

Journalism as a precarious routinized profession

Quality and job satisfaction seem to be at stake in each of the 18 countries monitored in the context of the “[Media for Democracy Monitor 2020](#)” [research project](#); the uncertainty dominating the media field leads to a worrying decline in journalistic profession security in several countries.

Journalism professionalism and journalistic job security is currently in a state of flux within various media markets. Two considerable trends have emerged, characterised by different degrees of intensity and influence on journalism field: the increasingly common use of fixed-term contracts and the generational change in newsrooms, aimed primarily at saving resources in times of crisis.

This is a core finding derived from a survey by researchers of the “[Media for Democracy Monitor 2020](#)” [research project](#), conducted under the umbrella of the [Euromedia Research Group](#) in eighteen countries¹ around the globe in the first half of 2020 (www.euromediagroup.org/mdm).

Although journalism has been perceived as an “open” profession, in most countries a considerable percentage of journalists are highly educated persons holding a university degree, not necessarily on the discipline of media or journalism studies. However, quality and job satisfaction seem to be at stake forming a type of pathogen attributable to a series of factors:

- the increasing amount of workload (e.g. in Austria, where, compared to the first MDM research results, job satisfaction decreased significantly, and in Finland, where the divide between quality media and increasingly routinised bulk journalism is increasing);
- adverse working conditions (including very low salaries, underlined by Portuguese country report, and significant depressing effects on the delivery of original journalism, registered in the UK);
- staff shortages (seen as a serious deterrent to the possibility of Icelandic journalists for “high-class journalism”);
- limited resources (e.g. in Greece, where the financial collapse of the media market and the demise of journalists’ labour rights are denounced, and in Belgium, where three-quarters of Flemish journalists declare there is no time and budget to conduct profound research).

The above-mentioned features compose an image of a precarious routinized profession far from the goal of quality or high-class journalism. A distinctive exception seems to be journalism in the Netherlands where, despite the vulnerabilities at the local level, the profession is considered to be at its best phase.

¹ The countries participating in the research project entitled “Media for Democracy Monitor 2020” are Australia, Austria, Belgium (Flanders), Canada, Chile, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Greece, Hong Kong, Iceland, Italy, Netherlands, Portugal, South Korea, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom.

By contrast, in many countries, the uncertainty dominating the media sector along with the decline of job security are clearly reflected in phenomena such as:

- the rise of temporary employed journalists (generating a particularly serious phenomenon in countries such as Iceland, where very little protection is guaranteed for journalists in case of dismissal or termination of contract resulting from changes in ownership or shifts in the political orientation of the medium, and in Italy, where the widely used contractual forms determine the rise of a generation of “information riders”, in fact these are unrecognised staff replacements);
- the apparent inclination of the media system towards the freelancers (the “bright side” of the fixed-term contracts, widely used in countries such as Australia, Germany, Netherlands as a contractual form, liable to offer opportunities to young people and contribute to job security, for which fierce battles are given);
- the replacement policy of the experienced journalists by younger ones (e.g. in Hong Kong, Greece), who cost less to media organizations and at the same time are more familiar with the new technologies.

A notable exception is Austria, where, despite the existence of low resources and high newsroom pressure, journalists enjoy a high level of job security.

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The policy brief can be downloaded at: <http://www.euromediagroup.org/mdm/policybrief03.pdf>

The Media for Democracy Monitor 2020 (MDM) is a longitudinal research project on the performance of the media with regard to democracy. In 2011, communication and political scientists from 10 countries delivered a state-of-the art report, based on relevant indicators, researched by national experts. Results have been published by Nordicom ([free and open access book](#)), and on the [website of the Euromedia Research Group](#).

In 2020, experts from 18 countries applied the MDM indicators to their national media landscape, providing insights on the development of the media performance with regard to democracy over the decade of media digitalization (2010 to 2019). Full results will be released early 2021. The [Dutch Journalism Fund](#) support the research project.

The Euromedia Research Group is the academic host of the MDM project, which is coordinated and managed by Josef Trappel, University of Salzburg, and Werner A. Meier, University of Zurich. Contact: josef.trappel@sbg.ac.at; werner.a.meier@uzh.ch