

Australia

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INTRODUCTION

After nearly ten years of conservative rule, the elections of 2022 resulted in the establishment of a Labor Party government under Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, who went on to also win the most recent election in 2025. The government's focus has been on addressing climate change and enhancing social policies, while an attempt to recognize the First Peoples of Australia in the constitution failed in 2023. The Covid-19 pandemic had severe impacts on the Australian economy, particularly its tertiary education sector, due to first the closure of the country's borders, as well as subsequently various lockdowns in some parts of the country that lasted for considerable amounts of time.

Australian journalism traditionally follows an Anglo-American approach that places emphasis on journalism's role as the Fourth Estate. It is thus marked by a commitment to journalism's monitorial role, independence from the state and strong professional standards to guide journalistic behavior. While journalism education used to be based on the apprenticeship model, the past 40 years have seen a substantial growth in university courses as a key, additional component.

The digital transformation across the globe has also had considerable impact on Australian journalism, which has operated in a highly centralized market. The recent decade has seen substantial challenges to established business models of the industry, resulting in large-scale job losses, mergers of some news organizations as well as the disappearance of countless news outlets, particularly in local and regional areas. Journalism as such has become increasingly more precarious as an occupation. A range of new, so-called peripheral actors have emerged, who are also challenging established journalism's cultural authority in society. In 2023, Rupert Murdoch stepped down from his position as chairman of News Corp, one of the country's most influential news organizations, which has traditionally pursued a strong conservative agenda. He was followed by his son, Lachlan Murdoch.

BACKGROUNDS OF JOURNALISTS

Australian journalism is marked by an almost even gender split. While 50.7% of those surveyed identified as male, 48.4% identified as female. The average age is 46.4 years (SD = 14.6; Median = 47.0). On the whole, Australian journalists are highly educated: Two-thirds (68.3%) have attained a Bachelor's degree, 10.9% a Master's degree and a further 2.6% a doctorate. In addition, three-quarters (77.9%) have received formal education or professional training in journalism. Of those, 75.5% studied a journalism degree at university, 48.3% completed a journalism apprenticeship or cadetship, while 27.5% completed a short-term course or diploma.

JOURNALISTS IN THE NEWSROOM

Two-thirds of our sample were in non-management roles (67.6%), while 14.6% worked in top management and 17.9% in middle management. Journalists' average work experience in journalism was relatively high at 21.1 years (SD: 13.7; Median: 20 years). On average, Australian full-time journalists work 45.0 hours per week (SD: 9.20, Median 45).

Most Australian journalists in our sample reported having a permanent contract (71.4% on a full-time and 8.9% on a part-time basis). Only a small number had fixed-terms contracts (4.3% full-time and 2.2% part-time), while there were 9.4% freelance or self-employed journalists. The vast majority (82.2%) received all their income from journalism, while 17.8% also received income from other sources. Union membership stands at 61.5%. Relatively few journalists specialize in just one beat – only 37.7% do so, while 62.3% work across a range of beats.

Print journalism still holds much sway in Australia. Almost half (46.3%) of journalists work at an organization that has traditionally focused on newspaper publishing. A further 14.6% work in a TV organization, while 12.3% work in radio. The remainder are spread somewhat evenly across magazine companies (6.6%), and news agencies (5.4%). Only a few work at native online news media organizations (4.6%).

The vast majority (73.0%) of our sample worked for news organizations that were national or transnational in scope, while one-quarter (24.4%) worked in local or regional organizations. Of those in salaried employment, one-quarter (25.0%) worked for public service media, whereas the remainder (74.5%) were employed in private or commercial media organizations.

Stress levels are considerable. One third (33.4%) said they felt stressed out at work very often, while a further 28.8% said they did so often. Only 11% rarely or never felt stressed, while 26.7% did so sometimes.

SAFETY AND WORK-RELATED CONCERNS

Australian journalists’ biggest concerns regarding threats they have experienced relate to demeaning or hateful speech directed at them, as well as public discrediting of their work (see Table 1). Other, slightly less frequent but nevertheless worrying concerns revolve around workplace bullying, intimidation and questioning of journalists’ personal morality. Physical attacks, arrests or office raids appear to be extremely rare occurrences.

In relation to broader work-related concerns, nearly half of Australian journalists in our sample say they are concerned about their emotional and mental well-being, as well as that those who harm journalists in Australia go unpunished (Table 2). Only around two in ten are concerned about their physical well-being or worried about losing their job in journalism within the next 12 months.

TABLE 1. EXPERIENCED THREATS

	N	Very often	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Demeaning or hateful speech directed at you	371	7.5%	20.5%	36.9%	24.3%	10.8%
Public discrediting of your work	371	6.2%	15.6%	33.7%	23.2%	21.3%
Surveillance	370	0.8%	1.6%	11.4%	20.8%	65.4%
Hacking or blocking of social media accounts or websites	371	0.8%	1.9%	10.2%	19.1%	67.9%
Arrests, detentions or imprisonment	370	0.3%	0.0%	0.8%	3.2%	95.7%
Legal actions against you because of your work	370	0.3%	4.1%	11.6%	19.7%	64.3%
Stalking	371	0.3%	1.3%	5.7%	11.3%	81.4%
Other threats or intimidations directed at you	370	2.4%	4.9%	17.8%	29.2%	45.7%
Sexual assault or sexual harassment	361	0.3%	0.8%	5.3%	10.8%	82.8%
Other physical attacks	370	0.0%	0.8%	1.9%	7.3%	90.0%
Coercion	371	0.3%	1.3%	4.9%	17.3%	76.3%
Questioning of your personal morality	370	6.2%	9.5%	24.9%	27.3%	32.2%
Others using your byline for fabricated or manipulated stories	370	0.5%	1.1%	6.2%	8.1%	84.1%
Others disseminating your personal information	371	0.3%	2.2%	5.9%	15.4%	76.3%
Workplace bullying	371	1.9%	4.0%	15.4%	23.7%	55.0%
Abductions	371	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	100%
Office raids or seizures or damage to equipment	370	0.0%	0.0%	1.6%	4.1%	94.3%
Intimidation that targets family	370	0.3%	0.3%	2.4%	4.6%	92.4%

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	370	23.5%	2.52	1.16
Concerned about physical well-being	370	20.8%	2.22	1.20
Concerned about emotional and mental wellbeing	370	44.6%	3.03	1.23
Concerned that those who harm journalists in Australia go unpunished	370	44.3%	3.27	1.07

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

Australian journalists are highly supportive of journalism’s monitorial role which includes holding those in power to account and being a detached observer (Table 3). At the same time, they strongly reject collaborative roles aimed at supporting those in power. Interventionist roles also receive some small support among journalists, while accommodative roles focusing on entertainment and everyday life are supported by around one-third.

TABLE 3. JOURNALISTIC ROLES

	N	Very/extremely important	Mean	SD
Be a detached observer	370	74.6%	4.02	1.01
Monitor and scrutinize those in power	371	83.3%	4.25	1.04
Shine a light on society’s problems	371	80.3%	4.24	1.00
Motivate people to participate in politics	370	21.9%	2.53	1.28
Provide analysis of current affairs	371	61.7%	3.67	1.24
Let people express their views	371	70.1%	3.90	1.04
Provide information people need to form political opinion	371	67.4%	3.73	1.33
Advocate for social change	371	38.8%	2.99	1.37
Influence public opinion	371	21.6%	2.56	1.18
Set the political agenda	370	16.5%	2.28	1.21
Promote peace and tolerance	371	42.0%	3.17	1.29
Educate the audience	370	84.3%	4.33	0.96
Point toward possible solutions to society’s problems	371	57.7%	3.53	1.22
Speak on behalf of the marginalized	369	58.0%	3.54	1.27
Support national development	371	32.1%	2.77	1.28
Support government policy	370	2.4%	1.49	0.82
Convey a positive image of political leaders	371	0.3%	1.26	0.56
Provide entertainment and relaxation	371	34.8%	2.92	1.27
Provide the kind of news that attracts the largest audience	370	35.7%	2.96	1.22
Provide advice, orientation and direction for daily life	371	15.9%	2.32	1.18
Tell stories that emotionally move the audience	371	58.2%	3.58	1.08
Support efforts to protect public health	370	55.9%	3.41	1.30
Counteract disinformation	371	83.6%	4.29	1.01

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

In line with their roles, a substantial number of journalists feel it is possible to represent objective reality in their reporting (Table 4). There is a strong emphasis on facts, albeit with some apparent contradictions. While a large majority believe facts must still be interpreted to be made sense of and that journalists should alert audiences about untrue claims, they also believe that journalists should let the facts speak for themselves. Journalists also broadly reject subjective approaches and believe they can keep their personal beliefs out of their work.

TABLE 4. JOURNALISTIC EPISTEMOLOGIES

	N	Agree/ strongly agree	Mean	SD
Interpretation is necessary to make sense of facts	354	80.8%	4.00	0.77
Truth is inevitably shaped by those in power	356	33.7%	2.95	1.01
It is impossible for journalists to withhold their personal beliefs from reporting	355	23.4%	2.69	0.97
Things are either true or false. there is no in-between	355	14.6%	2.37	0.97
It is possible to represent objective reality in reporting	355	70.4%	3.75	0.78
Journalists should trust their instincts in deciding what's true and what's not	356	36.2%	2.94	1.03
Journalists should intuitively know what the final story will be	356	16.6%	2.54	0.93
Journalists should let the facts speak for themselves	354	83.3%	4.01	0.79
Journalists should be part of a community to portray it accurately	355	54.6%	3.47	1.11
Journalists should make their standpoint transparent in their work	355	36.9%	3.03	1.09
Journalists should alert audiences when a source's claim is untruthful	355	90.7%	4.28	0.70

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

Australian journalists mostly place emphasis on professional standards as guidance in ethically difficult situations (Table 5). However, a substantial number also believe that specific situations may also guide such behavior. A subjective approach is overwhelmingly rejected. In terms of controversial reporting methods, journalists tend to feel that those that reveal wrongdoing by those in power can be justified most easily, while accepting money from sources, claiming to be somebody else or misrepresenting promotional content as news are typically rejected.

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	371	56.1%	3.53	1.13
What is ethical for journalists should be determined by professional standards unless extraordinary circumstances require disregarding them	370	61.4%	3.53	1.04
What is ethical for journalists should depend on each specific situation	370	44.1%	3.09	1.20
What is ethical for journalists should be a matter of personal judgment	368	16.8%	2.34	1.06

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	353	0.0%	17.6%
Using hidden recording devices	351	0.0%	54.4%
Using confidential business or government documents without authorization	350	8.9%	71.4%
Using the personal materials of powerful people. such as documents and photos. without their permission	354	4.8%	69.5%
Using the personal materials of ordinary people. such as documents and photos. without their permission	351	0.9%	54.1%
Paying people for confidential information	351	0.9%	30.5%
Accepting money from sources	358	0.0%	2.2%
Accepting a free product or service from sources	348	0.3%	31.3%
Producing content that mimics news stories but hides its promotional nature	355	0.0%	10.4%
Publishing or broadcasting stories with information that is not yet verified	354	0.3%	29.1%

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

Australian journalists' perceived autonomy is relatively high. Around one-quarter believe they are free to select the news stories they work on or to decide which aspects of a story should be emphasized (Table 7). At the same time, only 57% believe there is substantial media freedom in Australia.

TABLE 7. PERCEPTIONS OF EDITORIAL AUTONOMY AND MEDIA FREEDOM

	N	A great deal/ complete freedom	Mean	SD
Freedom in selecting the news stories	370	72.2%	3.81	0.76
Freedom in deciding which aspects of a story should be emphasized	370	76.2%	3.92	0.76
Media freedom in Australia	358	57.0%	3.55	0.63

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

EDITORIAL INFLUENCES

Procedural aspects like journalism ethics, access to information, time limits, media laws and regulation, as well as availability of news-gathering resources, are the influences most acutely felt by Australian journalists. Organizational influences rank second, while economic and especially political influences are perceived the least strongly. It is important to bear in mind that these are journalists' perceptions, however, which are subject to potential desirability bias and the fact such influences may often operate more strongly at senior editorial levels and are less acutely noticed by reporters.

TABLE 8. EDITORIAL INFLUENCES

	N	Very/extremely influential	Mean	SD
Peers on the news staff	347	35.2%	3.12	1.01
Editorial supervisors and higher editors	341	61.3%	3.67	1.03
The business managers of the news organization	283	17.3%	2.23	1.23
The owners of the news organization	267	18.4%	2.19	1.32
Editorial policy	339	53.1%	3.44	1.24
Advertising considerations	255	12.2%	2.00	1.14
Profit expectations	244	17.6%	2.21	1.29
Audience research and data	342	43.3%	3.21	1.20
Availability of news-gathering resources	348	51.7%	3.40	1.10
Time limits	357	60.5%	3.66	1.10
Journalism ethics	355	69.3%	3.85	1.17
Self-censorship	320	26.6%	2.52	1.29
Personal values and beliefs	346	39.3%	3.08	1.25
Colleagues in other media	353	14.2%	2.50	1.03
Friends, acquaintances and family	349	6.3%	2.14	0.95
Feedback from the audience	362	24.0%	2.85	1.01
Competing news organizations	353	17.6%	2.55	1.06
Media laws and regulation	346	59.5%	3.61	1.15
Access to information	358	69.3%	3.79	0.93
Government censorship	295	20.7%	2.23	1.24
Government officials	316	8.9%	1.96	1.04
Politicians	322	9.9%	2.02	1.08
Business people	329	8.8%	1.96	1.02
Public relations	335	6.9%	2.01	0.96
Relationships with news sources	343	30.3%	2.91	1.16
Police	298	16.1%	2.20	1.16
Issue advocacy groups	316	11.4%	2.14	1.04
Scientists or health experts	328	31.1%	2.83	1.17
Religious groups and institutions	285	2.8%	1.58	0.81

Question: "Here is a list of potential sources of influence. Please tell me how much influence each of the following has on your work as a journalist." (Scale: 5 = Extremely influential; 4 = Very influential; 3 = Moderately influential; 2 = Slightly influential; 1 = Not at all influential.)