

Croatia

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INTRODUCTION

Croatia is a parliamentary multiparty democracy with regular free and fair elections, generally respected civil liberties, and political stability, though corruption, minority rights (ethnic and LGBT+), and media freedom issues persist. An EU member since July 2013, Croatia's economy is growing (GDP +3% in 2025), driven by consumption and low unemployment, but faces high inflation and an aging, shrinking population threatening labor market sustainability. Socially, Croatia ranks high on the Human Development Index, but demographic decline, skill shortages, and political polarization pose challenges.

The media system aims for transparency but faces obstacles: journalists work under poor conditions, political/economic pressures, media capture, editorial interventions, and financial instability. While regulation provides media freedom, law enforcement and journalist safety remain problematic.

Data collection for this study took place between autumn 2022 and the end of 2023 when the number of strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs) increased. At the same time, the government proposed a draft law that would allow authorities to pressure journalists to reveal their sources, and editors to withhold articles without explanations. Though not directly criminalizing journalists, these Criminal Code amendments may chill sources and whistleblowers, restricting investigative journalism.

BACKGROUNDS OF JOURNALISTS

Croatian journalists are on average 44.0 years old (SD = 12.0, Median = 43), and 64.0% of respondents were women. Majority of them have university degrees: 68.1% have master's or equivalent degree, 12.5% are with bachelor's or equivalent degree and 3.6% acquired doctorate. Therefore, 73.9% have formal education or professional training in journalism. Almost 80.0% of respondents have acquired professional training through journalism apprenticeship/cadetship while 44.6% have been trained via short-term courses.

JOURNALISTS IN THE NEWSROOM

In terms of the background of their main employers, the most common are TV organizations (36.1%) and online media (28.7%), while 14.2% work for a radio outlet, 11.0% for an organization focused on newspaper publishing, 3.0% for magazine companies, 2.0% for news agencies and 4.4% have no main employer. Majority of journalists in Croatia perform no managerial role (45.4%), while 28.9% are top managers and 25.7% is on middle management positions. Regarding area of coverage, most journalists work in national/transnational media (60.1%) while 38.0% work in local media. Also, majority of surveyed journalists work in commercial media (55.0%), 18.5% work for public service media, 12.6% in non-profit media, 9.6% in state run media and 2.3% of journalists claim not to have a main employer. Only one of five Croatian journalists cover a specific topic while almost 80% work on variety of beats or subject areas.

On average, Croatian journalists had 18.6 years working experience (SD = 11.4; Median = 18) and work on average 41.7 hours per week (SD = 13.1; Median = 40; for those in full-time employment). Reported stress level is relatively high, and 62% of journalists felt stressed at work often or very often.

More than two thirds of Croatian journalists have full-time contract (74% permanently and 5.4% temporary employed) and 16.7% are self-employed or freelance journalists. About half of surveyed journalists (50.5%) have some additional income apart from journalism which indicates that journalists' salaries in Croatia are relatively low and do not cover basic living needs. Nevertheless, majority of respondents (53.7%) were not members of any professional association.

SAFETY AND WORK-RELATED CONCERNS

Among the most common threats to safety experienced by the Croatian journalists (see Table 1) are verbal attacks or hateful speech, public discrediting of journalists' work and surveillance. Despite respondents experiencing them less frequently, worrying are occurrences of threats like questioning journalists' personal morality, other threats and intimidations directed to journalists and situations when others used journalists' byline for fabricated or manipulated stories.

Croatian journalists are the most concerned that those who harm journalists go unpunished and about their emotional and mental wellbeing while concerns about losing job within next 12 months and their physical well-being are of relatively low occurrence (see Table 2).

TABLE 1. EXPERIENCED THREATS

	N	Very often	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Demeaning or hateful speech directed at you	313	8.6%	15.7%	39.9%	23.6%	12.1%
Public discrediting of your work	313	6.4%	10.9%	32.3%	24.0%	26.5%
Surveillance	313	4.2%	13.4%	28.8%	18.8%	34.8%
Hacking or blocking of social media accounts or websites	313	0.6%	3.8%	14.4%	14.4%	66.8%
Arrests, detentions or imprisonment	313	0.0%	3.8%	0.3%	1.9%	97.4%
Legal actions against you because of your work	313	1.3%	3.8%	12.8%	15.0%	67.4%
Stalking	313	0.0%	1.9%	6.4%	15.7%	76.0%
Other threats or intimidations directed at you	313	2.9%	5.8%	19.2%	33.9%	38.3%
Sexual assault or sexual harassment	313	0.3%	2.2%	7.7%	9.9%	79.9%
Other physical attacks	313	0.0%	1.0%	3.8%	11.2%	84.0%
Coercion	313	0.0%	0.3%	3.5%	7.0%	89.1%
Questioning of your personal morality	313	2.9%	6.7%	20.1%	27.8%	42.5%
Others using your byline for fabricated or manipulated stories	313	1.0%	3.5%	17.6%	26.2%	51.8%
Others disseminating your personal information	313	1.0%	2.9%	9.3%	18.5%	68.4%
Workplace bullying	313	1.0%	3.2%	12.1%	17.6%	66.1%
Abductions	313	0.0%	0.0%	0.3%	0.6%	99.0%
Office raids or seizures or damage to equipment	313	0.3%	0.0%	1.9%	1.9%	95.8%
Intimidation that targets family	313	0.0%	0.6%	7.3%	12.1%	95.8%

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	313	10.9%	2.17	1.07
Concerned about physical well-being	313	7.7%	1.97	0.96
Concerned about emotional and mental wellbeing	313	41.2%	3.03	1.27
Concerned that those who harm journalists in Croatia go unpunished	313	79.2%	3.93	0.86

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

Croatian journalists strongly support interventionist roles (see Table 3) like educating public, promotion of peace and tolerance, shining a light on society problems, pointing toward possible solutions, counteract disinformation, etc. Traditional journalistic roles continue to be pertinent, although they are less widely endorsed. Only a very small percentage of respondents identified politically supportive journalistic roles as relevant.

TABLE 3. JOURNALISTIC ROLES

	N	Very/extremely important	Mean	SD
Be a detached observer	313	75.7%	4.07	1.04
Monitor and scrutinize those in power	313	72.8%	3.94	1.13
Shine a light on society's problems	313	90.4%	4.38	0.80
Motivate people to participate in politics	313	52.1%	3.41	1.18
Provide analysis of current affairs	313	85.6%	4.18	0.82
Let people express their views	313	86.3%	4.23	0.82
Provide information people need to form political opinion	313	78.3%	4.08	1.01
Advocate for social change	313	80.2%	4.21	0.87
Influence public opinion	313	71.2%	3.85	0.90
Set the political agenda	313	32.9%	2.99	1.10
Promote peace and tolerance	313	93.9%	4.51	0.68
Educate the audience	313	94.6%	4.50	0.70
Point toward possible solutions to society's problems	313	89.8%	4.34	0.83
Speak on behalf of the marginalized	313	85.6%	4.27	0.86
Support national development	313	62.6%	3.70	0.97
Support government policy	313	3.2%	1.78	0.95
Convey a positive image of political leaders	313	3.5%	1.64	0.91
Provide entertainment and relaxation	313	31.6%	2.80	1.19
Provide the kind of news that attracts the largest audience	313	55.6%	3.48	1.14
Provide advice, orientation and direction for daily life	313	62.6%	3.66	0.93
Tell stories that emotionally move the audience	313	52.1%	3.50	0.97
Support efforts to protect public health	313	87.5%	4.23	0.85
Counteract disinformation	313	89.1%	4.42	0.94
Discuss future implications of current events	313	80.8%	4.05	0.87

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

Several epistemological claims are widely shared among the Croatian journalists (see Table 4). Respondents agreed the most with the claim that journalists should alert audiences when a source's claim is untruthful. They also agree that it is possible to represent objective reality in reporting. At the same time more than two thirds of Croatian journalists claim interpretation is necessary to make sense of facts and that journalist should make their standpoint transparent in their work. The greatest disagreement was with the claim that truth is inevitably shaped by those in power.

TABLE 4. JOURNALISTIC EPISTEMOLOGIES

	N	Agree/ strongly agree	Mean	SD
Interpretation is necessary to make sense of facts	304	69.1%	3.69	0.84
Truth is inevitably shaped by those in power	304	7.9%	1.95	0.97
It is impossible for journalists to withhold their personal beliefs from reporting	304	23.0%	2.67	0.99
Things are either true or false, there is no in-between	304	17.4%	2.52	1.01
It is possible to represent objective reality in reporting	304	70.4%	3.71	0.82
Journalists should trust their instincts in deciding what's true and what's not	304	29.6%	2.95	0.94
Journalists should intuitively know what the final story will be	304	42.8%	3.15	1.02
Journalists should let the facts speak for themselves	304	52.3%	3.45	0.89
Journalists should be part of a community to portray it accurately	304	25.0%	2.75	1.00
Journalists should make their standpoint transparent in their work	302	62.6%	3.62	0.90
Journalists should alert audiences when a source's claim is untruthful	302	89.5%	3.62	0.71

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

Journalists in Croatia strongly agreed on the importance of professional standards regardless of situation and personal judgments (see Table 5). When evaluating the acceptability of controversial reporting practices (see Table 6), journalists found accepting money from sources, producing hidden promotional stories and publishing stories with unverified information as the most unacceptable. Most journalists found it acceptable to use hidden recording devices, publish unauthorized government or public documents and use the personal materials of powerful people without their permission.

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	313	88.5%	4.37	0.82
What is ethical for journalists should be determined by professional standards unless extraordinary circumstances require disregarding them	313	13.7%	2.15	1.04
What is ethical for journalists should depend on each specific situation	313	18.2%	2.30	1.07
What is ethical for journalists should be a matter of personal judgment	313	19.8%	2.35	1.14

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	313	0.6%	41.9%
Using hidden recording devices	313	0.6%	65.8%
Using confidential business or government documents without authorization	313	8.0%	65.5%
Using the personal materials of powerful people, such as documents and photos, without their permission	313	5.1%	61.3%
Using the personal materials of ordinary people, such as documents and photos, without their permission	313	0.6%	18.2%
Paying people for confidential information	313	1.3%	30.0%
Accepting money from sources	313	0.3%	2.9%
Accepting a free product or service from sources	313	1.3%	23.0%
Producing content that mimics news stories but hides its promotional nature	313	0.6%	18.5%
Publishing or broadcasting stories with information that is not yet verified	313	0.3%	8.0%

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

Croatian journalists reported moderate to low general level of media freedom in the country and a higher level of their editorial autonomy. More than two thirds of journalists asserted a complete or great deal of freedom in selecting news stories and in deciding which aspects of the story should be emphasized.

TABLE 7. PERCEPTIONS OF EDITORIAL AUTONOMY AND MEDIA FREEDOM

	N	A great deal/ complete freedom	Mean	SD
Freedom in selecting the news stories	313	75.7%	3.94	0.91
Freedom in deciding which aspects of a story should be emphasized	313	72.8%	3.92	0.95
Media freedom in Croatia	300	16.0%	2.83	0.72

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

EDITORIAL INFLUENCES

Croatian journalists found journalism ethics, personal values and beliefs, time limits, availability of news-gathering resources and audience research and data as the most influential internal factors influencing news production (see Table 8). The most influential external factors were access to information, media laws and regulations and feedback from the audiences.

TABLE 8. EDITORIAL INFLUENCES

	N	Very/extremely influential	Mean	SD
Peers on the news staff	297	34.3%	2.83	1.22
Editorial supervisors and higher editors	283	50.9%	3.24	1.35
The business managers of the news organization	281	42.3%	2.89	1.50
The owners of the news organization	276	42.4%	2.92	1.49
Editorial policy	292	53.8%	3.42	1.30
Advertising considerations	286	26.9%	2.36	1.44
Profit expectations	291	33.3%	2.58	1.49
Audience research and data	290	35.2%	2.81	1.34
Availability of news-gathering resources	299	62.2%	3.59	1.25
Time limits	301	63.8%	3.73	1.23
Journalism ethics	300	87.7%	4.37	0.99
Self-censorship	299	20.4%	2.26	1.25
Personal values and beliefs	295	69.5%	3.88	1.17
Colleagues in other media	303	12.5%	2.10	1.07
Friends, acquaintances and family	301	13.0%	1.97	1.12
Feedback from the audience	300	46.7%	3.24	1.26
Competing news organizations	299	20.1%	2.24	1.27
Media laws and regulation	297	49.8%	3.24	1.26
Access to information	302	56.3%	3.53	1.16
Government censorship	299	11.0%	1.79	1.13
Government officials	295	10.8%	1.66	1.10
Politicians	301	14.0%	1.87	1.22
Business people	293	13.7%	1.91	1.19
Public relations	300	18.0%	2.19	1.27
Relationships with news sources	294	26.5%	2.61	1.28
Police	299	6.0%	1.48	0.95
Issue advocacy groups	295	10.5%	1.88	1.09
Scientists or health experts	296	31.6%	1.49	0.97
Religious groups and institutions	293	7.8%	1.19	0.66
Military	294	2.7%	1.18	0.62
Para-military groups, militias and similar groups	287	3.1%	1.23	0.71
Organized crime and criminal groups	292	3.8%	1.11	0.48
Terrorist groups	291	1.4%	2.59	1.34

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.)