

Iceland

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INTRODUCTION

Iceland has a stable democratic system, high standard of living, and a strong social welfare infrastructure. The country's economy, built on tourism, renewable energy and fisheries, has shown resilience, although economic and social challenges persist. Iceland remains a progressive society with high levels of civic engagement and gender equality.

Journalism in Iceland has traditionally enjoyed a strong foundation, rooted in democratic values, with legal protections for press freedom and a commitment to public service broadcasting. However, there has long been a perception of political parallelism in the media, which continues to influence public trust in the media, despite ongoing efforts to maintain editorial independence and journalistic integrity.

The data for the WJS survey were collected in the spring of 2021, during the COVID-19 pandemic and in the run-up to the national parliamentary elections held in September of that year. These circumstances created a challenging news environment, with journalists covering both politics and the public health crisis. Since the data were collected, the Icelandic media landscape has faced significant disruption as some media outlets have had to downsize or even shut down, including one of the country's two leading newspapers. In 2025, Iceland ranked number 17 on Reporters Without Borders' World Press Freedom Index, whilst the other Nordic states were all ranked in the top six. At the same time, the main threats to journalism in Iceland were financial instability and political uncertainty regarding the future of publicly funded support for the private media sector.

BACKGROUNDS OF JOURNALISTS

The Icelandic news journalism profession is male dominated: 63.5% identified as men and 36.0% as women when our study was conducted. On average, Icelandic journalists were 44.0 years old (SD = 12.7; Median = 42). Most were highly educated: 33.8% holding a bachelor's degree, and 42.5% a master's degree or equivalent. While nearly half (56.3%) had no formal education or training in journalism, 63.2% of those with such training received it at university or college, 36.0% did so via journalism apprenticeships or cadetships, and one in three (32.6%) through short-term courses.

JOURNALISTS IN THE NEWSROOM

Most Icelandic journalists (71.5%) worked for privately owned commercial media, while 28.5% were employed by the Public Service Media (RÚV). A vast majority (90.0%) reported working mainly for national media and only 10.0% for local or regional audiences. When asked about their professional role within their organization, 76.4% said they had no management responsibility, 6.3% were in middle management, and 17.3% reported holding top management positions.

On average, Icelandic journalists had 15.1 years of professional experience (SD = 11.9; Median = 12). Most of them (73.4%) described themselves as generalists, working across a range of beats rather than focusing on a single subject area. Only about one in four (26.6%) reported having a specific beat. This aligns with the relatively small size of the Icelandic media market, where specialization is often limited by staffing and resource constraints.

In terms of employment conditions, 70.6% held a full-time permanent contract, 12.2% were employed part-time, and 6.7% had full-time fixed-term contracts. Freelancers or self-employed journalists made up 9.2% of the journalistic population. While most journalists relied fully on journalism for their income (74.1%), about a quarter (25.9%) said they had additional sources of income outside journalism.

Over 90 percent of Icelanders were members of a labor union in 2021, according to Statistics Iceland, but only 77.0% of journalists reported belonging to a professional or labor union. Work-related stress appeared quite common, 63.5% said they often or very often felt stressed at work during the past six months. On average, full-time journalists reported working 44.3 hours per week (SD = 9.2; Median = 40).

SAFETY AND WORK-RELATED CONCERNS

When it came to safety threats, Icelandic journalists most frequently reported experiencing demeaning or hateful speech directed at them (see Table 1), with around a third reporting having experienced this often or very often. Moreover, close to a quarter had experienced public discrediting of their work. Surveillance was less common, with around one in ten journalists having experienced this very often or often. Few journalists had commonly experienced threats such as stalking, sexual assault, sexual harassment or workplace bullying. Nearly a quarter were worried about losing their job in journalism in the following 12 months (see Table 2). It is troubling to see that around a third of journalists were worried about their physical well-being and a similar number were concerned about their emotional and mental well-being.

TABLE 1. EXPERIENCED THREATS

	N	Very often	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Demeaning or hateful speech directed at you	237	13.5%	16.5%	27.4%	29.1%	13.5%
Public discrediting of your work	237	9.7%	12.7%	25.7%	30.8%	21.1%
Surveillance	235	3.8%	6.0%	11.1%	25.5%	53.6%
Hacking or blocking of social media accounts or websites	238	0.0%	0.4%	0.8%	4.6%	94.1%
Arrests, detentions or imprisonment	237	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.4%	99.6%
Legal actions against you because of your work	237	0.8%	0.8%	4.6%	8.4%	85.2%
Stalking	238	1.3%	1.3%	2.5%	10.9%	84.0%
Other threats or intimidations directed at you	237	1.3%	5.5%	11.8%	28.7%	52.7%
Sexual assault or sexual harassment	236	0.0%	0.0%	4.2%	8.5%	87.3%
Other physical attacks	236	0.0%	0.4%	0.8%	2.5%	96.2%
Coercion	235	0.4%	0.4%	3.8%	19.6%	75.7%
Questioning of your personal morality	236	5.1%	6.8%	20.3%	28.8%	39.0%
Others using your byline for fabricated or manipulated stories	236	0.4%	1.3%	3.0%	5.1%	90.3%
Others disseminating your personal information	236	0.4%	1.3%	8.5%	15.3%	74.6%
Workplace bullying	236	0.0%	1.3%	2.1%	11.4%	85.2%
Office raids or seizures or damage to equipment	237	0.0%	0.0%	1.7%	4.6%	93.7%
Intimidation that targets family	237	0.0%	0.4%	1.3%	5.5%	92.8%

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	238	24.8%	2.54	1.26
Concerned about physical well-being	237	34.6%	2.72	1.28
Concerned about emotional and mental wellbeing	237	37.6%	2.81	1.34
Concerned that those who harm journalists in Iceland go unpunished	228	39.0%	2.93	1.23

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

Icelandic journalists strongly supported informative and monitorial roles (see Table 3). A vast majority of them valued providing analysis and being detached observers, and countering disinformation. Most journalists also considered educating the audience very or extremely important as well as monitoring and scrutinizing those in power. Roles like setting the political agenda, supporting government policy or conveying a positive image of political leaders received very little support.

TABLE 3. JOURNALISTIC ROLES

	N	Very/extremely important	Mean	SD
Be a detached observer	236	84.7%	4.32	0.80
Monitor and scrutinize those in power	237	81.0%	4.17	1.04
Shine a light on society's problems	237	77.6%	4.15	1.02
Motivate people to participate in politics	233	11.2%	2.06	1.10
Provide analysis of current affairs	238	92.0%	4.57	0.71
Let people express their views	238	67.6%	3.92	1.01
Provide information people need to form political opinion	231	55.4%	3.53	1.29
Advocate for social change	229	27.5%	2.80	1.23
Influence public opinion	226	15.9%	2.29	1.12
Set the political agenda	228	3.1%	1.48	0.77
Promote peace and tolerance	228	31.6%	2.87	1.24
Educate the audience	237	89.5%	4.45	0.83
Point toward possible solutions to society's problems	233	50.6%	3.37	1.14
Speak on behalf of the marginalized	230	42.2%	3.27	1.21
Support national development	218	32.1%	2.82	1.28
Support government policy	229	1.3%	1.24	0.61
Convey a positive image of political leaders	232	2.2%	1.23	0.67
Provide entertainment and relaxation	237	38.0%	3.16	1.20
Provide the kind of news that attracts the largest audience	238	37.0%	3.13	1.16
Provide advice, orientation and direction for daily life	235	19.6%	2.57	1.13
Tell stories that emotionally move the audience	237	40.5%	3.19	1.09
Support efforts to protect public health	233	30.9%	2.94	1.17
Counteract disinformation	237	84.8%	4.38	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

There appeared to be a consensus among Icelandic journalists that they should let the facts speak for themselves (see Table 4). However, they also agreed that it was the role of journalists to alert audiences when a source's claim was untruthful. Also, nearly eight out of ten journalists agreed that journalists should be a part of a community to portray it accurately, and they generally rejected the idea that it was impossible for journalists to withhold their beliefs or that they should make their standpoint clear in their work.

TABLE 4. JOURNALISTIC EPISTEMOLOGIES

	N	Agree/ strongly agree	Mean	SD
Interpretation is necessary to make sense of facts	214	65.9%	3.65	1.03
Truth is inevitably shaped by those in power	211	25.1%	2.56	1.22
It is impossible for journalists to withhold their personal beliefs from reporting	218	14.7%	2.12	1.11
Things are either true or false, there is no in-between	219	28.8%	2.69	1.22
It is possible to represent objective reality in reporting	199	70.9%	3.78	0.91
Journalists should trust their instincts in deciding what's true and what's not	209	40.7%	2.92	1.26
Journalists should intuitively know what the final story will be	208	40.9%	3.04	1.14
Journalists should let the facts speak for themselves	211	95.3%	4.54	0.60
Journalists should be part of a community to portray it accurately	210	78.1%	4.03	0.96
Journalists should make their standpoint transparent in their work	212	10.4%	1.88	1.03
Journalists should alert audiences when a source's claim is untruthful	203	88.2%	4.29	0.88

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

The large majority of the Icelandic journalists, who participated in the study, agreed that journalists should adhere to professional standards when it came to determining what was ethical, regardless of situation or personal judgement (see Table 5). Although they generally rejected the idea of controversial reporting methods being always justified, they took a more lenient view towards using confidential business or government documents without authorization and using the personal material of powerful people (see Table 6). Using hidden recording devices was most often believed to be justified on occasion.

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	232	87.1%	4.36	0.84
What is ethical for journalists should be determined by professional standards unless extraordinary circumstances require disregarding them	226	60.6%	3.60	1.25
What is ethical for journalists should depend on each specific situation	226	24.3%	2.45	1.27
What is ethical for journalists should be a matter of personal judgment	224	28.6%	2.46	1.36

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	232	0.9%	59.1%
Using hidden recording devices	232	0.9%	79.3%
Using confidential business or government documents without authorization	229	12.7%	73.4%
Using the personal materials of powerful people, such as documents and photos, without their permission	229	7.0%	72.5%
Using the personal materials of ordinary people, such as documents and photos, without their permission	223	1.8%	46.2%
Paying people for confidential information	225	1.3%	48.0%
Accepting money from sources	236	0.0%	3.0%
Accepting a free product or service from sources	232	0.0%	19.0%
Producing content that mimics news stories but hides its promotional nature	235	0.0%	5.1%
Publishing or broadcasting stories with information that is not yet verified	231	0.4%	43.3%

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

Most Icelandic journalists reported enjoying editorial freedom (see Table 7); with an overwhelming majority saying that they had a great deal or complete freedom in selecting stories, as well as deciding the angle or emphasis of a story. Perceived media freedom was ranked slightly lower.

TABLE 7. PERCEPTIONS OF EDITORIAL AUTONOMY AND MEDIA FREEDOM

	N	A great deal/ complete freedom	Mean	SD
Freedom in selecting the news stories	227	87.7%	4.15	0.68
Freedom in deciding which aspects of a story should be emphasized	228	89.9%	4.24	0.72
Media freedom in Iceland	225	66.2%	3.70	0.73

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

EDITORIAL INFLUENCES

Time limits, availability of resources, and editorial supervision were seen as the most influential internal pressures in the journalists' work. Access to information and relationships with sources were the most impactful external factors. The influence of external actors like politicians, businesspeople or the government was, on the other hand, perceived as being weak.

TABLE 8. EDITORIAL INFLUENCES

	N	Very/extremely influential	Mean	SD
Peers on the news staff	220	65.5%	3.77	1.05
Editorial supervisors and higher editors	212	66.0%	3.72	0.97
The business managers of the news organization	213	19.7%	2.26	1.24
The owners of the news organization	207	10.6%	1.83	1.10
Editorial policy	217	53.0%	3.49	1.08
Advertising considerations	222	5.4%	1.57	0.93
Profit expectations	215	13.5%	1.97	1.19
Audience research and data	215	21.9%	2.56	1.22
Availability of news-gathering resources	215	62.8%	3.67	1.24
Time limits	223	65.9%	3.80	1.16
Journalism ethics	226	51.8%	3.38	1.28
Self-censorship	219	30.1%	2.79	1.24
Personal values and beliefs	224	50.9%	3.44	1.20
Colleagues in other media	221	10.4%	2.10	1.02
Friends, acquaintances and family	222	12.6%	2.30	1.00
Feedback from the audience	223	21.1%	2.73	0.98
Competing news organizations	223	27.8%	2.78	1.14
Media laws and regulation	216	25.5%	2.64	1.20
Access to information	221	68.8%	3.89	1.09
Government censorship	213	10.8%	1.82	1.16
Government officials	215	10.2%	1.80	1.07
Politicians	216	8.8%	1.70	1.03
Businesspeople	217	6.9%	1.68	0.98
Public relations	219	5.9%	1.94	0.94
Relationships with news sources	214	41.6%	3.17	1.27
Police	212	14.6%	2.07	1.22
Issue advocacy groups	212	4.7%	1.86	0.96
Scientists or health experts	210	18.6%	2.39	1.18

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.)