

# Netherlands<sup>1</sup>

LIESBETH HERMANS & TINEKE PRINS

## INTRODUCTION

The Netherlands is a constitutional monarchy with a relative stable parliamentary democracy. The political landscape is characterized by a multi-party system, in which coalition governments are the norm. There is a high degree of political pluralism which requires consensus-based governance. Economically, the European country is prosperous and highly developed, with a strong international trading position and relatively low unemployment. Socially, the Netherlands is known for its liberal values, high quality of life, and strong social welfare systems. It also faces some ongoing social challenges, including the integration of migrants, an aging population and political polarization.

The Netherlands has a long-standing tradition of press freedom which is rooted in principles of independence, pluralism, and public accountability. There is a diverse media landscape, funded by both government and commercial parties. It includes a wide range of newspapers, broadcasting channels and online platforms that reflect a broad spectrum of political and social perspectives.

Dutch journalists have strong legal protections that support their freedom of speech, and the country consistently ranks high on international press freedom indexes. During the recent data collection, the general parliament elections in November 2023 took place, which brought heightened media activity and scrutiny. The winner of the election, the right-wing populist Party for Freedom, expressed a critical attitude against (public) media. After the murder of journalist Peter R. de Vries in 2021, the discussion about journalists' safety continued to influence discussions around press protection and security.

## BACKGROUNDS OF JOURNALISTS

Our sample of Dutch journalists consisted of 33.8% women and 66.2% men. On average, Dutch journalists were 46.2 years old (SD = 13.2; Median = 48). They tend to be well educated: 54.8% of the respondents held a Bachelor's degree or equivalent and 31.6% held a Master's degree or equivalent. Only a few of the journalists had obtained a doctoral degree (0.4%), and 5.7% had completed several years of university education without a degree. 68.6% of the respondents acquired formal education or professional training in journalism. This education or training is usually obtained at university or in college (80.6%) and less via apprenticeships or traineeships (8.4%) and short-term courses (3.2%).

## JOURNALISTS IN THE NEWSROOM

Most journalists interviewed in the Netherlands held a full-time contract (58.9%) of which 47.4% were permanently and 11.5% were temporarily employed. Almost a quarter of the respondents (24.5%) worked as freelancers or were self-employed. Finally, 14.2% had a part-time permanent contract and 2.4% had a part-time temporary contract. The average working week of Dutch full-time journalists was 39.3 hours (SD = 6.3; Median = 40). Most journalists reported to have no additional income outside journalism (78.4%).

Dutch journalists are experienced. On average, they had 20.0 years of professional experience (SD = 12.5; Median = 20). Most of them (66.7%) worked on a variety of beats or subject areas rather than a specific beat or subject area. About a third of Dutch journalists (62.7%) were members of professional associations.

In terms of the main media format of their employers, more than one third of the Dutch journalists (34.9%) worked for an organization with a newspaper background, 26.0% for television, 10.2% for online only media, and 7.9% for radio outlets. 6.5% worked for news agencies and 5.1% for magazines. Finally, 9.3% of the interviewed journalists indicated they did not have a main employer. Regarding area of coverage, 56.6% of the journalists reported they mainly worked for local or regional media, 40.7% primarily worked for (trans)national media, and 2.7% reported to not work for any main medium.

Most Dutch journalists indicated to work for private media (44.6%) or for public media (44.6%). Much less work for non-profit media (5.0%) or did not have a main medium they worked for (5.0%). Half of the respondents indicated their rank was no management role (51.1%), 39.2% had a middle management role, and 9.7% had a top management role.

<sup>1</sup> Country sample does not fully align with WJS specifications regarding maximum margin of error (see WJS3 Methodology).

SAFETY AND WORK-RELATED CONCERNS

Dutch journalists mainly experience threats to their safety through demeaning or hateful speech or via public discrediting of their work (see Table 1). A quarter of Dutch journalists were concerned about their physical or emotional well-being and more than half of the surveyed journalists feared that those who harm journalists would go unpunished (see Table 2).

TABLE 1. EXPERIENCED THREATS

	N	Very often	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Demeaning or hateful speech directed at you	253	4.0%	9.5%	40.3%	32.0%	14.2%
Public discrediting of your work	253	4.0%	11.1%	37.9%	31.6%	15.4%
Surveillance	253	1.6%	3.6%	17.8%	24.5%	52.6%
Hacking or blocking of social media accounts or websites	252	0.8%	1.2%	7.1%	15.9%	75.0%
Arrests, detentions or imprisonment	253	0.0%	0.4%	2.4%	2.0%	95.3%
Legal actions against you because of your work	253	0.0%	0.8%	6.7%	16.6%	75.9%
Stalking	252	0.4%	1.2%	3.2%	9.5%	85.7%
Other threats or intimidations directed at you	253	2.0%	4.7%	13.8%	28.1%	51.4%
Sexual assault or sexual harassment	252	0.0%	0.4%	1.2%	3.6%	94.8%
Other physical attacks	252	0.0%	0.0%	4.0%	10.3%	85.7%
Others using your byline for fabricated or manipulated stories	252	0.4%	0.8%	1.6%	7.5%	89.7%
Others disseminating your personal information	253	0.4%	0.8%	4.7%	15.8%	78.3%
Workplace bullying	253	0.4%	2.0%	4.0%	9.5%	84.2%
Office raids or seizures or damage to equipment	252	0.0%	0.0%	1.2%	6.7%	92.1%
Intimidation that targets family	253	0.0%	0.4%	2.4%	5.5%	91.7%

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	252	7.5%	1.80	1.00
Concerned about physical well-being	253	11.9%	2.12	1.01
Concerned about emotional and mental wellbeing	253	24.9%	2.47	1.18
Concerned that those who harm journalists in the Netherlands go unpunished	253	60.5%	3.50	1.10

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

Dutch journalists show strong support for watchdog role (monitor and scrutinize those in power, counteract disinformation) and guiding role (see Table 3). The journalist as a guide shines a light on society's problems and discusses future implications of current events. The journalist as a guide can also point out possible solutions to society's problems. Least important according to Dutch journalists is the collaborative role in which the journalist supports government policy or conveys a positive image of political leaders.

TABLE 3. JOURNALISTIC ROLES

	N	Very/extremely important	Mean	SD
Be a detached observer	238	58.0%	3.65	0.90
Monitor and scrutinize those in power	239	80.3%	4.13	0.98
Shine a light on society's problems	239	80.3%	4.10	0.83
Motivate people to participate in politics	239	12.6%	2.39	1.03
Provide analysis of current affairs	239	76.6%	3.97	0.83
Let people express their views	238	46.6%	3.37	0.92
Provide information people need to form political opinion	239	55.6%	3.52	1.00
Advocate for social change	239	8.4%	2.18	1.03
Influence public opinion	239	9.6%	2.26	0.97
Set the political agenda	239	17.6%	2.57	1.03
Promote peace and tolerance	238	31.5%	2.94	1.04
Educate the audience	238	65.1%	3.79	0.89
Point toward possible solutions to society's problems	238	45.4%	3.33	0.95
Speak on behalf of the marginalized	239	36.8%	3.15	0.96
Support national development	239	2.5%	1.72	0.85
Support government policy	239	0.4%	1.21	0.50
Convey a positive image of political leaders	239	0.0%	1.19	0.41
Provide entertainment and relaxation	239	19.7%	2.72	1.04
Provide the kind of news that attracts the largest audience	240	17.9%	2.56	1.00
Provide advice, orientation and direction for daily life	238	32.8%	2.98	1.05
Tell stories that emotionally move the audience	239	40.2%	3.17	1.04
Discuss future implications of current events	237	62.9%	3.72	0.87
Support efforts to protect public health	237	12.7%	2.36	0.99
Counteract disinformation	239	68.6%	3.90	1.06

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

A clear majority of Dutch journalists indicates that interpretation is necessary to understand the facts: 78.7% agreed with the statement that interpretation is necessary to make sense of facts (see Table 4). At the same time almost half of the journalists agree with the statement that it is possible to represent objective reality in reporting.

**TABLE 4. JOURNALISTIC EPISTEMOLOGIES**

	N	Agree/ strongly agree	Mean	SD
Interpretation is necessary to make sense of facts	249	78.7%	3.82	0.83
Truth is inevitably shaped by those in power	249	10.8%	2.16	0.95
It is impossible for journalists to withhold their personal beliefs from reporting	250	22.0%	2.61	1.01
Things are either true or false, there is no in-between	250	12.8%	2.28	1.04
It is possible to represent objective reality in reporting	250	46.8%	3.18	1.04

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

There was more disagreement among Dutch journalists regarding their perceptions of ethical orientations (see Table 5). Most of the journalists agreed on the importance of professional standards: less than half indicated that these standards should be leading regardless of circumstances, and 69.8% indicated this is the case unless extraordinary circumstances require setting them aside. When it comes to the justification of controversial reporting methods accepting money from sources and hiding promotional content were most strongly rejected (see Table 6). On the other hand, most journalists found it acceptable to use confidential documents without authorization and to use hidden recording devices.

**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	253	42.7%	3.09	1.13
What is ethical for journalists should be determined by professional standards unless extraordinary circumstances require disregarding them	252	69.8%	3.72	0.95
What is ethical for journalists should depend on each specific situation	252	45.6%	3.12	1.14
What is ethical for journalists should be a matter of personal judgment	253	18.6%	2.47	1.03

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	253	0.4%	66.8%
Using hidden recording devices	253	5.5%	82.6%
Using confidential business or government documents without authorization	253	21.3%	70.8%
Using the personal materials of powerful people, such as documents and photos, without their permission	251	3.2%	69.7%
Using the personal materials of ordinary people, such as documents and photos, without their permission	253	1.2%	43.1%
Paying people for confidential information	253	0.4%	33.6%
Accepting money from sources	253	0.0%	4.7%
Accepting a free product or service from sources	253	2.4%	34.8%
Producing content that mimics news stories but hides its promotional nature	249	0.8%	7.6%
Publishing or broadcasting stories with information that is not yet verified	251	0.0%	21.1%

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

Dutch journalists reported a great deal of freedom in their work, both in selecting news stories and in deciding which aspect of a story should be emphasized (see Table 7). Moreover, media freedom was rated very high in the Netherlands.

**TABLE 7. PERCEPTIONS OF EDITORIAL AUTONOMY AND MEDIA FREEDOM**

	N	A great deal/ complete freedom	Mean	SD
Freedom in selecting the news stories	250	89.2%	4.15	0.63
Freedom in deciding which aspects of a story should be emphasized	253	90.5%	4.13	0.61
Media freedom in the Netherlands	251	92.0%	4.16	0.66

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

## EDITORIAL INFLUENCES

Dutch journalists found journalism ethics and peers on the news staff to fare highest among the internal factors influencing news production (see Table 8). Among the external factors, most journalists considered access to information and their relationship with news sources to be extremely or very influential.

**TABLE 8. EDITORIAL INFLUENCES**

	N	Very/extremely influential	Mean	SD
Peers on the news staff	243	61.3%	3.73	0.89
Editorial supervisors and higher editors	244	55.7%	3.63	0.93
The business managers of the news organization	226	28.3%	2.72	1.21
The owners of the news organization	214	10.7%	1.93	1.10
Editorial policy	238	55.0%	3.54	0.94
Advertising considerations	229	4.8%	1.59	0.93
Profit expectations	222	8.6%	1.69	1.07
Audience research and data	239	33.9%	3.05	1.13
Availability of news-gathering resources	232	50.9%	3.35	1.12
Time limits	245	51.4%	3.55	0.99
Journalism ethics	249	68.3%	3.79	0.97
Self-censorship	240	6.3%	1.98	0.90
Personal values and beliefs	250	43.2%	3.29	1.06
Colleagues in other media	246	10.2%	2.45	0.93
Friends, acquaintances and family	247	8.5%	2.26	0.91
Feedback from the audience	247	19.0%	2.89	0.83
Competing news organizations	244	15.6%	2.70	0.92
Media laws and regulation	233	18.5%	2.65	1.01
Access to information	245	53.5%	3.50	1.03
Government censorship	236	10.6%	1.89	1.15
Government officials	240	16.3%	2.15	1.23
Politicians	240	12.1%	2.06	1.15
Business people	240	3.8%	1.70	0.88
Public relations	238	9.7%	2.03	1.04
Relationships with news sources	240	32.1%	2.92	1.10
Police	242	8.7%	2.02	1.08
Issue advocacy groups	243	4.1%	2.02	0.97
Scientists or health experts	243	16.9%	2.34	1.17
Religious groups and institutions	238	0.8%	1.44	0.68
Organized crime and criminal groups	234	1.7%	1.35	0.70
Terrorist groups	228	0.0%	1.15	0.42

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.)