

# Sierra Leone

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## INTRODUCTION

Sierra Leone is navigating a transformative period in the face of major political, economic, and social challenges. In 2025, the country is still recovering from the aftermath of a failed coup attempt in November 2023, when armed assailants attacked military barracks and a central prison in Freetown, resulting in over 20 deaths and the escape of more than 2,000 inmates. Although many suspects were later apprehended, the incident heightened political tensions and insecurity. Inflation dropped significantly due to tighter monetary policies; but Sierra Leone still grapples with developmental needs. Socially, the country is battling a public health crisis related to the synthetic drug "kush," which has devastated its youth.

Sierra Leone has a proud journalistic legacy dating back to 1801, when it launched one of sub-Saharan Africa's first newspapers, and it later pioneered radio broadcasting in West Africa. Despite progress, the media sector has experienced setbacks including limited resources and political pressure. Radio remains the most accessible and trusted medium.

During field work of this study, 2023-2024, the attempted coup disrupted media operations and highlighted risks to journalists' safety. They often work under precarious conditions, lack access to limited resources, face occasional arbitrary arrests and threats to their safety. Despite occasional risks and resource constraints, journalists in Sierra Leone play an essential role in strengthening democracy, thereby informing the public, elevating community voices, and holding institutions accountable. Their perseverance in the face of adversity underscores the enduring vitality of the country's media landscape.

## BACKGROUNDS OF JOURNALISTS

Our sample showed an overrepresentation of male journalists, who comprised 78.2% of respondents, females made up 21.8%. No respondents identified as another gender or declined to disclose. The average age of journalists was 33.4 years (SD = 7.8), with a Median age of 33 and a range from 20 to 68 years, indicating a relatively young yet seemingly experienced workforce.

This gender imbalance may reflect both sampling conditions and structural dynamics in the media sector. Female journalists were more accessible to researchers, more willing to participate in the study and are more concentrated in sectors such as radio which had the highest representation in the sample. Additionally, organizations that facilitated access to respondents had higher female participation, unintentionally shaping the final composition.

In terms of education, while detailed degree data were limited, 81.2% of respondents reported having completed formal journalism training, suggesting a well-prepared professional base. The remaining 18.8% had not received such training. These findings reflect a skilled and relatively youthful journalistic community in Sierra Leone, while also underscoring ongoing gendered patterns of visibility and engagement in research.

## JOURNALISTS IN THE NEWSROOM

In terms of the background of their main employers, the majority of journalists in Sierra Leone (82.2%) reported working primarily in radio outlets, followed by 7.4% in organizations focused on newspaper publishing and 5.8% in television. Online and news agency roles were minimal. Most were affiliated with local media (54.7%), while 22.1% worked with transnational, 14.3% with regional, and only 1.2% with national media. Nearly 61.3% held non-management roles, 17.6% were in middle management, and 21.1% in top management. About 58.5% held full-time, permanent positions, while 20.4% worked freelance or on fixed terms. A significant 92.9% did not earn their entire income from journalism, indicating reliance on additional employment.

Regarding specialization, 67.4% focused on a specific beat, while 32.6% covered multiple subjects. Union membership was reported by 71.1%. Journalists had a Median of 7 years of experience (Mean = 8.3; SD = 5.7), indicating a large variance, potentially due to data outliers. Weekly working hours for journalists in full-time employment had a Median of 40 (Mean = 34.2; SD = 22.2), again suggesting substantial workload differences. Stress levels were notable, with 51.8% experiencing it "sometimes," 19.0% "often," and 12.6% "very often." These figures reflect economic instability, role diversity, and psychological strain that affect journalistic sustainability in Sierra Leone.

## SAFETY AND WORK-RELATED CONCERNS

Verbal attacks such as demeaning or hateful speech and public discrediting of journalists' work were among the most frequently reported threats by journalists in Sierra Leone (see Table 1). Digital threats like surveillance and hacking were also prevalent. Although less common, severe incidents such as physical attacks and coercion continue to pose risks. These experiences align with widespread concerns: over 60% of journalists reported being strongly concerned about their physical well-being and nearly as many about emotional and mental health. In contrast, only 19.4% expressed strong concern about job insecurity. Most notably, 62.4% strongly agreed that those who harm journalists in Sierra Leone would go unpunished (see Table 2).

**TABLE 1. EXPERIENCED THREATS**

	N	Very often	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Demeaning or hateful speech directed at you	252	5.2%	17.1%	29.0%	12.7%	36.1%
Public discrediting of your work	252	3.2%	8.7%	16.7%	12.3%	59.1%
Surveillance	252	4.4%	12.7%	21.8%	18.7%	42.5%
Hacking or blocking of social media accounts or websites	250	3.6%	5.2%	15.6%	8.8%	66.8%
Arrests, detentions or imprisonment	249	1.2%	4.0%	4.0%	6.0%	84.7%
Legal actions against you because of your work	246	1.6%	1.6%	6.1%	6.5%	84.1%
Stalking	247	2.4%	3.2%	8.9%	13.4%	72.1%
Other threats or intimidations directed at you	248	5.6%	4.0%	27.8%	10.5%	52.0%
Sexual assault or sexual harassment	248	0.8%	2.8%	3.6%	4.0%	88.7%
Other physical attacks	245	2.4%	4.9%	17.1%	11.0%	64.5%
Coercion	249	3.2%	4.4%	10.0%	10.0%	72.3%
Questioning of your personal morality	248	2.0%	5.2%	17.7%	7.7%	67.3%
Others using your byline for fabricated or manipulated stories	249	4.0%	4.8%	14.9%	13.3%	63.1%
Others disseminating your personal information	249	1.6%	6.8%	19.3%	12.9%	59.4%
Workplace bullying	246	2.8%	2.8%	17.1%	12.6%	64.6%
Abductions	250	0.8%	3.2%	4.4%	11.2%	80.4%
Office raids or seizures or damage to equipment	251	1.2%	3.6%	9.2%	8.0%	78.1%
Intimidation that targets family	244	0.0%	2.5%	10.7%	6.1%	80.7%

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	19.4%	3.34	1.27
Concerned about physical well-being	250	60.4%	3.52	1.26
Concerned about emotional and mental wellbeing	250	56.0%	3.39	1.37
Concerned that those who harm journalists in Sierra Leone go unpunished	250	62.4%	3.66	1.35

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

Sierra Leonean journalists showed strong consensus on several core roles, especially those emphasizing civic responsibility and public information (see Table 3). A majority rated as very or extremely important the roles of monitoring those in power (73.3%), shining a light on societal problems (83.1%), and providing information for political opinion (80.1%). High importance was also placed on educating the audience (91.5%), supporting public health (79.3%), and countering disinformation (73.3%). In contrast, roles focused on emotional impact or audience appeal – such as telling emotionally moving stories (72.2%) and providing entertainment (64.5%) – received comparatively lower importance ratings, suggesting a strong normative commitment to journalism's watchdog and educational functions.

**TABLE 3. JOURNALISTIC ROLES**

	N	Very/extremely important	Mean	SD
Be a detached observer	250	54.4%	3.30	1.31
Monitor and scrutinize those in power	251	73.3%	3.98	1.26
Shine a light on society's problems	249	83.1%	4.26	1.07
Motivate people to participate in politics	250	56.4%	3.37	1.47
Provide analysis of current affairs	249	82.7%	4.23	1.00
Let people express their views	251	84.5%	4.33	0.93
Provide information people need to form political opinion	246	80.1%	4.10	1.10
Advocate for social change	251	82.5%	4.27	1.03
Influence public opinion	246	73.6%	3.91	1.14
Set the political agenda	249	59.8%	3.53	1.39
Promote peace and tolerance	245	86.1%	4.44	1.01
Educate the audience	246	91.5%	4.55	0.85
Point toward possible solutions to society's problems	249	88.0%	4.35	0.90
Speak on behalf of the marginalized	247	80.6%	4.26	1.08
Support national development	247	84.2%	4.31	1.05
Support government policy	247	71.7%	3.98	1.09
Convey a positive image of political leaders	250	50.8%	3.32	1.32
Provide entertainment and relaxation	248	64.5%	3.73	1.21
Provide the kind of news that attracts the largest audience	246	78.5%	4.19	1.08
Provide advice, orientation and direction for daily life	250	76.0%	3.98	1.02
Tell stories that emotionally move the audience	248	72.2%	3.91	1.14
Support efforts to protect public health	246	79.3%	4.15	1.01
Counteract disinformation	247	73.3%	3.97	1.15
Discuss future implications of current events	252	77.0%	4.02	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

Sierra Leonean journalists widely support core epistemic roles. About 75% see interpretation as key to understanding facts, and 79% believe journalists should let facts speak for themselves. Most also value transparency and correcting false claims. However, views diverge on the impact of power and personal beliefs in shaping truth (see Table 4).

**TABLE 4. JOURNALISTIC EPISTEMOLOGIES**

	N	Agree/ strongly agree	Mean	SD
Interpretation is necessary to make sense of facts	236	75.4%	3.93	1.14
Truth is inevitably shaped by those in power	233	50.2%	3.28	1.25
It is impossible for journalists to withhold their personal beliefs from reporting	236	50.0%	3.29	1.33
Things are either true or false, there is no in-between	236	58.9%	3.67	1.22
It is possible to represent objective reality in reporting	235	71.9%	3.95	1.15
Journalists should trust their instincts in deciding what's true and what's not	239	49.4%	3.26	1.35
Journalists should intuitively know what the final story will be	227	57.0%	3.44	1.31
Journalists should let the facts speak for themselves	238	79.0%	4.14	1.22
Journalists should be part of a community to portray it accurately	235	76.2%	4.00	1.15
Journalists should make their standpoint transparent in their work	237	78.1%	4.16	1.17
Journalists should alert audiences when a source's claim is untruthful	240	76.3%	4.04	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

Journalists in Sierra Leone strongly supported professional standards over situational or personal judgment in ethical reporting (see Table 5). However, when it comes to controversial reporting methods, most rejected accepting money from sources or using personal materials without consent, while many found using hidden recordings and confidential documents acceptable (see Table 7).

**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	254	85.0%	4.38	0.95
What is ethical for journalists should be determined by professional standards unless extraordinary circumstances require disregarding them	254	59.4%	3.65	1.13
What is ethical for journalists should depend on each specific situation	254	44.9%	3.29	1.22
What is ethical for journalists should be a matter of personal judgment	253	35.2%	2.82	1.37

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	250	22.8%	21.6%
Using hidden recording devices	249	28.9%	53.4%
Using confidential business or government documents without authorization	250	18.4%	32.8%
Using the personal materials of powerful people, such as documents and photos, without their permission	251	18.3%	31.9%
Using the personal materials of ordinary people, such as documents and photos, without their permission	253	18.2%	30.8%
Paying people for confidential information	243	25.5%	36.6%
Accepting money from sources	250	18.8%	28.4%
Accepting a free product or service from sources	247	23.9%	35.2%
Producing content that mimics news stories but hides its promotional nature	252	24.2%	34.9%
Publishing or broadcasting stories with information that is not yet verified	252	14.7%	19.8%

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 Sierra Leone reported moderate levels of editorial autonomy (see Table 7). About 61.8% indicated they had complete or a great deal of freedom in selecting the news stories they work on, while 58.2% felt similarly about deciding which aspects of a story should be emphasized. In contrast, perceptions of overall media freedom in the country were lower, with only 48.9% expressing a high degree of freedom. These figures reflect a constrained but not entirely restricted media environment, where individual autonomy exists within broader systemic limitations.

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

	N	A great deal/ complete freedom	Mean	SD
Freedom in selecting the news stories	244	44.7%	3.45	1.08
Freedom in deciding which aspects of a story should be emphasized	244	16.8%	2.55	1.06
Media freedom in Sierra Leone	244	28.3%	2.92	1.00

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

## EDITORIAL INFLUENCES

In Sierra Leone, journalists identified editorial supervisors, editorial policy, and profit expectations as key internal influences on their work (see Table 8). Externally, government censorship, media laws, and access to information were most often rated as extremely or very influential, highlighting strong organizational and regulatory pressures.

**TABLE 8. EDITORIAL INFLUENCES**

	N	Very/extremely influential	Mean	SD
Peers on the news staff	226	51.8%	3.31	1.10
Editorial supervisors and higher editors	231	66.2%	3.79	1.15
The business managers of the news organization	223	50.2%	3.33	1.23
The owners of the news organization	219	57.1%	3.58	1.24
Editorial policy	219	65.3%	3.72	1.20
Advertising considerations	218	44.0%	3.24	1.27
Profit expectations	210	43.3%	3.13	1.36
Audience research and data	211	52.6%	3.33	1.26
Availability of news-gathering resources	222	61.3%	3.60	1.24
Time limits	224	60.7%	3.54	1.28
Journalism ethics	224	77.2%	4.07	1.09
Self-censorship	218	60.1%	3.52	1.30
Personal values and beliefs	220	62.7%	3.65	1.29
Colleagues in other media	214	47.7%	3.19	1.24
Friends, acquaintances and family	201	29.9%	2.66	1.26
Feedback from the audience	215	59.1%	3.53	1.30
Competing news organizations	211	54.0%	3.41	1.31
Media laws and regulation	217	74.2%	4.02	1.20
Access to information	213	70.4%	3.85	1.27
Government censorship	195	39.0%	3.00	1.34
Government officials	196	32.1%	2.79	1.35
Politicians	194	27.8%	2.57	1.33
Business people	205	37.1%	2.89	1.32
Public relations	204	46.6%	3.17	1.33
Relationships with news sources	211	58.8%	3.43	1.37
Police	196	38.8%	2.87	1.36
Issue advocacy groups	196	44.9%	3.09	1.35
Scientists or health experts	194	41.8%	3.06	1.34
Religious groups and institutions	194	42.8%	2.98	1.39
Military	173	24.9%	2.47	1.42
Para-military groups, militias and similar groups	161	26.1%	2.37	1.41
Organized crime and criminal groups	144	20.1%	2.17	1.35
Terrorist groups	133	23.3%	2.16	1.40

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.)