

Sweden

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INTRODUCTION

Sweden has a long tradition of low levels of conflict in politics and society. However, this has changed in the last decade due to the rise of a right-wing populist party, the Sweden Democrats (SD), which is supported by approximately 18 to 20 percent of the voters. Since 2022, the moderate right government is dependent on the support of SD and has an organized cooperation with the party.

Journalism has long been based on strong daily newspapers and a deep-seated public service broadcasting tradition. Digitalization of the media landscape has not changed this in any major way, and the newspapers have a large share of digital subscribers. There has also been a strong concentration in media ownership, and local and regional media especially face economic problems. Traditional journalism is now challenged by social media and different “alternative media” on the internet.

Labor market trends for journalists are the same as in all Western countries with decreasing newsrooms, a growing share of temporary employees, and a strong pressure on those journalists still working in newsrooms. In line with other labor markets in the Global North, the number of journalists in Sweden has shrunk. Based on data from Statistics Sweden and the Swedish Union of Journalists (SJF), the number of people working as professional journalists in Sweden fell from approximately 15,000 in 2014 to 11,000 in 2022. According to this survey, the profession has gradually become older and the share of women in journalism has grown to become the majority. This development is not new; it has been visible for 15-20 years in other research.

This report's data were collected in the fourth quarter of 2021 and thus attest to the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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BACKGROUNDS OF JOURNALISTS

The average Swedish journalist is 49.1 years old ($SD = 11.4$, Median = 50 years), has either a bachelor's (48.6%, $n = 210$) or master's degree (16.7%, $n = 72$), or studied without graduating (21.3%, $n = 92$). Three participants obtained a doctorate (0.7%), while three others did not complete high school (0.7%) and another 12.0% graduated from high school ($n = 52$). A total of 52.9% ($n = 229$) of journalists identify as women, 46.2% as men ($n = 200$), and 0.9% ($n = 4$) as nonbinary or other. The majority of respondents completed professional training/formal education in journalism (72.7%, $n = 298$), usually at a university or college (78.3%). Of the participants, 14.5% ($n = 20$) stated that they had completed an apprenticeship/cadetship and 53.7% ($n = 88$) indicated that they had attended a short-term course in journalism.

JOURNALISTS IN THE NEWSROOM

The average Swedish journalist at the time of the study had a full-time permanent contract (69.5%, $n = 328$). The second-largest group included journalists who worked as freelancers or were self-employed (18.6%, $n = 88$). Since part-time permanent (5.7%, $n = 27$) or part-time fixed-term contracts (1.1%, $n = 5$) as well as full-time fixed-term contracts (3.8%, $n = 18$) are rare, additional earnings from activities outside journalism are seldom necessary (87.0% stated to have no additional income, $n = 416$).

Swedish journalists, on average, are experienced generalists. The majority have been active in journalism for more than two decades (Mean = 22.5 years, $SD = 11.6$, Median = 22 years) and do not have a specific “beat” (68.2%, $n = 298$). On average, Swedish journalists in full-time employment work 40.2 hours a week ($SD = 4.5$, Median = 40 hours). Even if the average working hours are moderate, they are only a rough indicator of the individual workload. Of the respondents, 48.5% ($n = 225$) reported feeling stressed at work in the past six months (i.e., before data collection) either often or very often. Another 37.9% responded that this was sometimes the case ($n = 176$). Accordingly, only slightly more than one-tenth of respondents reported never or rarely feeling stressed (13.6%, $n = 63$).

Organizational hierarchies in Swedish newsrooms are low. Most respondents in our sample were “regular” journalists without any managerial responsibilities (85.8%, $n = 406$). Only 7.0% belonged to middle management ($n = 33$), while another 7.2% belonged to top management ($n = 34$).

Outlets with (trans-)national reach played the largest role as employers (52.3%, $n = 225$). Local and regional (39.1%, $n = 168$) outlets played a lesser, but by no means marginal role. A further 37 respondents were not able to classify their employers using this categorization (“no main medium”: 8.6%, $n = 37$). Despite financial challenges, the private/commercial media sector has remained highly relevant for the journalistic labor market. Journalists in Sweden primarily work for commercial media outlets (54.9%, $n = 236$), followed by public service broadcasting companies (27.2%, $n = 117$). Nonprofit (10%, $n = 43$) or community media (0.9%, $n = 4$), by comparison, play a lesser role. Seven percent of respondents ($n = 30$) could not specify any one primary medium outlet for which they worked. A closer look at the background of their main employers showed that the largest group (39.3%, $n = 168$) of journalists in our sample worked for companies publishing newspapers, and an additional 15.2% ($n = 65$) for magazine companies. Radio (16.6%, $n = 71$) and television (14.5%, $n = 62$) played major roles as well. Furthermore, 2.6% ($n = 11$) reported working for a news agency and 0.9% ($n = 4$) for a native internet outlet. Another 8% reported no primary employer ($n = 34$), and 2.8% ($n = 12$) reported working for other outlets.

SAFETY AND WORK-RELATED CONCERNS

In our survey, the majority of our respondents indicated that they had never, or at least very rarely, encountered any threats (see Table 1). Nevertheless, it remains worrisome that more than one-third of journalists have occasionally had their work publicly discredited or were subject to hate speech. Furthermore, one in 10 journalists has occasionally been affected by doxing and other threats or intimidation attempts.

Hate speech is often considered to be the perfect crime. Freedom of expression is interpreted very broadly in many countries, including Sweden, and even when legal rights are affected, prosecution is difficult, for example, in the case of anonymous online posts. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that a large proportion of journalists in Sweden fear impunity (see Table 2). Nearly one-third are also concerned about their emotional and mental well-being, while one-fifth are worried about their physical security. By contrast, only slightly more than one in 10 is concerned about losing their job.

TABLE 1. EXPERIENCED THREATS

	N	Very often	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Demeaning or hateful speech directed at you	483	3.5%	5.2%	30.0%	39.5%	21.7%
Public discrediting of your work	482	2.7%	8.1%	29.0%	35.3%	24.9%
Surveillance	461	0.2%	1.5%	5.0%	13.9%	79.4%
Hacking or blocking of social media accounts or websites	482	0.0%	1.0%	3.9%	12.2%	82.8%
Arrests, detentions or imprisonment	483	0.0%	0.0%	0.2%	0.4%	99.4%
Legal actions against you because of your work	483	0.0%	0.4%	0.4%	1.9%	97.3%
Stalking	478	0.0%	0.4%	2.9%	12.1%	84.5%
Other threats or intimidations directed at you	481	0.6%	2.7%	6.9%	23.5%	66.3%
Sexual assault or sexual harassment	482	0.0%	0.6%	1.5%	7.7%	90.2%
Other physical attacks	483	0.0%	0.0%	1.0%	5.0%	94.0%
Others disseminating your personal information	482	0.6%	1.7%	8.3%	21.6%	67.8%
Workplace bullying	482	0.4%	1.0%	5.6%	14.1%	78.8%
Intimidation that targets family	483	0.0%	0.2%	0.8%	4.1%	94.8%

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	479	13.6%	2.04	1.17
Concerned about physical well-being	480	21.0%	2.36	1.22
Concerned about emotional and mental wellbeing	479	29.4%	2.60	1.31
Concerned that those who harm journalists in Sweden go unpunished	480	59.0%	3.48	1.18

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

Most journalists devote themselves to the role of detached observers (see Table 3); more than 80% found that role to be very or extremely important and saw it as their job to counteract disinformation and shed light on social problems. It was also very important to them to allow people to express their views. On the other hand, journalists are dismissive of statements that suggest financial or political interest; they are rarely interested in providing news that attracts the largest possible audience, and do not consider themselves to play a role in supporting national development, supporting government policy, or conveying a positive image of political leaders. Consequently, only some expressed wanting to set the political agenda.

TABLE 3. JOURNALISTIC ROLES

	N	Very/extremely important	Mean	SD
Be a detached observer	480	85%	4.23	0.84
Monitor and scrutinize those in power	482	79.3%	4.21	1.02
Shine a light on society's problems	479	83.1%	4.31	0.90
Motivate people to participate in politics	480	14.6%	2.34	1.09
Provide analysis of current affairs	477	70.2%	3.88	0.97
Let people express their views	480	82.3%	4.26	0.87
Provide information people need to form political opinion	478	54.8%	3.52	1.25
Advocate for social change	480	22.1%	2.68	1.15
Influence public opinion	482	17.4%	2.28	1.17
Set the political agenda	481	7.7%	2.00	1.01
Promote peace and tolerance	481	32.6%	3.01	1.22
Educate the audience	481	66.5%	3.84	1.02
Point toward possible solutions to society's problems	480	34.4%	3.04	1.10
Speak on behalf of the marginalized	481	28.9%	2.75	1.22
Support national development	482	9.1%	1.96	1.05
Support government policy	480	0.6%	1.12	0.44
Convey a positive image of political leaders	481	2.1%	1.33	0.70
Provide entertainment and relaxation	478	25.5%	2.68	1.17
Provide the kind of news that attracts the largest audience	478	9.2%	2.11	1.01
Provide advice, orientation and direction for daily life	480	27.1%	2.80	1.13
Tell stories that emotionally move the audience	480	61.0%	3.65	1.04
Support efforts to protect public health	481	19.8%	2.43	1.20
Counteract disinformation	483	84.7%	4.39	0.92

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

Discussing journalists' role perceptions inevitably involves discussing whether the ideal of the objective reporter can be realized at all. The majority, albeit a narrow majority, of the journalists surveyed expressed that it was possible to depict objective reality in reporting. However, there was slightly more agreement that interpretation was necessary to give meaning to facts. Accordingly, Swedish journalists indicated being rather averse to black-and-white thinking. Most were also convinced that it was possible for them to prevent their personal convictions from influencing their work (see Table 4).

TABLE 4. JOURNALISTIC EPISTEMOLOGIES

	N	Agree/ strongly agree	Mean	SD
Interpretation is necessary to make sense of facts	443	60.5%	3.57	0.83
Truth is inevitably shaped by those in power	444	18.9%	2.49	1.08
It is impossible for journalists to withhold their personal beliefs from reporting	443	16.5%	2.42	1.02
Things are either true or false, there is no in-between	446	13.7%	2.33	1.08
It is possible to represent objective reality in reporting	444	52.0%	3.40	1.00

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 Sweden attach great importance to professional ethics. For the vast majority of respondents in our sample, ethical standards should always be set by professional standards regardless of the situation and one's personal judgment (see Table 5). However, they allowed for extraordinary exceptions and distanced themselves from the idea that ethical judgments should be made on a situation-specific basis or be a matter of personal judgment.

Swedish journalists also seemed to have a clear understanding of which ethically problematic professional practices they would accept and those they would not (see Table 6). They strongly rejected financial dependence, for example, in the form of native advertising. They would also not accept money, products, or services from sources, and were very hesitant to pay for confidential information. Furthermore, the unauthorized use of ordinary citizens' documents or photos was also viewed with caution. However, journalists were less squeamish about using such materials on occasion if the people were in power and more open about using confidential corporate or government documents without authorization. The vast majority also indicated that pretending to be someone else and using hidden recording devices could occasionally be accepted. Journalists were divided on only one statement; almost half of them stated that under no circumstances would they agree to publish stories containing unverified information, whereas slightly more than half believed that doing so could occasionally be justified.

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	478	93.7%	4.50	0.71
What is ethical for journalists should be determined by professional standards unless extraordinary circumstances require disregarding them	480	85.6%	4.23	0.82
What is ethical for journalists should depend on each specific situation	478	25.5%	2.69	1.17
What is ethical for journalists should be a matter of personal judgment	480	20.2%	2.42	1.17

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	482	1.0%	80.1%
Using hidden recording devices	482	1.7%	93.6%
Using confidential business or government documents without authorization	482	7.5%	82.8%
Using the personal materials of powerful people, such as documents and photos, without their permission	479	5.8%	79.1%
Using the personal materials of ordinary people, such as documents and photos, without their permission	481	0.4%	35.8%
Paying people for confidential information	479	1.3%	33.2%
Accepting money from sources	480	0.4%	1.3%
Accepting a free product or service from sources	480	0.2%	7.9%
Producing content that mimics news stories but hides its promotional nature	481	0.2%	1.5%
Publishing or broadcasting stories with information that is not yet verified	481	1.2%	52.0%

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

The majority of respondents felt that they had considerable freedom in choosing and presenting topics (see Table 7); around three-quarters experience a great deal or even complete freedom in the selection of the stories that they wanted to work on and in deciding which aspects they wanted to emphasize in their reporting. In general, the media in Sweden were considered to be quite “free” by a vast majority of the journalists we surveyed.

TABLE 7. PERCEPTIONS OF EDITORIAL AUTONOMY AND MEDIA FREEDOM

	N	A great deal/ complete freedom	Mean	SD
Freedom in selecting the news stories	470	75.3%	3.85	0.81
Freedom in deciding which aspects of a story should be emphasized	470	76.6%	3.90	0.82
Media freedom in Sweden	451	90.2%	4.19	0.64

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

EDITORIAL INFLUENCES

Internal journalistic factors were perceived as being more important than external ones. Supervisors were perceived as being very or extremely influential by a majority, which also applied to colleagues. By contrast, not only media owners and managers but also the police, politicians, the government, organized crime groups, public relations personnel, and people from the business world were rated as being less influential (see Table 8).

TABLE 8. EDITORIAL INFLUENCES

	N	Very/extremely influential	Mean	SD
Peers on the news staff	409	58.9%	3.57	0.88
Editorial supervisors and higher editors	427	76.8%	3.95	0.88
The business managers of the news organization	380	7.6%	1.82	1.02
The owners of the news organization	380	7.1%	1.73	1.00
Editorial policy	413	53.0%	3.52	1.00
Advertising considerations	355	1.1%	1.30	0.66
Profit expectations	364	13.5%	2.02	1.16
Audience research and data	416	37.7%	3.06	1.14
Availability of news-gathering resources	384	45.1%	3.19	1.15
Time limits	426	55.2%	3.50	0.98
Journalism ethics	435	61.1%	3.60	1.17
Self-censorship	419	3.6%	1.75	0.84
Personal values and beliefs	443	35.9%	3.00	1.13
Colleagues in other media	420	7.4%	2.31	0.90
Friends, acquaintances and family	425	3.1%	2.02	0.84
Feedback from the audience	431	18.3%	2.80	0.86
Competing news organizations	420	18.3%	2.69	0.95
Media laws and regulation	405	19.3%	2.39	1.17
Access to information	424	56.6%	3.49	1.02
Government censorship	384	1.0%	1.15	0.51
Government officials	405	1.7%	1.32	0.70
Politicians	410	3.7%	1.49	0.84
Business people	409	1.2%	1.40	0.68
Public relations	408	2.5%	1.54	0.79
Relationships with news sources	415	19.3%	2.53	1.06
Police	402	7.2%	1.72	0.99
Issue advocacy groups	414	3.1%	1.66	0.82
Scientists or health experts	418	10.5%	2.16	1.02
Religious groups and institutions	410	1.0%	1.24	0.58
Organized crime and criminal groups	401	0.2%	1.13	0.41

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.)