

The American Journalist Under Attack: An Institution at Risk

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Abstract

Data from six decades underpin this representative survey of 1,600 U.S. journalists conducted in 2022 that analyzes changes in journalists' characteristics, values, and attitudes. Findings indicate the "interpretive-investigative" function remains prominent, while endorsement of the "disseminator" role has dropped dramatically. Social media usage is now routine but concerns about its adverse effects on journalism have risen sharply since 2013. While lack of diversity is still a problem in U.S. newsrooms, women have made strides in numbers and leadership and are now at parity on salaries. Alarming, six in 10 U.S. journalists report having received threats in their jobs.

Keywords

U.S. journalists, professional roles and values, democracy, survey

Fracturing public faith in American democracy and many of the institutions on which it rests—none more important than the press—mark the moment for this research. Public criticism of the news media, normally a healthy result of the traditional role of the press as "watchdog," has become louder and more menacing. And the financial model for much of the news profession has never been under greater stress. With a half-century of previous studies as background, this new research offers a unique perspective, at a perilous time, of journalists' perceptions of their purpose, roles, and work.

It is in this context that our new research updates findings on the status of roles, values, ethics, and professional perceptions of American journalists since the last

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study conducted in 2013. What has happened to U.S. journalists over a decade of political-social strife and the continuing upheaval in media forms by technology? Have their sociological characteristics and professional attitudes changed? What has affected job satisfaction, perceived autonomy, ethical practices, and role perceptions? What effect has the maturing of social media—as tools of reporting and audience interaction—had on journalists' views of their work?

This 2022 survey of 1,600 U.S. journalists addresses these and other questions. It asks many of the same questions included in our previous surveys to track trends over time (Weaver et al., 2007; Weaver & Wilhoit, 1986, 1996; Willnat et al., 2017), but also introduces new questions about the threats journalists face in their work. As such, our latest study explores the evolving landscape of U.S. journalism over five decades up to 2022, focusing on shifting demographics, professional autonomy, job satisfaction, changing professional roles, the influence of social media, and increasing threats faced by journalists.

Economic, Social, and Political Context

The American news landscape has undergone radical changes during the half-century of our research. As audiences have shifted to digital platforms, content streaming, and social media, these trends have significantly affected the structure and economic model of U.S. news media. One of the most dramatic changes in the newspaper sector since 2000 has been the shift in revenue sources. In 2020, for the first time in 50 years, subscriber revenue surpassed advertising revenue, primarily due to social media's effectiveness with targeted ads (Adgate, 2023; Barthel, 2021). Despite the rise in online access, total U.S. daily newspaper circulation (both digital and print) dropped by about 6% in 2020 to 24 million subscribers, a sharp decline from 62 million in 1971 when Johnstone et al.'s (1976) foundational study of U.S. journalists was conducted, marking the beginning of the longitudinal research reported here.

Since 2013, news audiences across all media have declined, particularly after the 2020 presidential election and the end of the "Trump bump" (Moore, 2021). Traditional network, local, and cable television news, which saw growth during the Trump administration, have experienced audience declines since 2020. However, network evening news audiences have remained stable, and Fox Network has recovered from its audience losses following the Dominion libel settlement (Pew Research Center, 2023a, 2023b, 2023c).

The print sector, particularly daily newspapers, has experienced the most extensive changes. Virtual newsrooms from the pandemic era have largely shifted to hybrid models, with journalists typically spending three days in the newsroom and two working remotely. This transition has been challenging, even for prestigious outlets like *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* (Guaglione, 2024; Izadi & Scribner, 2023).

Digital news sites of the top 50 U.S. newspapers have also experienced audience declines (Pew Research Center, 2023d). The 2023 shutdown of BuzzFeed News, a pioneer

in digital journalism, underscores the unpredictability of audience patterns, particularly for digital-native media (Mullin & Robertson, 2023).

As a result, the information system supporting American democracy is much more complex than it was in 2013. One of the most consequential developments has been the shrinking number of journalists delivering credible news. A recent Pew report (Walker, 2021) estimated a 26% decline in U.S. journalists, from 114,000 in 2008 to approximately 85,000 in 2020. Consequently, journalists today have fewer face-to-face interactions with colleagues, communities, and sources than during our previous studies.

Overall, it seems clear that a diminished journalism profession faces significant challenges that have frayed the aura of the press as a pillar of American democracy—making an accurate portrayal of the state of this profession an important endeavor.

The Changing American Journalist

The unique longitudinal perspective of this study allows for the analysis of shifts in the demographic profile of U.S. journalists, their working conditions, and their professional attitudes over the past half-century within the broader context of societal, political, and economic change. Few studies provide comparable data on a profession as significant as journalism, spanning nearly half the lifespan of this academic journal.

One exception is the work by Singer and her colleagues (2023), who analyzed the content of 444 academic studies on journalism published in *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* between 1924 and 2022. The authors highlight how journalism studies evolved from a narrow focus on teaching and practice to a more sophisticated and global field, driven by technological changes and theoretical advancements.

While the research reported here does not draw on the theoretical perspectives Singer et al. (2023) found dominating contemporary journalism studies, it relies heavily on sociological perspectives of professions that emphasize what the German sociologist Thomas Kurtz (2022) calls “the importance of professional performance” that is “oriented to certain social values” (pp. 277, 265). Based on this concept of professionalism, we analyze the attitudes of American journalists about the purpose, meaning, and ethics of their work across time. Our approach assumes that journalists’ backgrounds relate to their values and ethics, which, in turn, likely affect the news they report. As such, this study documents significant changes among U.S. journalists over the past decade and explores how these shifts relate to their views about their work.

A key objective of the *American Journalist* studies is to track the demographics of journalists over time. Research shows that factors like age, gender, race, and education influence journalists’ ethics and work practices. For instance, our 2013 study revealed that older journalists are less likely to support controversial practices and tend to be more skeptical about the benefits of social media.

Understanding journalists’ demographics is essential for evaluating workplace diversity, equity, and inclusion. For example, women journalists bring unique perspectives to news coverage, especially on topics related to gender, health, and social justice (Rodgers & Thorson, 2003). In addition, increased representation of women in newsrooms may

improve the visibility of women in news stories and influence how they are portrayed (Beam & Di Cicco, 2010; Usher et al., 2018).

Similarly, journalists from racial or ethnic minority groups can highlight issues that might otherwise be overlooked and offer perspectives that resonate with underrepresented communities (Chakravartty et al., 2018). They also contribute to more accurate and comprehensive coverage of racial and ethnic groups, as well as policy issues that disproportionately affect these communities, such as poverty, crime, and immigration (Sui et al., 2018). As a result, diverse newsrooms are better equipped to understand and engage with a diverse audience, fostering greater trust and loyalty as their experiences and concerns are reflected in the news (Jenkins & Powers, 2023).

Studies of U.S. journalists conducted between 1982 and 2022 have identified significant demographic shifts, which have implications for various journalistic issues, including whether U.S. journalists are becoming demographically and politically less representative of the American public (Willnat et al., 2017). The 2013 study revealed that although more women and journalists belonging to minorities have entered the profession, newsrooms still lack sufficient representation to reflect U.S. demographics. In addition, the study highlighted an aging workforce and a persistent salary gap for women. At the same time, the profession saw the highest proportion of highly educated and experienced journalists in the last 50 years, likely playing a pivotal role in maintaining journalistic standards during the digital revolution. Given that these demographic shifts have likely continued over the past decade, our first research question asks:

RQ1: What Demographic Shifts Have Occurred Among U.S. Journalists Over Time?

Journalism is a high-stress profession characterized by tight deadlines, public scrutiny, and frequent exposure to stressful events (Monteiro et al., 2015). In addition, increasing financial pressures on U.S. media outlets have reduced the number of full-time journalists, raising concerns about job security (Gottfried et al., 2022). As a result, job satisfaction dropped from 40% of U.S. journalists who were “very satisfied” with their jobs in 1982 to 23% in 2013. Similarly, job autonomy—a key factor linked to job satisfaction—declined from 60% of journalists in 1982 who said they had “almost complete freedom” in selecting news stories to only 35% in 2013 (Willnat et al., 2017).

Tracking job satisfaction and autonomy is crucial as they influence whether journalists remain in the field or leave for other work (Willnat et al., 2017). The loss of talented journalists can diminish the quality of reporting, including the institutional memory that informs it. Furthermore, satisfied journalists are likely to be more motivated, creative, and committed to ethical standards, which enhances the depth and integrity of news coverage (Deuze, 2017). Considering the economic and work-related pressures U.S. journalists have faced over the past decade, our second research question asks:

RQ2: How Have U.S. Journalists' Job Satisfaction and Autonomy Changed?

How journalists define their roles in society has been a long-standing question in journalism research. Part of the debate surrounding this topic stems from the fact that the knowledge underpinning journalistic practices is “both limited and less clearly defined” compared to other established professions (Tumber & Prentoulis, 2005, p. 58).

Media scholars have described journalism as its own “interpretive community” (Hanitzsch et al., 2019; Zelizer, 1993), where journalists shape their reality through interactions with other like-minded individuals (Raemy & Vos, 2021; Vos et al., 2023). While we agree with the conceptualization of U.S. journalism as a self-constructed community that is continuously redefined, our decennial surveys also consider the social and technological changes that likely influence journalists' role perceptions. As a result, our last two surveys, conducted in 2013 and 2022, included questions on the use of social media in journalism.

Prior research shows that journalists' perceptions of their roles are multifaceted, often encompassing multiple functions at once (Hanitzsch et al., 2019; Mellado et al., 2017; Weaver & Wilhoit, 1996). Ward (2009) argues that journalists often see themselves as embodying a blend of roles, including informer, interpreter, and advocate. While various criteria for evaluating the journalism profession appear in the literature (e.g., Hanitzsch et al., 2019; Mellado, 2020), the interpretive, populist-mobilizer, disseminator, and adversarial roles have been consistently identified among U.S. journalists in surveys conducted over the past four decades (Willnat et al., 2017).

Earlier surveys depicted journalism as a profession largely driven by altruism, with strong ties to the investigative and disseminator roles, though the disseminator role was in decline. There was also a drop in the perceived importance of analyzing complex problems and discussing national policies from the early 1970s to the early 2000s. However, the 2013 study revealed a shift, showing that journalists often combined investigative and analytic dimensions into an interpretive-investigative approach. Journalists increasingly saw their role as not only checking official claims, but also placing those findings in a meaningful context (Willnat et al., 2017).

Given the technological and financial crisis affecting the U.S. news media over the past decade, our third research question explores how these changes might influence journalists' views about their professional roles:

RQ3: How Have U.S. Journalists' Perceptions of Professional Roles Changed?

Historically, the public's perception of journalists' professional ethics has been shaped primarily by how they handle critical reporting tactics, such as undercover reporting, using confidential documents, and treating anonymous sources. If these tactics are seen as manipulative or unethical, they can significantly erode public trust in the news media (Lanosga et al., 2015). Conversely, journalists' views on whether certain controversial

reporting methods are justified offer valuable insights into shifts in their professional values and role perceptions.

However, the moral-ethical dimensions of controversial reporting techniques are complex, making it difficult to draw clear boundaries on what should or should not be acceptable. A general conclusion drawn from over half a century of research on journalistic attitudes is that journalists have become more cautious about using aggressive tactics, such as false identification or clandestine employment, to obtain information (Willnat et al., 2017). However, the greatest dilemma for journalists remains the legitimacy of using confidential documents, both official and private. While most journalists now tolerate the use of such documents, the field has been almost evenly divided on this issue over several decades of research.

Given the increasing competition with “instant” news on social media, journalists in mainstream media may feel tempted to adopt more aggressive tactics in their reporting. Moreover, tensions between journalists and government officials, which peaked during the Trump administration (Barr, 2024), may have encouraged journalists to become more assertive in their work. Therefore, our next research question asks:

RQ4: How Have U.S. Journalists’ Views of Controversial Reporting Methods Changed?

Research on journalists’ use of social media has surged over the past decade. Most studies have found that journalists value social media as a tool for publishing and promoting stories, as well as engaging with audiences (Humayun & Ferrucci, 2022). Many journalists see social media as enhancing traditional newsmaking by enabling faster reporting, better access to sources, and increased research efficiency (Spyridou et al., 2013). Most journalists also agree that social media have increased their engagement with audiences (Cision, 2016). However, our findings show that many journalists recognize that social media have undermined traditional journalistic norms by creating pressure to publish faster, relying on unverified information from questionable sources, or reacting to trending stories with limited relevance (Willnat et al., 2017).

Thus, because social media deeply affect how journalists work and think about their roles as newsmakers, it is essential to understand how they navigate these challenges in a fast-changing media environment. Consequently, we ask:

RQ5: How Has U.S. Journalists’ Use of Social Media in Their Work Changed?

The rise of social media has pressured journalists to constantly scan for breaking news and continuously update their stories. These demands have sparked concerns about declining news quality, inadequate fact-checking, and diminished ethical standards. The spread of misinformation on social media has amplified these worries, underscoring the need for strategies to combat fake news and ensure the public receives accurate information (Wardle & Derakhsha, 2017).

In 2013, when U.S. journalists were first asked about the impact of social media, the majority viewed them positively, with 72% perceiving a positive effect on their

work and 70% on the profession. However, journalists' attitudes likely have shifted over the past decade due to the challenges of integrating social media into their daily routines and the growing threats posed by misinformation. Thus, we ask:

RQ6: How Have U.S. Journalists' Attitudes Toward Social Media Changed?

The rapid growth of social media platforms has highlighted threats in online spaces and their impact on journalists' well-being. Interactive platforms often allow users to remain anonymous (Jaidka et al., 2022), which can embolden harassing behaviors not typically seen in face-to-face interactions (Carlson et al., 2021). This anonymity can contribute to widespread online harassment of journalists, particularly on social media, where they engage in public discourse.

Rising violence and harassment against U.S. journalists (Krøvel et al., 2023; Lewis et al., 2020) likely affect their psychological well-being and undermine the integrity of journalism, leading to self-censorship, restricted information flow, and weakened press freedom (Löfgren Nilsson & Örnebring, 2016; Miller, 2021). Coupled with declining public trust in the media (Brenan, 2023), these trends further erode confidence in U.S. news outlets. A healthy democracy depends on an informed citizenry and a free press capable of reporting on government actions without fear of retaliation. Thus, violence and harassment compromise journalists' ability to perform this critical role, leading to a chilling effect that threatens the foundations of democracy (Miller, 2023).

Previous research has explored the threats journalists face in both online and offline environments and their consequences (e.g., Obermaier, 2023; Posetti et al., 2023; Waisbord, 2020). However, many of these studies have relied on qualitative investigations of journalists with relatively small sample sizes (e.g., Miller & Lewis, 2020; Tsui & Lee, 2021). We aim to contribute to this body of literature by examining the online and offline threats faced by journalists in their daily work using our representative sample of 1,600 U.S. journalists. Thus, we ask:

RQ7: To What Extent Do U.S. Journalists Face Verbal and Physical Threats in Their Work?

Methods

To address these questions, we conducted a national online survey of 1,600 full-time U.S. journalists in early 2022, following a similar approach to the four previous surveys. The 2022 survey included many of the same questions from earlier studies to allow for tracking trends over time. In addition, new questions were introduced to capture journalists' perceptions of verbal and physical threats in the modern journalism landscape.

Sampling. The 2022 study employs the same sampling method used in our previous studies, including journalists from print, broadcast, and online news media in the United States. The sample is based on a multistage sampling procedure, which first

draws a representative sample of media organizations in the United States and then, in a second step, samples journalists from within each of the selected organizations.

The online survey, conducted from January 19 to April 10, 2022, targeted full-time journalists working for a wide variety of daily and weekly newspapers, radio and television stations, wire services, news magazines, and online news media throughout the United States.¹ All 14,700 journalists selected for our initial sample were invited via email to participate in the survey and received four follow-up reminders via email and one personal “nudge” call by telephone. The response rate for the final sample of 1,600 U.S. journalists included in this study was 11%.²

Questionnaire. The survey questionnaire focused on journalists’ job satisfaction, perceived job autonomy, role perceptions, reporting practices, use of social media, perceived impact of social media on their work, and demographics. Most of these questions were asked in previous studies of U.S. journalists and can be compared over time. As mentioned earlier, we also added questions that probed journalists’ experiences with verbal and physical threats in their jobs.

Job Satisfaction and Journalistic Autonomy. Journalists’ overall job satisfaction was assessed by asking how satisfied (1 = very dissatisfied, 4 = very satisfied) they were with their present job. Journalists’ perceived autonomy in their work was measured on a 4-point scale (1 = none at all, 4 = almost complete freedom) with three questions that asked (a) how much freedom they had in covering subjects that they thought were important, (b) how much freedom they had in selecting the stories they would like to work on, and (c) how much freedom they had in deciding which aspects of a story should be emphasized.

Journalistic Roles. To better understand how journalists think about their roles in society, respondents were asked how important (1 = not really important, 4 = extremely important) they considered several “classic” professional roles identified in prior research. Journalists were asked, for example, how important they thought it was to “get information to the public quickly,” “provide analysis and interpretation of complex problems,” or “investigate claims and statements made by the government.”

Controversial Journalistic Practices. To assess how widespread the acceptance of controversial reporting practices is among U.S. journalists, respondents were asked to indicate—given an important story—whether they might approve any of 11 reporting practices such as “paying people for confidential information,” “claiming to be somebody else,” or “badgering unwilling informants to get a story.” Respondents were able to indicate whether they thought that their use “would be justified on occasion,” that they “would not approve” such methods under any circumstances, or that they were “not sure.”

Perceived Importance and Use of Social Media in Journalism. How journalists use social media in their jobs was assessed with questions that measured the perceived importance of social media in journalists’ work, the frequency of use of different types of social media, and the way social media were used. The perceived importance of

social media was measured by asking journalists how important (1 = not important at all, 5 = extremely important) they thought social media were for reporting or producing their stories. The frequency of social media use in their work was assessed by asking journalists how often (1 = never, 4 = regularly) they use social media such as Twitter and Facebook or audio-visual sharing sites such as YouTube. Finally, to better understand how journalists use social media in their work, they were asked whether they regularly use it to check for breaking news, find new ideas for stories, or keep in touch with their audiences. The questions regarding the use of social media, which were first asked in the 2013 survey, were partially adopted from Gulyas (2013) and Hedman and Djerf-Pierre (2013).

Perceived Impact of Social Media. The survey also included questions that probed how journalists thought about the impact of social media on their work and the profession overall. After first asking journalists how they would rate the impact of social media on their work (1 = very positive, 5 = very negative), they were then asked to rate the impact of social media on the journalistic profession by answering to what extent they agree (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree) with the following five statements: (a) Social media are undermining traditional journalistic values; (b) Social media threaten the quality of journalism; (c) Social media make journalism more accountable to the public; (d) User-generated content threatens the integrity of journalism; (e) Online journalism has sacrificed accuracy for speed.

Perceived Threats Against Journalists. Respondents were first asked how safe they felt “operating as a journalist in the United States” and whether they had experienced any threats, abuse, or violence in their work. Next, journalists were asked whether they had experienced, either online or offline, any of the following 12 types of threats in their work as journalists during the past year: physical abuse, verbal abuse, bullying, intimidation, violence, racism, sexism, insults about their character, threats to their professional standing, threats of physical violence, threats of sexual violence, and death threats. This was followed by a question about the most frequent sources of these threats (anonymous people, colleagues, government officials, politicians, etc.). Finally, journalists were asked how these threats affected their journalistic work and them personally (self-censorship, avoiding interactions, increased security, etc.). The threat questions were adopted from the UNESCO 2020 Report on Online Violence Against Women Journalists (Posetti et al., 2020).

Demographics. Gender, age, education, race, religion, political party affiliation, political leaning, marital status, and income were measured for descriptive and statistical control purposes.

Findings

Demographics of U.S. Journalists. One of the goals of this study is to update the findings of the last comprehensive U.S. journalist survey conducted in 2013—including those related to journalists’ demographic characteristics. The main question we try to answer

here is whether the demographic composition of the journalism profession in the United States has changed significantly during the last decade.

According to the findings, the typical U.S. journalist today is a married White male, 47 years old, with 24 years of work experience and a college degree. These demographics are similar to those in 2013, except for the increased years of experience, which was 20 years in 2013.

Most journalists (96.5%) have a college degree, with about half (48.8%) majoring in journalism. However, only 18.1% feel their education prepared them “very well” for the digital media environment. Consequently, a majority (59.5%) want more training, especially in records management (9.1%), data journalism (8.1%), podcast production (6.7%), and media law (6.6%).

The median annual salary for U.S. journalists increased to \$74,010 in 2021, up by about \$13,000 from 2012 (\$61,079) (journalists were asked about the previous year’s salary). However, that progress largely results from the significant closing of the long-standing salary gap between men and women in the field. While the median salary for male journalists increased by 15.7% over the past decade—not matching the 21% inflation that occurred between December 2012 and December 2021 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023)—women journalists’ median salary increased by 44.2% over the same period. Thus, the gender pay gap, a consistent feature of U.S. journalists’ salaries over the past five decades, has almost closed in 2021, with women journalists earning \$396 less than their male colleagues on average.

Although there are still significantly fewer women in journalism than men, their representation has grown slightly from 37.5% in 2013 to 40.9% in 2022. Women are underrepresented in journalism and tend to be concentrated among those with less than 10 years of professional experience. As shown in Figure 1, among U.S. journalists with less than five years of work experience, women significantly outnumber men, with 60.8% working in the profession. However, unlike a decade ago, the percentages of women in the mid-level-years of experience are now at parity with men. The largest gap remains among journalists with 20 or more years of experience, where only about one-third (31.1%) are women. Overall, these findings suggest that the problem of retention of women in U.S. journalism may have abated somewhat over the past decade.

The proportion of women in various news media has remained similar to a decade ago, except for news magazines and online media, where they are now a larger minority. As shown in Table 1, they now make up 43.9% of news magazine and 40.4% of online staffs, about 10 percentage points more than a decade ago.

Network television (45.3%) and radio (43.7%) staffs have the highest proportions of women, closely followed by news magazines (43.9%) and weekly newspapers (41.7%). As was true a decade ago, daily newspapers (37.2%) and wire services (34.1%) employ fewer women, with the largest gender imbalance in cable television, at only 27.9%.

The number of ethnic minority journalists in U.S. news media nearly doubled from 10.8% in 2013 to 18% in 2022, marking a 7-point increase, the largest in a decade since 1971. However, as Table 2 indicates, African Americans (5.2%), Asians (3.5%), and Latinos (6.6%) remain underrepresented in the journalistic profession. Notably, 54.8% of ethnic minority journalists are women, compared to 37.6% of White journalists. In

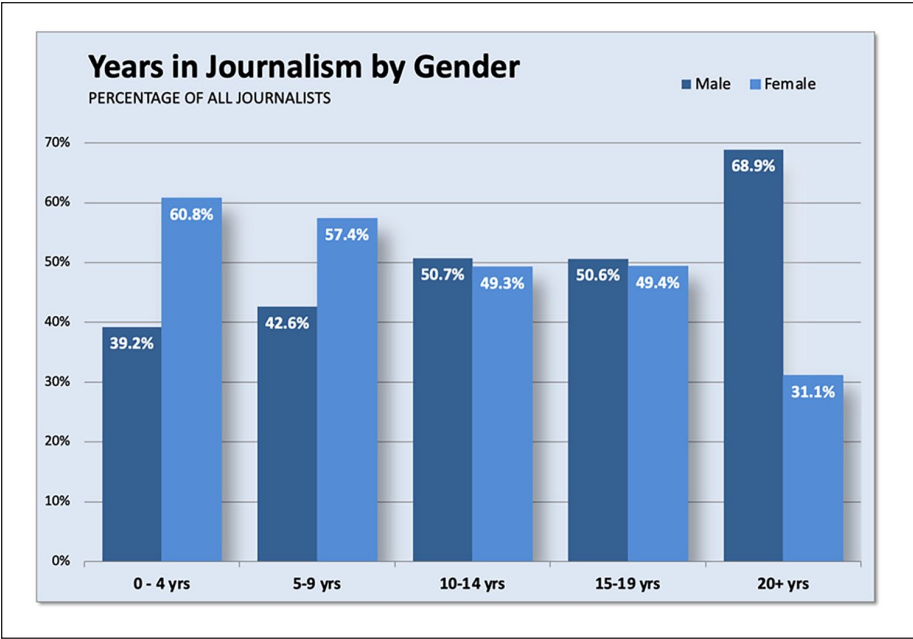


Figure 1. Years in Journalism by Gender in 2022

Table 1. Representation of Women Journalists in the U.S. News Media (in %).

News medium	1971	1982	1992	2002	2013	2022
Radio	4.8	26.3	29.0	21.9	38.1	43.7
Network TV	10.7	33.1	24.8	37.4	42.4	45.3
Wire services	13.0	19.1	25.9	20.3	36.9	34.1
Daily newspapers	22.4	34.4	33.9	33.0	34.9	37.2
Weekly newspapers	27.1	42.1	44.1	36.9	42.0	41.7
News magazines	30.4	31.7	45.9	43.5	33.3	43.9
Online	—	—	—	—	31.5	40.4
Cable TV	—	—	—	—	—	27.9
Total %	20.3	33.8	34.0	33.0	37.5	40.9
Total N	1,313	1,001	1,056	1,149	1,080	1,600

Note. Online and cable TV journalists were not assessed as a separate category in earlier surveys.

addition, 30.5% of journalists with less than five years of experience are ethnic minorities, indicating that efforts by media organizations to hire ethnic minorities in the past few years have had some success.

Television (26.8%) and radio (17.3%) employ the largest percentage of ethnic minority journalists, up notably from a decade ago (22% and 11.3%). Online media

Table 2. Representation of Ethnic Minority Journalists in the U.S. News Media (in %).

Race/ethnicity	1971	1982	1992	2002	2013	2022
African American	3.9	2.9	3.7	3.7	4.1	5.2
Hispanic	1.1	0.6	2.2	3.3	3.2	6.6
Asian American	—	0.4	1.0	1.0	1.8	3.5
Native American	—	—	0.6	0.4	0.5	0.3
Jewish	6.4	5.8	5.4	6.2	7.6	9.5
Other (incl. Caucasian)	88.6	90.3	87.1	85.4	82.8	74.9
Total %	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Total N	1,313	1,001	1,056	1,149	1,080	1,600

Note. The “Other” category for ethnic minority journalists shown here includes not only Caucasians, but also Pacific Islanders and “other” ethnic minorities (journalists who said they were part of an ethnic minority but didn’t specify which one).

Table 3. Political Party Identification of U.S. Journalists (in %).

Political party	1971	1982	1992	2002	2013	2022
Democrat	35.5	38.5	44.1	35.9	28.1	35.4
Republican	25.7	18.8	16.4	18.0	7.1	3.4
Independent	32.5	39.1	34.4	32.5	50.2	58.0
Other	5.8	1.6	3.5	10.5	9.8	2.6
Don’t know/refused	0.5	2.1	1.6	3.1	4.8	1.6
Total %	100.0	100.1	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Total N	1,313	1,001	1,056	1,149	1,080	1,600

Note. Not all percentages total 100% because of rounding.

nearly doubled their employment of ethnic minorities over the decade, increasing to 16.8% in 2022. Daily newspapers (14.7%) and wire services (14.1%) also significantly increased the employment of ethnic minorities over the past decade. News magazines (10.5%) and weekly newspapers (5.7%) have roughly the same percentage of ethnic minority journalists as a decade ago.

The 2022 survey also found that U.S. journalists are more likely to identify as independents than Democrats or Republicans, similar to 2013 (see Table 3). While the percentage of independents (58%) and Democrats (35.4%) increased by about eight percentage points since 2013, the number of journalists who identified as Republicans dropped from 7.1% in 2013 to 3.4% in 2022. Most journalists described their political views as “liberal” (53.4%) or “moderate” (39.5%), with only 7.1% identifying as “conservative.”

Job Satisfaction. Another goal of this study was to measure job satisfaction and autonomy in the profession during continuing economic stress and pessimism about the news media industry. Our surveys over several decades show a notable and steady decline in perceived job satisfaction, except for a small positive bounce in 2002. Surprisingly, the most recent data suggest a slight uptick in job satisfaction, belying the

Table 4. Job Satisfaction Among U.S. Journalists by Year (in %).

Level of satisfaction	1971	1982	1992	2002	2013	2022
Very satisfied	49.0	40.0	27.0	33.3	23.3	28.9
Fairly satisfied	39.0	44.0	50.0	50.6	51.3	47.5
Somewhat dissatisfied	12.0	15.0	20.0	14.4	19.3	19.4
Very dissatisfied	1.0	2.0	3.0	1.7	6.1	4.3
Total %	101.0	101.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.1
Total N	1,313	1,001	1,056	1,149	1,080	1,600

Note. Not all percentages total 100% because of rounding.

popular commentary. As Table 4 shows, job satisfaction has increased from 23.3% of journalists who said they were “very satisfied” with their jobs in 2013 to 28.9% who said so in 2022.

However, the results show job satisfaction among women was slightly lower than among men, with 72.8% of women and 78.8% of men being “very” or “fairly” satisfied. Women were also slightly more likely to plan to leave journalism within five years, with 15% of women and 10% of men indicating such plans, down from 19% and 13% in 2013. Despite this, both genders showed a strong inclination to stay in journalism for the next five years.

Cable television (51.2%), news magazine (43.9%), online (34.9%), and radio (33.7%) journalists were especially likely to be “very satisfied” with their jobs. In contrast, those working at daily (27.8%) and weekly newspapers (26%), wire services (24.7%), and network television (24.1%) were less so.

When asked which aspects are important to them when judging their jobs, most journalists prioritize the editorial policy of their organization (69.6%), the chance to help people (60.6%), and job security (56.7%). These are followed by pay (55.5%), job autonomy (44.4%), the chance to influence public affairs (32.7%), opportunities for advancement (31.7%), and developing a specialty (24.2%).

Journalistic Autonomy. As pointed out earlier, over the last three decades, the work environment of U.S. journalists has been transformed dramatically. News media ownership has become more consolidated (Abernathy, 2018). Threats to professional autonomy have emerged as news organizations have become more market-driven, and the demands of online news have changed how journalists work (Opgenhaffen & Hendrickx, 2024; Vos et al., 2023). How have these developments affected U.S. journalists’ perceived job autonomy?

Surveys of U.S. journalists conducted between 1982 and 2022 show a continuing erosion of perceived job autonomy in the nation’s newsrooms. While a majority (60%) of journalists said that they had “almost complete freedom” in selecting their stories in 1971 and 1982, only a third (33.6%) said so in 2013 (Willnat et al., 2017). This trend was halted in 2022, as slightly more than one-third (35.3%) of journalists said they had “almost complete freedom” in selecting their stories. At the same time, the percentage

of journalists who said they could “almost always” cover the subjects they thought were important increased from 34% in 2013 to 42% in 2022. The percentage of journalists who believe they have “almost complete freedom” to choose which aspects of a story to emphasize has increased only slightly from 38% in 2013 to 39% in 2022.

Overall, these latest findings suggest some reasons for optimism, including more women and people of color who work in journalism, a closing gender pay gap, and a slight increase in perceived job satisfaction and autonomy.

Professional Roles. As argued earlier, the news media can be seen as an “interpretive community” (Zelizer, 1993) created by journalists who interact with their peers about their profession (Raemy & Vos, 2021; Vos et al., 2023). Given the significant organizational and technological changes that have occurred in the news media over the past decade—and the extensive discussions within the profession about the consequences of these changes—it is reasonable to assume that journalists’ perceptions of their roles and functions also have changed.

Analysis of journalists’ attitudes in 2022 about their professional roles suggests a hardened consensus around one key dimension—investigating official claims, the “watchdog” role, with 85% of journalists saying it is “extremely important,” the most in five decades. As Table 5 shows, the “watchdog” role is the anchoring element of the *interpretive-investigative* function, consisting also of three analytic dimensions—discussing national and international policy, and analyzing complex problems. The three analytic roles appear to have declined somewhat in perceived importance, led by a significant decline of those saying “analyzing complex problems” was “extremely important,” down 12 points from a decade ago. In context, however, the overwhelming majority (90%) of journalists in 2022 said this role was either “quite” or “extremely important.”

The most dramatic change in journalists’ view of their core roles over the decades is in the decline in perceived importance placed on the *disseminator* function—being somewhat neutral messengers reaching large audiences quickly. In the analysis, two key elements make up this function: “getting information to the public quickly” and “reaching a wide audience.” Only 44% of the 2022 sample said getting news to the audience quickly was “extremely important,” down only slightly from a decade ago, but down 25 points from its high in 1992. Declining numbers of journalists also said that concentrating on news that is of interest to “the widest possible audience” is important. While about four in 10 journalists (39%) considered that role extremely important in 1971, this percentage dropped to 7.4% in 2022, the lowest ever.

Surprisingly, even support for roles that reflect an increasingly interactive media environment, such as “motivating people to get involved” (34%) or “letting people express their views” (23%), declined over the past decade. Support for other classic journalistic roles remained more stable. For example, the perceived importance of serving as “an adversary” of the government (20%) and business (19%) or “point to possible solutions” (32%) did not change much over the past decade.

Reporting Practices. Another important indicator of journalists’ professional values is their views on which controversial reporting methods might be justified in the case of

Table 5. Importance of Professional Roles Among U.S. Journalists, 1971–2022 (in %).

Media roles	Percentage saying “extremely important”					
	1971	1982	1992	2002	2013	2022
Interpretive-investigate function						
Investigate government claims	76	66	67	71	78	85
Provide analysis of complex problems	61	49	48	51	69	57
Discuss national policy	55	38	39	40	39	31
Discuss international policy	–	–	–	48	51	48
Adversarial function						
Serve as an adversary of the government	–	20	21	20	22	20
Serve as an adversary of business	–	15	14	18	19	19
Disseminator function						
Get information to the public quickly	56	60	69	59	47	44
Concentrate on the widest audience	39	36	20	15	12	7
Provide entertainment	17	20	14	11	9	6
Populist-mobilizer function						
Let people express views	–	–	48	39	31	23
Develop intellectual/cultural interests	30	24	18	17	21	18
Motivate people to get involved	–	–	–	39	38	34
Point to possible solutions	–	–	–	24	32	32
Other						
Set the political agenda	–	–	5	3	2	1
Avoid stories with unverified content	51	50	49	52	45	47
Total N	1,313	1,001	1,056	1,149	1,080	1,600

Note. The roles listed under “Other” did not load with the other factors. The Ns for each category vary slightly.

an important story. Our findings indicate that U.S. journalists in 2022 were notably more willing to use documents without permission than in 2013.

Table 6 shows that support for using “confidential business or government documents without authorization” rose from 57.7% in 2013 to 69.8% in 2022. Similarly, support for using “personal documents without permission” increased slightly from 24.9% to 29.6%.

An increase in levels of support was found for two other controversial reporting techniques as well, but the levels of support are still considerably less than the high-water marks in 1992. For example, the occasional use of “hidden cameras or microphones” jumped from 47.4% in 2013 to 54.6% in 2022. Similarly, support for “getting employed to gain inside information” increased slightly from 25.2% in 2013 to 29.2% in 2022. U.S. journalists in 2022 overwhelmingly rejected the use of the long-controversial reporting techniques of “claiming to be somebody else” and “paying people for information,” just as in 2013.

Overall, the cautious increase in justifying more “aggressive” reporting methods aligns with the growing importance placed on investigating government claims.

Table 6. Journalists' Acceptance of Controversial Reporting Techniques, 1982–2002 (in %).

Reporting practice	Percentage saying "may be justified"				
	1982	1992	2002	2013	2022
Getting employed to gain inside information	67	63	54	25	29
Using confidential documents without authorization	55	82	78	58	70
Badgering unwilling informants to get a story	47	49	52	38	32
Using personal documents without permission	28	48	41	25	30
Paying people for confidential information	27	20	17	5	5
Claiming to be somebody else	20	22	14	7	7
Agreeing to protect confidentiality and not doing so	5	5	8	2	4
Using hidden microphones or cameras	—	60	60	47	55
Using re-creations or dramatizations of news by actors	—	28	29	12	18
Disclosing names of rape victims	—	43	36	15	13
Publishing unverified content	—	—	—	6	5
Total N	1,001	1,056	1,149	1,080	1,600

However, it is also evident that journalists' support for controversial reporting practices has significantly dropped over the past 30 years, suggesting greater ethical sensitivity among U.S. journalists.

Social Media in Journalism. Given the essential role of social media in journalism, the 2022 survey included questions about journalists' use of social media and its impact on their work and the profession. These questions were first asked in the 2013 survey, allowing limited comparisons over time.

As expected, the importance of social media in U.S. journalism has grown significantly over the past decade. As shown in Figure 2, most journalists now use social media to acquire information for news articles. The most prevalent uses between 2013 and 2022 include checking for breaking news (78.5% vs. 87.4%) and monitoring other news organizations (73.1% vs. 79.3%). Social media use has also increased for finding story ideas (59.8% vs. 74.3%), engaging with audiences (59.7% vs. 67%), discovering sources (54.1% vs. 66.7%), and gathering supplementary information (56.2% vs. 65.3%). Less frequent uses, like networking (21.9% vs. 33.3%) and conducting interviews (20% vs. 31.6%), have also increased. Overall, journalists mainly use social media for information gathering rather than conducting interviews or verifying information.

The increasingly common consumption of news through social media has forced journalists to grapple with how social media affect their professional work. Findings from the 2023 study indicate that U.S. journalists were especially concerned about social media's potentially negative impact on the quality of journalism. The severity of this concern is reflected in the fact that six in 10 journalists (59.5%) in 2022 said that social media harm the profession, while only two in 10 (18.9%) thought so in 2013.

When asked specifically which adverse effects they thought social media might have on the journalistic profession, about six in 10 journalists said that "social media threaten the quality of journalism" (64.6% up from 48.4% in 2013) and that "online

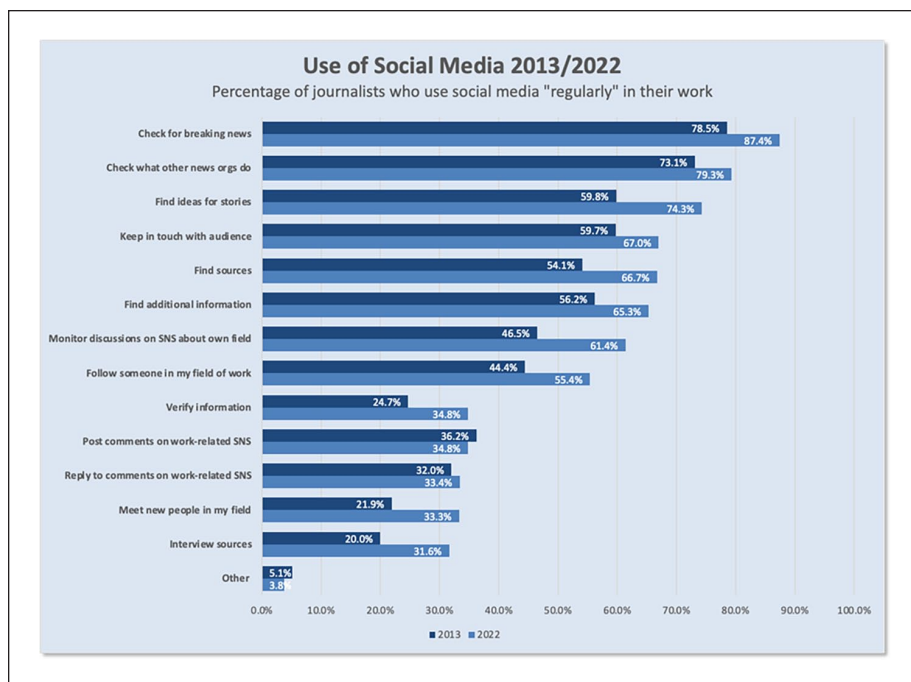


Figure 2. Use of Social Media in Journalism in 2013 and 2022

journalism has sacrificed accuracy for speed” (66.7% down from 75.5% in 2013). Nearly half (47.9%) believed user-generated content threatens journalism integrity (46.8% in 2013). However, 47.3% also said social media make journalism more accountable to the public (48.1% in 2013).

Overall, it appears that U.S. journalists have become skeptical about the benefits of social media for their profession over the past decade, even though they do not report significant increases in specific fears related to journalism’s accuracy, integrity, or accountability. These conflicted beliefs might be explained by the fact that a slim majority of journalists (54%) believe that social media positively affect their work—even though that percentage is down significantly from 71.5% of journalists who reported such a positive effect in 2013.

Perceived Threats. The 2022 survey included questions that focused on the perceived threats journalists experienced in their jobs. Given the frequent verbal and physical attacks on journalists during the years of the Trump administration (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2020), these questions were considered crucial for accurately portraying the state of journalism in 2022. Results suggest that while only 11% of journalists reported feeling “unsafe” in their work, a majority had received threats.

Overall, about six in 10 journalists (61.4%) reported having received threats on the job “during the past year.” While about one-third (33.2%) reported receiving these

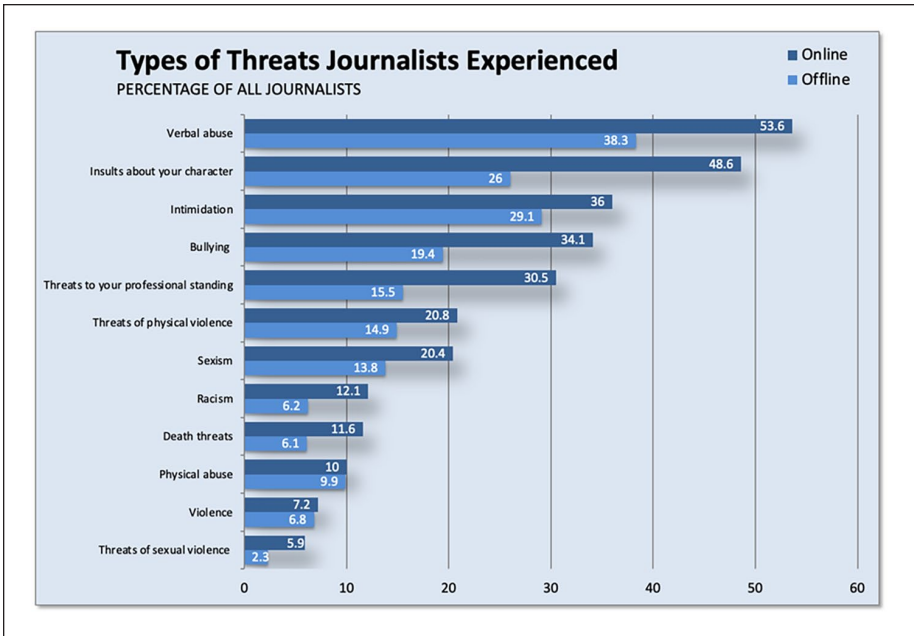


Figure 3. Types of Threats Journalists Experienced in 2022

threats “a few times” during the past year, 22.1% said they received them monthly or even more often. As shown in Figure 3, the most common threats were verbal abuse (53.6% online, 38.3% offline), character insults (48.6% online, 26% offline), intimidation (36% online, 29.1% offline), and bullying (34.1% online, 19.4% offline). A significant number of journalists also reported threats of physical violence (20.8% online, 14.9% offline). According to the journalists, most of these threats came from unknown or anonymous sources (65.2%), but a significant number also mentioned known contacts (11.2%), politicians and party officials (9.2%), government officials (4.1%), or activists (2.1%), as origins of these threats.

Equally dismaying are the findings that women journalists were 7 to 14 times more likely to face sexism, whether online (34.9% vs. 4.9%) or in person (30.5% vs. 2.2%), and were also notably more likely to encounter sexual violence, both online (12.5% vs. 1.3%) and offline (4.8% vs. 0.5%). Similarly, ethnic minority journalists were about six times more likely than White journalists to experience racism, either online (36.7% vs. 6.7%) or in person (20.6% vs. 3.1%).

Many journalists reported that these threats had a negative effect on their work. As Table 7 illustrates, more than one-third (38.1%) of journalists avoided engaging with online audiences, 27.8% heightened security measures at work, and 22.7% limited interactions with specific sources. Given these challenges, it is not surprising that more than half (50.8%) of the journalists who experienced threats also reported suffering emotional and psychological effects. While a significant portion (26.1%) felt

Table 7. Perceived Effects of Online and Offline Threats on Work and Person Among U.S. Journalists.

	Occurrences	Percent	Percent of cases ^a
Effects of threats on work			
Avoided audience engagement online	374	31.0%	38.1%
Increased security measures	273	22.6%	27.8%
Avoided interactions with certain sources	223	18.5%	22.7%
Self-censorship	108	8.9%	11.0%
Avoided pursuing certain stories	104	8.6%	10.6%
Avoided certain beats	67	5.5%	6.8%
Asked to be reassigned to different duties	23	1.9%	2.3%
Removed my byline or went off-air	18	1.5%	1.8%
Changed my name to a pseudonym	7	0.6%	0.7%
Changed job, but still practicing journalism	11	0.9%	1.1%
Total	1,208	100%	
Effects of threats on person			
Experienced emotional/psychological effects	499	51.8%	50.8%
Felt physically unsafe	256	26.6%	26.1%
Need to seek medical or psychological support	74	7.7%	7.5%
Suffered damage to my professional reputation	64	6.6%	6.5%
Missed work because of emotional/psychological stress	57	5.9%	5.8%
Missed work because of possible threats, abuse, violence	14	1.4%	1.4%
Total	964	100%	

^aMultiple answers possible. Percent of cases are based on journalists who experienced threats (N = 982).

physically unsafe in their personal lives, some also sought medical or psychological support (7.5%) or missed work due to emotional or psychological stress (6.5%).

Overall, the 2022 data suggest the concerns raised over the past decade about stress and mental health issues among journalists may be justified. One of the first international psychiatric literature reviews (Aoki et al., 2013) found that journalists were more likely than general populations to suffer from posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), but that there were also “perceived workplace disincentives to disclose mental health problems” (p. 377). A more recent book, *Happiness in Journalism*, edited by a team of international media scholars (Bélair-Gagnon et al., 2024), concludes that journalists are suffering partly because digital and social media make their work “almost 24/7, stretching their lives thin across a range of channels and platforms” (p. 2).

Conclusions

This study continues the half-century tradition of the *American Journalist* project. Our findings suggest that the past decade has affected U.S. journalists more negatively than positively, although there are a few positive signs. The profession is now the most

highly educated in its history, with educational levels somewhat higher than a decade ago. And the long-standing salary gap between women and men in the field has almost disappeared. Unlike a decade ago, women in media management are now paid somewhat higher salaries than their male colleagues. However, the profession still has significantly more men than women, and racial or ethnic minorities remain underrepresented compared to the general population. On political identification, the 2022 survey also shows that U.S. journalists are more likely to identify as independents than Democrats or Republicans, similar to 2013. However, Democrats are predominant among those identifying with a party.

The last *American Journalist* study conducted in 2013 revealed widespread pessimism among journalists yet great passion for their work. This duality persists in the latest study, with some positive trends emerging. One of these trends is a slight rise in job satisfaction and perceived job autonomy. And while many journalists told us that they are frustrated and exhausted by the public's waning trust in the news media, growing consolidation, frequent layoffs, shrinking resources, and low pay, many also told us they are driven by altruism and the importance of their work. As one reporter said:

"The career I have had has never disappointed. Challenging, gratifying, irritating, for sure. But I am a better, more caring person because I am a journalist, having covered the calamities of life. And even now, I am excited by the changes still to come."

Our comparative data over time also indicate growing support for the classic "watchdog" role of journalists, while the emphasis on "getting information to the public quickly" or "reaching the widest possible audience" continues to decline. U.S. journalists appear to recognize their strength in investigative reporting, and they see a greater need for it in a time of authoritarian threats. The perception of the declining importance of reaching a "wide" audience may be influenced, in part, by the growing dominance of online media, which allows journalists to reach specific audiences with tailored content.

A notable shift in the 2022 study is journalists' perception of social media's impact on the profession. In 2013, seven out of 10 journalists believed social media positively affected journalism. By 2022, however, less than one-third shared this view, while more than half saw social media as having a negative impact. This striking reversal suggests that, although social media are deeply integrated into journalists' daily routines, they are increasingly viewed as a threat to the quality of journalism. This shift in perception is likely due to the rise of fake news, the diminished gatekeeping role of journalists, and the tendency to prioritize speed over accuracy.

Our 2022 findings also reveal that many journalists face verbal and physical threats while on the job. This marks the first time we included questions about perceived threats, and the results are alarming. Verbal threats have become a common occurrence, with about six in 10 U.S. journalists reporting they had received threats while working. Women and journalists from ethnic or racial minorities were particularly vulnerable. Notably, the most frequent threats reported were online verbal abuse and

insults. The prevalence of these threats may help explain why so many journalists view the impact of social media on journalism in a negative light.

Finally, we advocate for more research into what frustrates journalists most in their work. While many participants in our study expressed a deep devotion to their profession, they also face increasing stress, heavier workloads, less time for crucial tasks, job insecurity, and other challenges typical of a field under siege. Therefore, future studies should explore the factors that might drive these essential guardians of democracy to leave their profession.

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Notes

1. To be consistent with our past studies of U.S. journalists, the 2022 sample included only journalists who worked full-time for a general-interest news medium. With the growing number of freelancers in the journalism field (Joseph & O'Donnell, 2023), future research should focus on these unique professionals whose attitudes and opinions may differ (Reynolds Lewis, 2022) and who often work under very different conditions and pressures than their fully employed counterparts.
2. The journalists were chosen randomly from news organizations that were also randomly selected from listings in various directories. The response rate for this sample was 11% (AAPOR RR1; RR1 is the minimum response rate, or the number of complete interviews divided by the number of interviews [complete plus partial] plus the number of noninterviews and all cases of unknown eligibility (American Association for Public Opinion Research, 2023)). We should also note that the timing of our study coincided with at least three other national surveys of U.S. journalists, all conducted in early 2022. Consequently, it is not surprising that our response rate dropped from 33% in 2013 to 11% in 2022. However, despite the lower response rate—similar to what is seen in most national U.S. population surveys—we believe our sample remains representative of full-time U.S. journalists. The 2022 survey sample was drawn from more than 1,000 randomly and proportionally selected media organizations across the United States, encompassing a wide array of journalists with diverse backgrounds and experiences.

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