

South Korea

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INTRODUCTION

Data for South Korea were collected between September 2022 and February 2023. During this period, the country experienced political turbulence involving the ruling party, the opposition, and civil society, following the inauguration of President Yoon Suk-yeol in May 2022. The government was criticized for its handling of economic issues, such as rising housing costs, inflation, and declining exports. Social challenges included widening generational divides, labor disputes, and a falling birthrate. In October 2022, a tragic crowd crush in Seoul's Itaewon district killed over 150 people, prompting national mourning and public outrage over the government's failure to manage public safety.

South Korea has a dynamic media landscape shaped by its democratic transition in 1987. While press freedom is protected by law, political and corporate pressures persist. The media ecosystem comprises powerful legacy outlets, major broadcasters, and a growing number of digital platforms, contributing to a vibrant but often polarized information environment.

During the reporting period, the Itaewon tragedy tested media ethics, with some outlets criticized for sensationalism. Journalists encountered restricted access and delays in official communication. Political tensions with major broadcasters escalated, yet investigative journalism continued despite growing concerns about press freedom and increasing polarization.

BACKGROUNDS OF JOURNALISTS

The majority of South Korean journalists surveyed were male (76.2%), with females making up 23.5% of respondents. The average age was 42.4 (SD = 9.5; Median = 41). In terms of education, 70.5% held a Bachelor's degree, 25.7% a Master's degree, and 1.9% had a doctorate. Over half (58.4%) had received formal education or professional training in journalism. This training was most commonly acquired at universities or colleges (60.6%), through apprenticeships or cadetships (57.4%), and via short-term courses (31.5%).

JOURNALISTS IN THE NEWSROOM

South Korean journalists work across diverse roles and media contexts. Most (58.5%) are not in management, while 36.3% hold middle-management roles and 5.1% are in top management. A majority (64.9%) work for national or transnational outlets, 26.2% for local or regional media, and 8.9% have no primary medium. Private or commercial ownership dominates, employing 78.9% of journalists. Public service media accounts for 14.3%, with smaller shares in community (3.8%) and non-profit (0.5%) media. A few (1.1%) selected "other," and 1.4% have no main employer.

Employment appears stable: 95.9% hold full-time permanent contracts. Only 1.1% work part-time, 1.3% on fixed-term contracts, and 1.6% are freelance. However, 44.9% earn income outside journalism, raising concerns about financial security. Journalists reported an average of 14.2 years of experience (SD = 8.9; Median = 12) and work 42.0 hours per week on average (SD = 16.7; Median = 45; for those in full-time employment). Over half (54.9%) cover a specific beat.

Most work for organizations focused on publishing newspapers (49.2%), followed by internet-native outlets (24.1%) and TV organizations (17%). Union membership is high at 70.2%. Stress is common: 42.2% "often" feel stressed, and 24.3% "very often," reflecting the job's emotional demands.

SAFETY AND WORK-RELATED CONCERNS

South Korean journalists report frequent exposure to verbal and reputational threats. Nearly 73% have faced demeaning or hateful speech, and 65% have experienced public discrediting. Surveillance (40%), hacking (44%), and coercion (33.3%) were also reported. Less common but notable were legal actions (22.2%) and stalking (19.8%). Physical threats, including harassment or assault, were reported by a smaller portion. Over half expressed concern about their physical (52.7%) or mental well-being (50.8%), and 46.2% worried that those who harm journalists go unpunished.

TABLE 1. EXPERIENCED THREATS

	N	Very often	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Demeaning or hateful speech directed at you	370	7.8%	28.6%	36.8%	21.6%	5.1%
Public discrediting of your work	370	5.9%	24.6%	34.3%	28.6%	6.5%
Surveillance	370	1.6%	11.4%	26.8%	39.7%	20.5%
Hacking or blocking of social media accounts or websites	370	1.1%	3.0%	9.7%	31.9%	54.3%
Arrests, detentions or imprisonment	370	0.3%	0.8%	1.9%	9.7%	87.3%
Legal actions against you because of your work	370	0.8%	4.6%	16.8%	18.4%	59.5%
Stalking	370	0.0%	1.4%	4.1%	14.3%	80.3%
Other threats or intimidations directed at you	370	1.4%	5.7%	15.4%	27.0%	50.5%
Sexual assault or sexual harassment	370	1.1%	3.5%	7.8%	13.5%	74.1%
Other physical attacks	370	0.3%	1.4%	4.6%	19.5%	74.3%
Coercion	370	1.6%	10.3%	21.4%	36.8%	30.0%
Questioning of your personal morality	370	2.7%	12.7%	24.6%	33.8%	26.2%
Others using your byline for fabricated or manipulated stories	370	1.1%	4.6%	14.9%	30.0%	49.5%
Others disseminating your personal information	370	1.6%	6.8%	17.0%	33.2%	41.4%
Workplace bullying	370	1.1%	2.7%	7.3%	23.8%	65.1%
Abductions	370	0.5%	0.8%	1.4%	6.2%	91.1%
Office raids or seizures or damage to equipment	370	0.5%	1.1%	3.0%	8.9%	86.5%
Intimidation that targets family	370	0.0%	1.9%	2.4%	13.2%	82.4%

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	370	11.1%	2.04	1.01
Concerned about physical well-being	370	52.7%	3.39	1.15
Concerned about emotional and mental wellbeing	370	50.8%	3.35	1.17
Concerned that those who harm journalists in South Korea go unpunished	370	46.2%	3.25	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

South Korean journalists view their roles as watchdogs and problem-solvers. The most valued roles were shining a light on social issues (87.6%), monitoring power (83.8%), and countering disinformation (77.6%). Less emphasis was placed on promoting government policy (13.5%) or projecting a positive image of leaders (9.2%).

TABLE 3. JOURNALISTIC ROLES

	N	Very/extremely important	Mean	SD
Be a detached observer	370	78.1%	3.99	0.69
Monitor and scrutinize those in power	370	83.8%	4.26	0.78
Shine a light on society's problems	370	87.6%	4.28	0.71
Motivate people to participate in politics	370	43.5%	3.37	0.90
Provide analysis of current affairs	370	66.5%	3.78	0.76
Let people express their views	370	50.3%	3.48	0.91
Provide information people need to form political opinion	370	69.5%	3.80	0.86
Advocate for social change	370	59.2%	3.65	0.88
Influence public opinion	370	59.7%	3.65	0.83
Set the political agenda	370	48.4%	3.45	0.87
Promote peace and tolerance	370	40.3%	3.36	0.92
Educate the audience	370	32.2%	3.12	0.97
Point toward possible solutions to society's problems	370	69.2%	3.78	0.81
Speak on behalf of the marginalized	370	75.9%	4.01	0.83
Support national development	370	46.5%	3.36	0.94
Support government policy	370	13.5%	2.52	0.94
Convey a positive image of political leaders	370	9.2%	2.02	0.99
Provide entertainment and relaxation	370	21.9%	2.79	0.95
Provide the kind of news that attracts the largest audience	370	40.8%	3.27	0.95
Provide advice, orientation and direction for daily life	370	33.8%	3.13	0.90
Tell stories that emotionally move the audience	370	35.9%	3.26	0.85
Support efforts to protect public health	370	54.3%	3.55	0.90
Counteract disinformation	370	77.6%	4.09	0.79
Discuss future implications of current events	370	71.4%	3.88	0.76

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

Most journalists agreed that interpretation is necessary to make sense of facts (76.2%) and that facts should speak for themselves (77.6%). A majority (68.9%) supported transparency about their standpoint, while fewer believed truth is shaped by power (17.0%) or that objectivity is impossible (13.8%).

TABLE 4. JOURNALISTIC EPISTEMOLOGIES

	N	Agree/ strongly agree	Mean	SD
Interpretation is necessary to make sense of facts	370	76.2%	3.84	0.68
Truth is inevitably shaped by those in power	370	17.0%	2.56	0.98
It is impossible for journalists to withhold their personal beliefs from reporting	370	13.8%	2.54	0.89
Things are either true or false, there is no in-between	370	20.0%	2.59	1.02
It is possible to represent objective reality in reporting	370	33.5%	3.19	0.77
Journalists should trust their instincts in deciding what's true and what's not	370	25.1%	2.83	0.96
Journalists should intuitively know what the final story will be	370	47.0%	3.28	0.96
Journalists should let the facts speak for themselves	370	77.6%	3.94	0.80
Journalists should be part of a community to portray it accurately	370	15.4%	2.55	0.92
Journalists should make their standpoint transparent in their work	370	68.9%	3.79	0.85
Journalists should alert audiences when a source's claim is untruthful	370	64.1%	3.74	0.89

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

Most journalists (63.5%) agreed that journalism ethics should always follow professional standards, though 69.5% accepted exceptions in extraordinary cases. Only 17.0% supported relying on personal judgment. Controversial methods, such as using hidden recordings (84.0%) or unauthorized documents (73.0%), were broadly justified, but actions like accepting money (9.5%) or publishing unverified info (17.1%) were largely rejected.

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	370	63.5%	3.69	0.94
What is ethical for journalists should be determined by professional standards unless extraordinary circumstances require disregarding them	370	69.5%	3.76	0.84
What is ethical for journalists should depend on each specific situation	370	40.3%	3.12	1.08
What is ethical for journalists should be a matter of personal judgment	370	17.0%	2.43	1.06

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	370	2.2%	33.0%
Using hidden recording devices	370	8.1%	75.9%
Using confidential business or government documents without authorization	370	6.5%	66.5%
Using the personal materials of powerful people, such as documents and photos, without their permission	370	9.2%	66.5%
Using the personal materials of ordinary people, such as documents and photos, without their permission	370	1.6%	28.1%
Paying people for confidential information	370	9.2%	58.6%
Accepting money from sources	370	1.1%	8.4%
Accepting a free product or service from sources	370	1.6%	17.8%
Producing content that mimics news stories but hides its promotional nature	370	3.0%	38.6%
Publishing or broadcasting stories with information that is not yet verified	370	1.4%	15.7%

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

Only about one-third of journalists reported having a great deal or complete freedom in selecting stories (35.1%) or deciding which aspects to emphasize (35.4%). Similarly, just 36.3% felt that media freedom in South Korea is high, reflecting moderate perceptions of editorial autonomy and press freedom overall.

TABLE 7. PERCEPTIONS OF EDITORIAL AUTONOMY AND MEDIA FREEDOM

	N	A great deal/ complete freedom	Mean	SD
Freedom in selecting the news stories	370	35.1%	3.19	0.86
Freedom in deciding which aspects of a story should be emphasized	370	35.4%	3.14	0.88
Media freedom in South Korea	369	36.3%	3.16	0.98

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

EDITORIAL INFLUENCES

Editorial supervisors and higher editors were rated most influential (85.8%), followed by personal values and beliefs (72.0%) and editorial policy (69.9%). Journalism ethics (69.6%), self-censorship (68.9%), and business managers (67.1%) also ranked high. External pressures, such as government censorship (19.8%) and military groups (7.4%), were seen as much less influential.

TABLE 8. EDITORIAL INFLUENCES

	N	Very/extremely influential	Mean	SD
Peers on the news staff	361	61.8%	3.61	1.01
Editorial supervisors and higher editors	367	85.8%	4.27	0.88
The business managers of the news organization	359	67.1%	3.82	1.12
The owners of the news organization	350	62.3%	3.63	1.30
Editorial policy	365	69.9%	3.85	0.93
Advertising considerations	359	53.2%	3.46	1.20
Profit expectations	355	47.9%	3.34	1.20
Audience research and data	364	44.5%	3.26	1.09
Availability of news-gathering resources	364	56.9%	3.57	0.96
Time limits	361	54.6%	3.53	1.01
Journalism ethics	368	69.6%	3.86	0.90
Self-censorship	367	68.9%	3.78	0.83
Personal values and beliefs	368	72.0%	3.83	0.85
Colleagues in other media	362	61.9%	3.56	1.03
Friends, acquaintances and family	359	37.9%	3.06	1.14
Feedback from the audience	364	61.0%	3.55	0.90
Competing news organizations	363	63.4%	3.59	0.98
Media laws and regulation	362	37.0%	3.16	0.96
Access to information	368	53.3%	3.47	0.95
Government censorship	353	19.8%	2.56	1.14
Government officials	359	19.8%	2.59	1.09
Politicians	356	22.2%	2.60	1.14
Business people	359	38.4%	3.01	1.18
Public relations	365	50.4%	3.31	1.02
Relationships with news sources	367	68.4%	3.69	0.88
Police	348	14.4%	2.43	1.09
Issue advocacy groups	354	21.8%	2.67	1.05
Scientists or health experts	356	26.7%	2.77	1.13
Religious groups and institutions	344	12.2%	2.26	1.05
Military	337	7.4%	1.91	1.03
Para-military groups, militias and similar groups	330	5.5%	1.71	0.97
Organized crime and criminal groups	332	4.8%	1.63	0.95
Terrorist groups	331	5.1%	1.57	0.91

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.)