sources	352	53.4	3.56	.83
Managers of the news organization	353	47.3	3.42	1.02
Media laws and regulation	353	45.9	3.33	.85
Owners of the news organization	353	44.2	3.22	1.16
Your peers on the staff	354	42.9	3.37	.75
Advertising considerations	352	37.5	3.14	1.10
Profit expectations	352	35.2	3.04	1.13
Colleagues in other media	353	28.0	3.01	.87
Friends, acquaintances and family	353	27.2	2.89	.95
Censorship	352	25.3	2.75	1.07
Business people	351	24.5	2.75	1.02
Government officials	352	22.4	2.68	1.03
Politicians	352	22.2	2.66	1.06
Pressure groups	350	18.9	2.60	1.02
Public relations	352	17.6	2.72	.90
Military, police and state security	352	15.9	2.49	1.02
Religious considerations	353	10.8	2.18	1.01

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 South Korean journalists, the use of search engines and the importance of technical skills had most profoundly changed over the last five years (see Table 5). Overall, the journalists’ responses point to a substantive deterioration of working conditions in the profession. A large majority of the respondents reported an increase in their average working hours. Furthermore, half of the interviewed journalists felt that the time available for researching stories had dropped. Another major concern for South Korean journalists was the decrease in journalism’s public credibility.

Table 5: Changes in journalism

	N	Percentage saying has “increased”	Percentage saying has “decreased”
The use of search engines	254	92.1	.4
Technical skills	254	72.8	6.3
Average working hours of journalists	254	67.7	9.1
Interactions of journalists with their audiences	254	54.7	16.5
Journalists’ freedom to make editorial decisions	254	29.9	36.6
The relevance of journalism for society	254	23.6	48.4
Having a university degree	253	20.6	21.3
The credibility of journalism	254	18.5	63.8
Having a degree in journalism or a related field	253	17.0	32.0
Time available for researching stories	254	14.6	52.4

Question: Please tell me whether you think there has been an increase or a decrease in the importance of following aspects of work in South Korea. 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.

Influences on journalism and news production have changed as well. With the exception of ethical standards and journalism education, influences on journalists have increased for all sources mentioned in Table 6. Here, it was especially the influence of competition and social media that had strengthened the most during the past five years. A majority of South Korean journalists reported an increase for market- and audience-related influences – such as profit making pressures, audience involvement in news production, audience feedback, and advertising considerations. Furthermore, seven out of ten respondents reported that the influence of user-generated contents (such as blogs) had increased as well. Ethical standards were the source of influence that had weakened the most over the years.

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

Table 6: Changes in influences on journalism

	N	Percentage saying has “strengthened”	Percentage saying has “weakened”
Competition	255	88.2	3.1
Social media	255	86.7	3.1
Profit making pressures	254	84.3	3.1
Audience involvement in news production	255	80.4	2.4
Audience feedback	255	79.2	3.5
Advertising considerations	254	76.0	3.1
User-generated contents, such as blogs	255	70.2	7.1
Public relations	255	46.7	9.4
Audience research	255	40.0	11.0
Pressure toward sensational news	255	38.4	16.1
Western ways of practicing journalism	252	37.7	20.2
Ethical standards	255	32.2	42.0
Journalism education	255	27.5	31.8

Question: Please tell me to what extent these influences have become stronger or weaker during the past five years in South Korea. 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, South Korean journalists turned out to have minimal faith in institutions. Approximately one out of ten respondents had trust in the judicial system, trade unions, and religious leaders (see Table 7). Major political institutions – such as the parliament and the government – as well as the police, were found trustworthy by only four percent of South Korean journalists. Even their own institution – the news media – was trusted by only a minority of the journalists (6.8%). Overall, there was a fairly high agreement among the respondents over the question of institutional trust, as low standard deviation values indicate. Disagreement was most pronounced for the judiciary/the courts 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	338	13.3	2.74	.76
Trade unions	338	9.5	2.66	.73
Religious leaders	338	8.6	2.55	.81
The news media	338	6.8	2.78	.63
The police	338	4.7	2.54	.72
The government	338	4.4	2.45	.72
The parliament	338	3.6	2.34	.68
The military	338	2.1	2.19	.74
Politicians in general	338	1.2	2.17	.67
Political parties	338	.3	2.14	.62

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>	29,000 working journalists (estimated)
<i>Sampling method:</i>	-
<i>Sample size:</i>	355 working journalists
<i>Interview methods:</i>	face-to-face, telephone, mail/e-mail and online
<i>Response rate:</i>	-
<i>Period of field research:</i>	03/2014-12/2014