

Estonia

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INTRODUCTION

Estonia is a member of the European Union and NATO, and a country with a rather stable political system. Since 1991 it has been a democratic country. While having diversity on the party landscape, the last decades' coalitions, including mainly liberal parties, have been ruling. However, the conservative parties have significant support among the population, too. Estonia is well known worldwide as an innovative country with a digitally advanced public sector. The population is highly educated, and the country stands high in different international rankings, including a high media literacy level among various population groups.

Estonian journalistic tradition started centuries ago as a part of the Baltic-German press system. The development of modern journalism was disrupted by Soviet rule, where journalists, for almost 50 years, worked in the conditions of censorship by the ruling Communist Party. After regaining independence, the dual media system was built with strong public service media, diverse private media, and relatively high trust in media among audiences.

Estonia has politically independent media and high press freedom (in 2025 the 2nd place according to Reporters Without Borders). Any political attempt to influence journalism or threaten its autonomy will be responded to with heavy public discussion. Since being a small media market, the sustainability of the media is more threatened by economic factors. Advertising money flows out of the market due to global capitalism and very large online platforms. However, in the last decades the domestic digital media have been successful in selling digital subscriptions: and the future goal is to fine tune digital subscriptions further to offer a more personalized approach content-wise to the subscriber. After the start of the full-scale war in Ukraine, the Estonian government gave more support to the domestic media for producing quality news content in both Estonian and Russian language, since Estonia has a substantial Russian-speaking population group. There is widespread support for Ukraine in Estonia.

BACKGROUNDS OF JOURNALISTS

The sample of Estonian journalists (N = 299) is balanced in terms of gender: 51.9% of them defined themselves as female. On average, they were 41.7 years old (SD = 12.4; Median = 41.0). They were highly educated: 45.9% of them have obtained a Bachelor's degree or equivalent, 34.5% hold a Master's degree or equivalent and 1.0% obtained a doctorate, 18.2% listed high-school education as their highest educational level and some of them have been visiting university courses, but did not obtain a degree. Almost half of the journalists report their educational background in journalism (45.8%) and got their training from a university.

JOURNALISTS IN THE NEWSROOM

In terms of the background of their main employers, most of the journalists in the Estonian sample worked for newspapers (38.3%) or for internet-native media (30.9%). The sample included 12.8% of journalists working for TV organizations and 10.7% for radio outlets only. Very few journalists worked for magazine companies (2.0%) or for a news agency (1.0%). The biggest share of them worked for national (82.3%) and fewer for local or regional media (16.7%), 77.4% for private and 20.5% for public service media. Most of the questioned journalists had a full-time permanent contract (86.9%). However, at least a half of journalists reported to get additional income from outside the field of journalism (50.8%). They worked on average 42.2 hours a week (SD = 10.4; Median = 40; for those in full-time employment). The majority of journalists were not members of a union (73.8%).

The Estonian sample consisted of 72.6% journalists having no management role, 20.6% having middle management role, and 7.0% of journalists having top management role. Their working experience in journalism is on average 16.4 years (SD = 11.7; Median = 15). Most of them were not specialized in any specific beat and covered different topics (75.1%). Journalists in the Estonian sample perceived their work as rather stressful, while 33.7% of them reported feeling stressed out often and 34.4% having it sometimes.

SAFETY AND WORK-RELATED CONCERNS

Journalists in the Estonian sample did not report serious safety concerns related to their work. However, they had experiences with demeaning or hateful speech and public discrediting of their work (see Table 1). Additionally, some journalists have experienced surveillance (only 68.1% never experienced), disseminating their personal information (77.2% never experienced), stalking (83.9% never experienced) and legal actions against their work (84.2% never experienced). Physical and other serious actions against them have been rare or almost non-existent. However, any attack against journalists needs to be treated with the utmost attention.

13.4% of the respondents were concerned about their physical well-being (see Table 2) – the number is considerably high for Estonian society, which is one of the safest in the world. More than one third report that they are concerned about their emotional and mental wellbeing (38.4%).

TABLE 1. EXPERIENCED THREATS

	N	Very often	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Demeaning or hateful speech directed at you	298	6.7%	12.8%	33.6%	30.5%	16.4%
Public discrediting of your work	298	8.4%	15.8%	29.5%	24.8%	21.5%
Surveillance	298	1.7%	2.7%	12.4%	15.1%	68.1%
Hacking or blocking of social media accounts or websites	298	0.7%	0.3%	3.7%	5.4%	89.9%
Arrests, detentions or imprisonment	298	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	1.3%	98.7%
Legal actions against you because of your work	298	0.7%	0.7%	5.4%	9.1%	84.2%
Stalking	298	0.0%	1.0%	3.7%	11.4%	83.9%
Other threats or intimidations directed at you	298	0.7%	2.7%	13.4%	26.2%	57.0%
Sexual assault or sexual harassment	298	0.0%	0.0%	1.3%	1.7%	97.0%
Other physical attacks	298	0.0%	0.0%	0.7%	2.7%	96.3%
Others disseminating your personal information	298	0.3%	1.3%	4.7%	16.4%	77.2%
Workplace bullying	298	0.7%	2.0%	4.4%	12.8%	80.2%

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	292	14.0%	2.16	1.10
Concerned about physical well-being	292	13.4%	1.88	1.15
Concerned about emotional and mental wellbeing	292	38.4%	2.83	1.36
Concerned that those who harm journalists in Estonia go unpunished	292	33.2%	2.71	1.33

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

Journalists in the Estonian sample perceived having mainly a monitorial role in society (see Table 3). Only a few of them expressed willingness to intervene with politics or, even fewer, collaborate with government and politicians.

TABLE 3. JOURNALISTIC ROLES

	N	Very/extremely important	Mean	SD
Be a detached observer	299	90.3%	4.47	0.73
Monitor and scrutinize those in power	299	79.6%	4.18	1.01
Shine a light on society's problems	299	88.0%	4.52	0.79
Motivate people to participate in politics	299	22.1%	2.58	1.21
Provide analysis of current affairs	299	68.9%	3.90	1.10
Let people express their views	299	72.6%	3.97	0.99
Provide information people need to form political opinion	299	60.5%	3.63	1.25
Advocate for social change	299	48.8%	3.37	1.23
Influence public opinion	299	43.1%	3.32	1.17
Set the political agenda	299	47.5%	3.37	1.21
Promote peace and tolerance	299	64.2%	3.81	1.14
Educate the audience	299	80.3%	4.29	1.00
Point toward possible solutions to society's problems	298	77.5%	4.12	0.95
Speak on behalf of the marginalized	299	49.8%	3.42	1.13
Support national development	297	51.5%	3.49	1.13
Support government policy	297	5.4%	1.79	0.96
Convey a positive image of political leaders	299	2.4%	1.35	0.73
Provide entertainment and relaxation	298	33.6%	2.92	1.28
Provide the kind of news that attracts the largest audience	298	66.8%	3.81	1.10
Provide advice, orientation and direction for daily life	297	44.1%	3.21	1.23
Tell stories that emotionally move the audience	299	70.6%	3.98	1.07
Support efforts to protect public health	298	52.3%	3.47	1.19
Counteract disinformation	299	85.3%	4.36	0.95
Discuss future implications of current events	299	65.5%	3.76	1.08

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

Journalists in the Estonian sample perceived the importance of context and interpretations in reporting. There were few respondents who felt strongly that there is an universal truth, the majority of respondents perceived the world as a rather relational one. However, most of the respondents believed that it is possible to represent objective reality in reporting (see Table 4).

TABLE 4. JOURNALISTIC EPISTEMOLOGIES

	N	Agree/ strongly agree	Mean	SD
Interpretation is necessary to make sense of facts	274	67.2%	3.72	1.01
Truth is inevitably shaped by those in power	274	60.6%	3.54	1.02
It is impossible for journalists to withhold their personal beliefs from reporting	274	35.4%	3.03	1.01
Things are either true or false, there is no in-between	274	9.9%	2.12	1.02
It is possible to represent objective reality in reporting	273	68.5%	3.68	0.97

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 the Estonian sample stressed the relevance of ethics for their work (see Table 5). As visible from Table 6, Estonian journalists claimed it unacceptable to take money from sources, publish stories without verifying information, and publish promotional stories.

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	283	86.9%	4.30	0.79
What is ethical for journalists should be determined by professional standards unless extraordinary circumstances require disregarding them	283	51.9%	3.32	1.21
What is ethical for journalists should depend on each specific situation	283	35.0%	2.76	1.29
What is ethical for journalists should be a matter of personal judgment	283	34.3%	2.83	1.32

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	285	1.1%	63.5%
Using hidden recording devices	285	1.1%	63.9%
Using confidential business or government documents without authorization	285	8.8%	60.4%
Using the personal materials of powerful people, such as documents and photos, without their permission	285	1.8%	54.7%
Using the personal materials of ordinary people, such as documents and photos, without their permission	285	1.4%	26.7%
Paying people for confidential information	284	2.8%	32.4%
Accepting money from sources	285	0.4%	1.4%
Accepting a free product or service from sources	283	1.4%	40.3%
Producing content that mimics news stories but hides its promotional nature	285	0.7%	14.4%
Publishing or broadcasting stories with information that is not yet verified	285	1.1%	10.2%

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

Journalists in the Estonian sample perceived a great deal of freedom in their everyday work (see Table 7).

TABLE 7. PERCEPTIONS OF EDITORIAL AUTONOMY AND MEDIA FREEDOM

	N	A great deal/ complete freedom	Mean	SD
Freedom in selecting the news stories	298	82.2%	3.99	0.72
Freedom in deciding which aspects of a story should be emphasized	298	87.9%	4.26	0.71
Media freedom in Estonia	298	90.6%	4.06	0.52

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

EDITORIAL INFLUENCES

Estonian journalists perceived internal factors like editorial policy, journalism ethics, and guidance by the editorial supervisors as the most influential related to their work (see Table 8). On the other hand, they perceived that external factors characterizing society also have an impact, e.g. time limits, availability of sources, and access to information. There was almost a consensus that no particular social group has impact on editorial decisions and journalists' work in Estonia.

TABLE 8. EDITORIAL INFLUENCES

	N	Very/extremely influential	Mean	SD
Peers on the news staff	272	48.5%	3.38	0.98
Editorial supervisors and higher editors	273	54.2%	3.55	0.97
The business managers of the news organization	233	20.2%	2.33	1.26
The owners of the news organization	227	16.3%	2.17	1.26
Editorial policy	256	42.6%	3.26	1.09
Advertising considerations	206	15.0%	2.08	1.19
Profit expectations	218	26.1%	2.64	1.27
Audience research and data	247	24.3%	2.66	1.15
Availability of news-gathering resources	260	49.6%	3.49	1.07
Time limits	276	67.0%	3.83	0.97
Journalism ethics	269	71.4%	3.91	1.16
Self-censorship	264	39.0%	3.01	1.31
Personal values and beliefs	266	57.1%	3.65	1.11
Colleagues in other media	262	12.2%	2.22	1.04
Friends, acquaintances and family	269	13.8%	2.30	1.03
Feedback from the audience	271	26.9%	2.92	0.98
Competing news organizations	269	23.4%	2.77	1.06
Media laws and regulation	262	38.2%	3.16	1.18
Access to information	270	63.3%	3.75	1.12
Government censorship	227	5.7%	1.57	0.98
Government officials	248	8.5%	1.81	1.06
Politicians	246	6.1%	1.76	0.98
Business people	247	3.2%	1.67	0.91
Public relations	258	10.5%	2.23	1.02
Relationships with news sources	265	44.2%	3.19	1.19
Police	232	8.2%	1.78	1.05
Issue advocacy groups	234	5.1%	1.67	0.92
Scientists or health experts	244	21.7%	2.45	1.26

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.)