UNIVERSITY OF GOTHENBURG

DEPARTMENT OF JOURNALISM, MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION

SWEDISH JOURNALISTS: PROFESSIONAL ROLES AND CHALLENGES



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JMG

Working report no 96

Swedish Journalists: Professional roles and challenges

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ISSN 1101-4679
Date: November 2, 2026
The Department of Journalism, Media and Communication
University of Gothenburg
www.gu.se/jmg

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Foreword

During the spring 2026, the Department of Journalism, Media and Communication at the University of Gothenburg conducted a survey among Swedish journalists in collaboration with the Swedish Union of Journalists. The results from this will be analyzed in depth and reported in academic journals. However, we believe it is also important to report more descriptive findings in a format that is accessible to a broader public.

In this report, we therefore provide an overview of some of the main results. This is the first time these results are being shared publicly. For a broader accessibility and transferability of the findings, the report is published in both English and Swedish.

This report is divided into two parts. Part 1 presents the results of questions posed to all journalists. Part 2 presents the results of questions posed only to journalists who report on political parties and politicians.

This survey could not have been done without the support and help by the Swedish Union of Journalists, and we are very thankful for their support.

Gothenburg, November 2026

Jesper Strömbäck, Emma van der Goot, and Leen Lingier

Methodology in brief

The results in this report come from a survey among Swedish journalists conducted during the Spring 2026. To get a sample that is as representative as possible, we worked together with the Swedish Union of Journalists. From them, we received a list of email-addresses, randomly selected from their membership. Members of the Union that have retired were not included.

This original sample consisted of 3076 journalists, who were invited over email to participate. We were unable to reach 58 of these journalists due to emails bouncing back. We also received 16 reactions from journalists who were no longer working in the journalistic field. Two reminder emails were sent. Data collection took place between May 5 and June 19, 2026. The study is approved by the Swedish Ethics Review Authority (Number: 2026-01600-01).

In the end, a total of 942 journalists started our survey (response rate 31%). Several of those only answered the background questions, so, our final sample includes 830 journalists (response rate 28%). It is important to note that journalists were free to skip questions or opt out, which is why the number of responses varies across questions. Furthermore, some questions were shown only to journalists covering politics. To determine whether the questions pertaining to political news coverage were relevant to participating journalists, we asked how often they had mentioned a political party or politician in their news stories during the last 3 months. If they answered more than never, we asked them the questions pertaining to politics. We list the number of participants separately in each section, so it is clear how many participants viewed and answered the questions. Below we provide some general descriptions for the full sample and sample of political journalists specifically.

Full sample

In our full sample of journalists (N = 830), 48% identified as man, and 51% as women. On average, they have 22 years' experience working as journalists, and 71% of them are employed, while 21% work freelance, 7% indicated ‘other’, and 1% is unemployed. Journalists could indicate multiple outlets for which they work, and the following percentages therefore reflect the proportion of journalists working for each type of outlet. They are more

likely to work for public service radio (15%) or television (21%) than commercial television (5%) or radio (1%). A quarter of journalists work for a local newspaper (25%), fewer for a national morning newspaper (11%), and even fewer for an evening tabloid (7%). They also work for magazines (22%), digital news outlets (5%), and a press agency (2%).

Political journalists

For the specific sample of political journalists (N = 543), 53% identified as man and 47% as women. On average, they have 20 years' experience working as journalists, and 79% of them are employed, while 14% work freelance, 6% indicated ‘other’, and 1% is unemployed. Like the full sample, they are more likely to work for public service radio (20%) or television (13%) than commercial outlets (television 4%; radio 1%). A substantial proportion work for local newspapers (27%), whereas a smaller proportion work for national morning newspapers (12%), or evening tabloids (6%). They also work for magazines (19%), digital news outlets (6%), and press agencies (3%). On a scale from 'sometimes' (2) to 'daily' (7), they reported an average of 4.8 on how often they report about politicians or political parties.

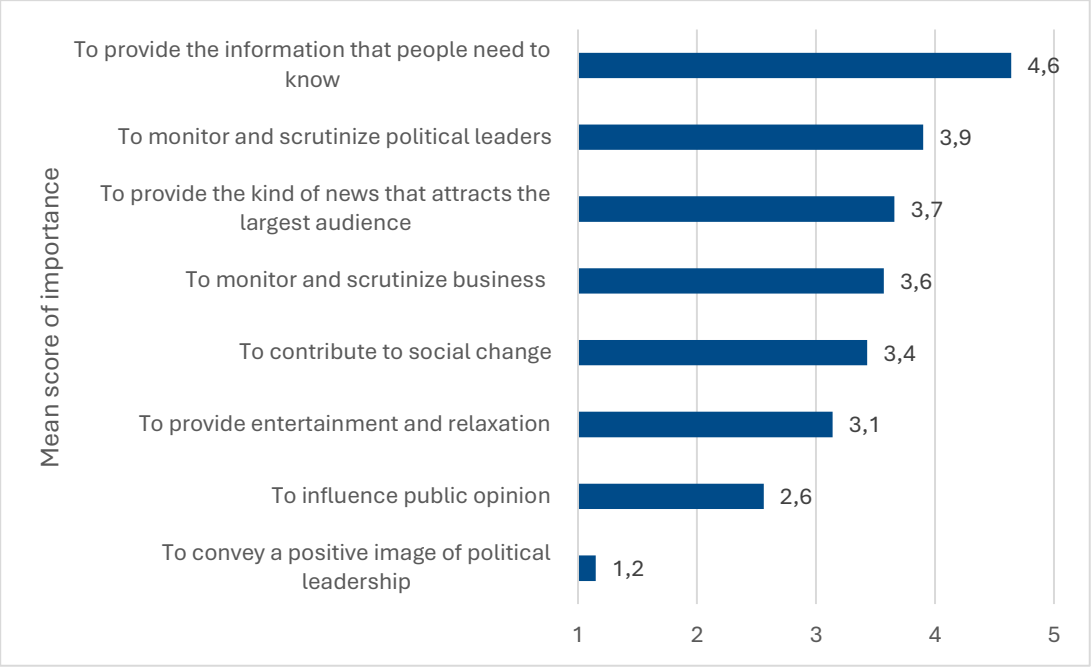
Part 1: General journalism

1. Role conceptions

A large body of research has investigated the roles journalists consider important to fulfill in society (see, for instance, Mellado, 2015; Hanitzsch et al., 2025). These roles are often used to explain news content, to compare journalistic cultures across countries, or track developments over-time.

Following this body of research, we asked journalists how important different roles are in their work on a 5-point scale (1= not important at all; 5 = extremely important). Figure 1 shows the average importance of the different roles for journalists (N=745).

Figure 1. Role conceptions



As shown in the figure, providing information that people need to know is seen as the most important role, with an average score of 4,6. When we take a closer look at journalists' answers, a substantial number of journalists (71%) indicated they find this role extremely important. This is followed by monitoring and scrutinizing political leaders (Mean = 3,9). Almost half (45%) of the journalists indicated to find this role extremely important. In the literature these different roles are classified under the term 'monitorial role conception',

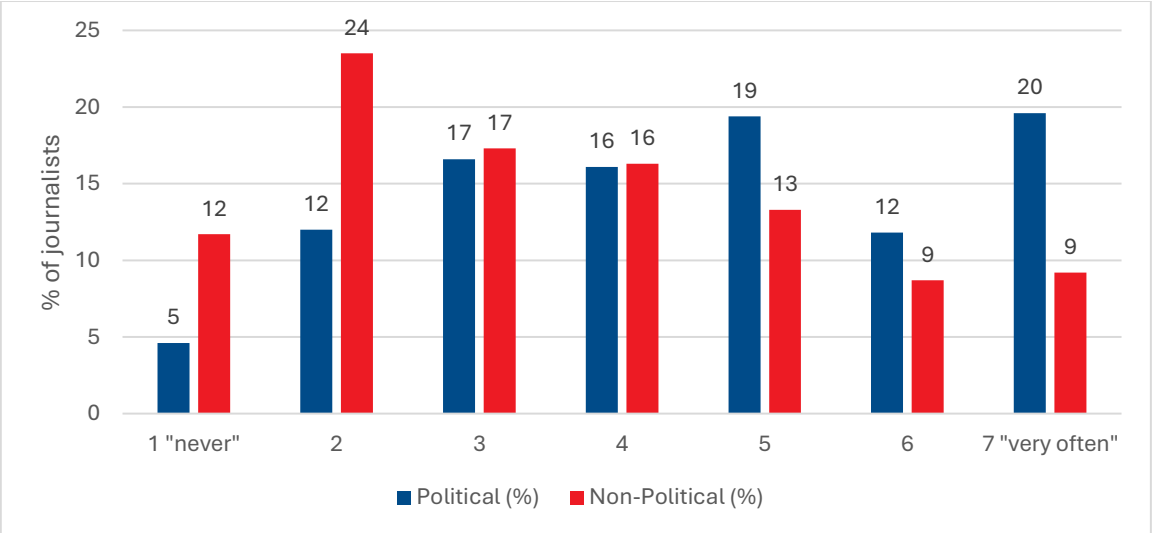
which is the most dominant role conception globally, especially in democratic countries (Hanitzsch et al., 2025).

The results also show that journalists rate “providing news that attracts the largest audience” as somewhat important as well (Mean = 3,7), with 20% finding it extremely important. This finding contradicts earlier surveys with Swedish journalists, who find that journalists are rarely interested in attracting the largest audience (Hanitzsch et al., 2025). However, it does align with the global trend of commercial pressures on journalism, resulting in journalists needing to prioritize audience attraction.

2. Audience reactions

The digital age has produced greater opportunities for citizens to engage in journalistic work and publicly articulate their expectations from journalism. While there has been research into hostility against the news media coming from citizens (something we reflect on below), research has rarely investigated the extent to which these audience reactions make a positive contribution to journalistic output. To investigate this, we asked journalists how often they have received responses from the audience in the last 12 months and how helpful they considered them. The results are displayed in figure 2, showing the distribution of receiving reactions among political and non-political journalists (N=805)

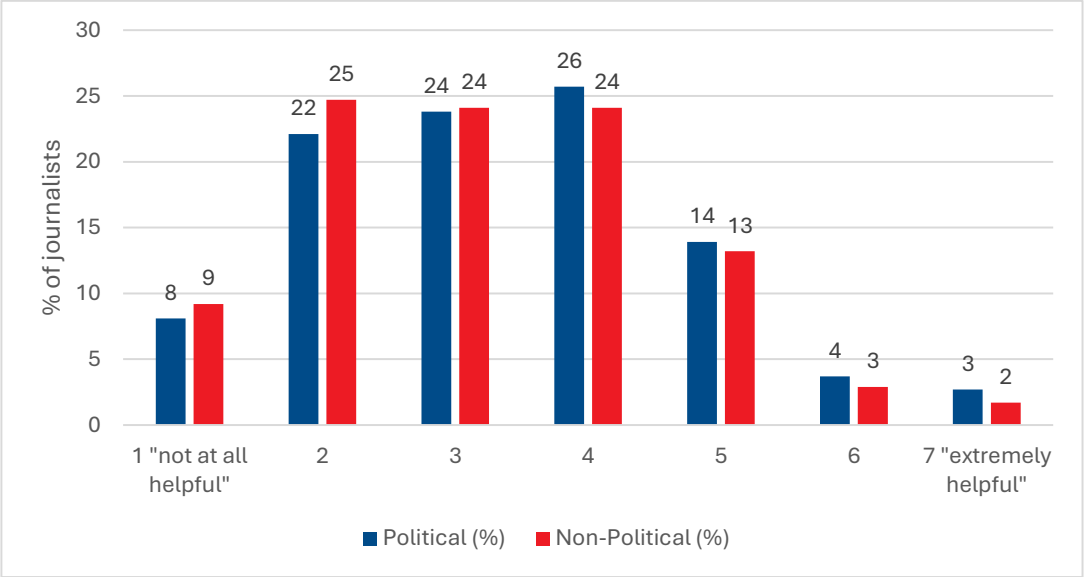
Figure 2. Percentage of journalists receiving audience reactions



Generally, we find that it is common for journalists to receive audience reactions, with only 7% indicating they never receive audience reactions. We divided the frequencies by considering those journalists who cover politics and those who do not and observe a notable difference. The findings show that political journalists report receiving reactions more frequently than other journalists. For instance, 20% of the political journalists indicate receiving reactions very often, compared to 9% of other journalists.

We also explore how helpful the reactions are for the different groups. Whether journalists find audience reactions helpful is relevant because it shapes how journalists engage with their audience and whether they incorporate feedback into their work. The results are shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Percentage of journalists receiving helpful reactions



While we observed a difference in the amount for reactions, we find largely overlapping patterns for political and non-political journalists when it concerns the usefulness of these reactions. While political journalists receive more reactions, these reactions do not appear to be perceived as more or less helpful. Overall, audience reactions are not evaluated very positively. More than half of the journalists indicate the reactions are not at all or somewhat helpful, while very few report finding them very helpful (4% of political journalists; 3% of other journalists) or extremely helpful (3% and 2%, respectively). This raises questions about the extent to which audience reactions serve a meaningful function, and how news

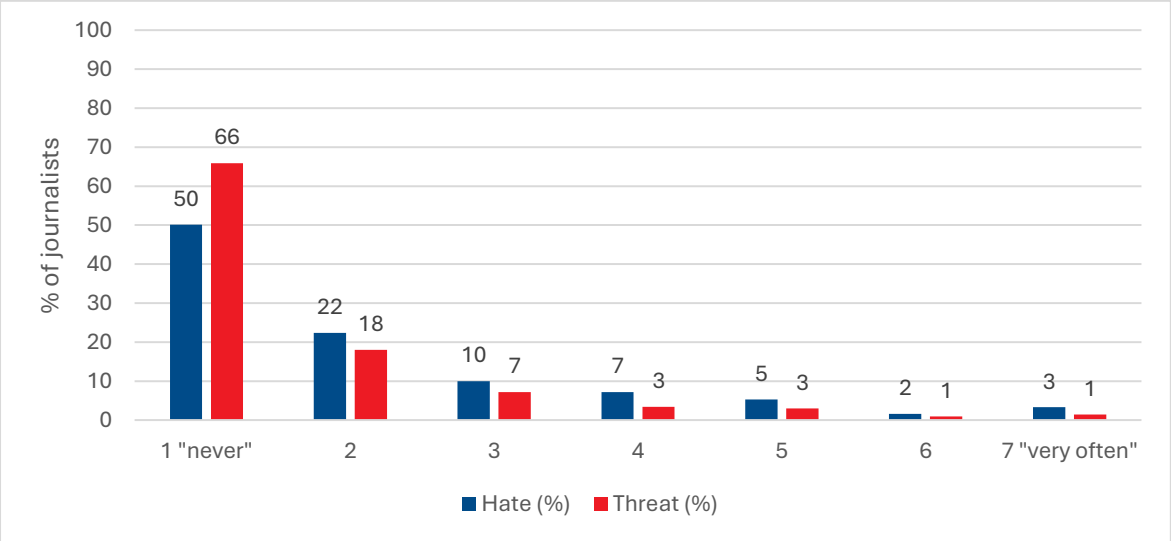
organizations may better facilitate audience engagement that is more informative for their work. Journalists also answered questions about which type of reactions they find most useful. In future research we will examine these responses to gain a better understanding of what makes a reaction helpful.

3. Hostility against journalists

While audience reactions can be essential for journalists to understand how their news stories are received by the public and may theoretically help improve news reporting, audience reactions increasingly tend to be hostile. Research shows that journalists often face hateful speech or threats with far-reaching implications, such as feelings of fear, self-censorship, and ultimately (considerations) of leaving the profession (Löfgren Nilsson & Örnebring, 2016; Miller, 2023).

Against that background, we asked journalists how often they have experienced hate or hateful comments, as well as threats or threatening comments, in the context of their work in the last 12 months. Figure 4 shows the frequencies for hate and threats among all journalists (N= 790).

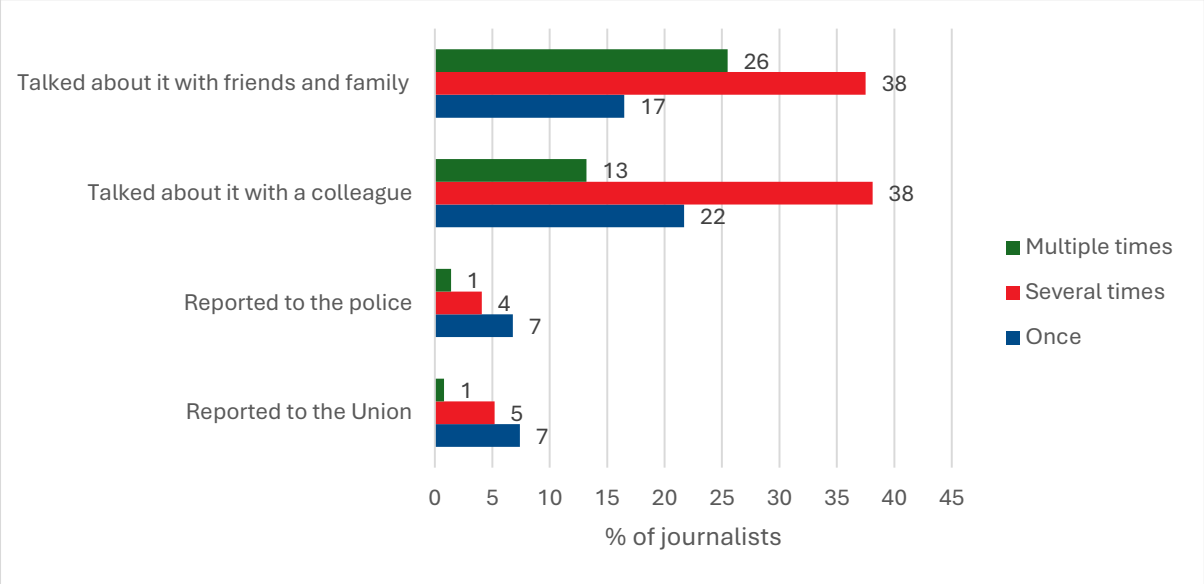
Figure 4. Percentage journalists receiving hate and threats



The results show that 50% of journalists indicate to have had experience with hate, albeit to different degrees, and 34% indicate to have experienced threats. While these numbers, especially for hate, seem to be lower than in other democracies (Hanitzsch et al., 2025), they are still considerable.

We also asked journalists who had experienced hate and threats to what extent they have reported these incidents to official bodies or shared it with friends and family. Figure 5 shows the results (N =378). The overwhelming majority of journalists has shared it with friends and family (79 %) or colleagues (73%) at least once. Research shows social support can be helpful for journalists who face hate and threats, and also prevents them from self-censoring in response to this harassment (Celuch et al., 2024). The threshold for reporting it to official bodies seems high though, as most have never done so: 88% has never reported it to the police and 87 % has never reported it to the Union.

Figure 5. Journalists' responses to hate and threats

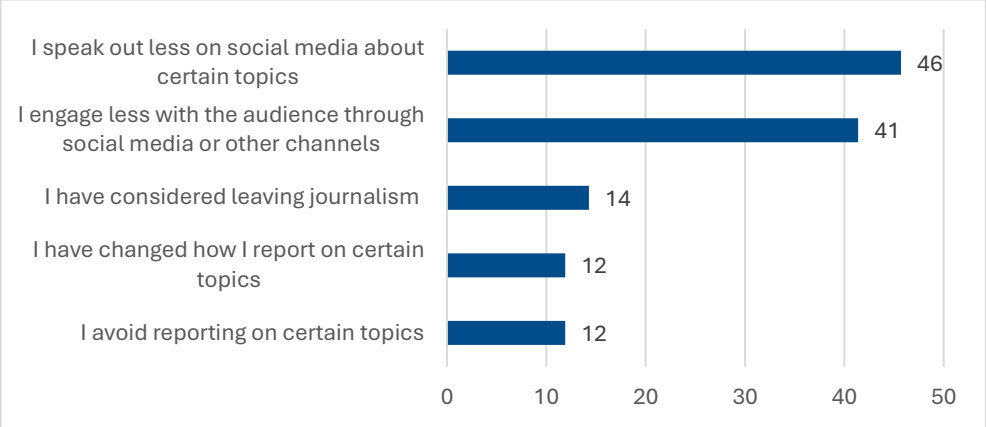


Finally, we asked about the consequences of hate and threats (N= 278)[1]. The results are presented in Figure 6 and show that the main change is that they make journalists more

[1] The N for this question is lower due to a filtering error, as only those journalists who received both hate and threats saw this question. For those who filled out the survey after the reminder we changed this and also posed the question to journalists who experienced only hate or threats. Results remain the same.

inclined to change their communication and behavior on social media: they speak out less about certain topics (46%) and engage less with their audiences (41%). Self-censorship regarding their reporting is less common, but 12% of journalists indicate they avoid reporting on certain topics or have changed their reporting. It also is concerning that 14% respond that they consider leaving journalism for this reason. These results reflect findings in some other countries, for example Belgium (Lamot et al., 2025), and show that hate and threats can have real consequences for journalists and journalism. While in most cases it does not lead to direct self-censorship, they do experience an indirect chilling effect by avoiding online discussions.

Figure 6. Consequences of hate and threats



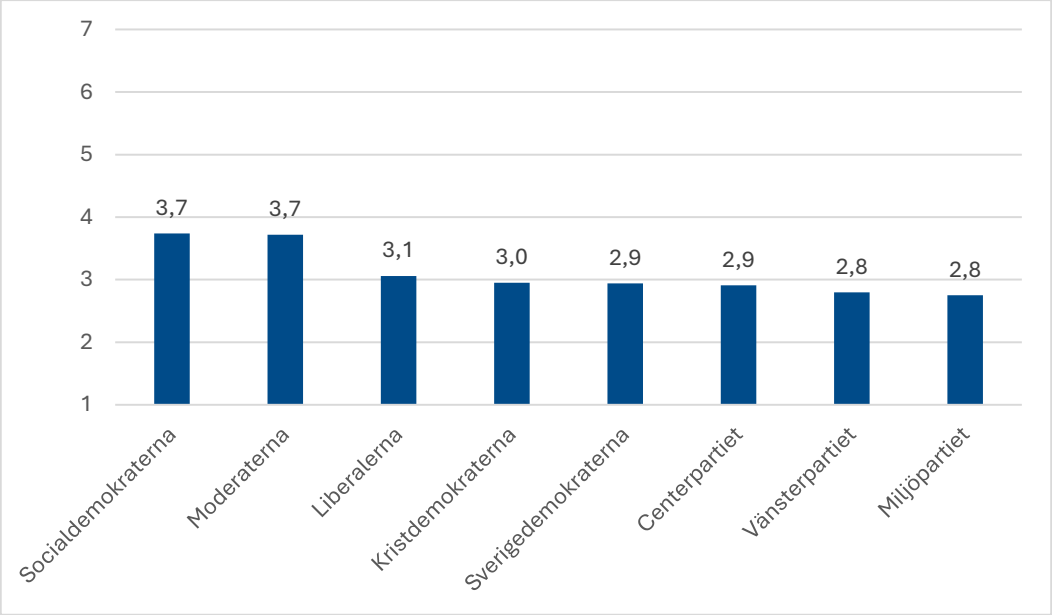
Part 2: Political journalism

4. Political contact

Because political parties are important news sources and the relationship between journalists and politicians is essential to news reporting (see, for example, (Aelst et al., 2010; Strömbäck & Nord, 2006), we asked journalists how often they are in contact with various political parties. Of 539 journalists, 433 (80%) have had direct contact with political parties in the previous 3 months. Direct contact was defined as any contact made in person, by phone, in writing, or digitally (for example, via email, messaging apps, or social media). This group was then questioned about which parties they are primarily in contact with.

The results are presented in Figure 8, showing the average contact journalists have with the different parties on a scale from (1) never to 7 (very often). The results show that contact between journalists and political parties generally remains limited, centering around 3 which indicates seldom/sometimes. When considering how many parties journalists generally contact, we find that 88% has contacts with all parties.

Figure 8. Average contact across political parties



The results show that contact is most often with the Social Democrats and Moderate party. However, differences between the parties are quite small. This is surprising, as it is often assumed that institutional standing determines media contact and attention. Larger parties, with more seats and more government involvement, are generally expected to attract more journalistic attention. As we do not know who initiates contact, it may be an indication of journalists spreading their attention evenly across the party landscape to prevent political bias, or it may reflect that smaller or opposition political parties have successfully invested in building their relationship with journalists.

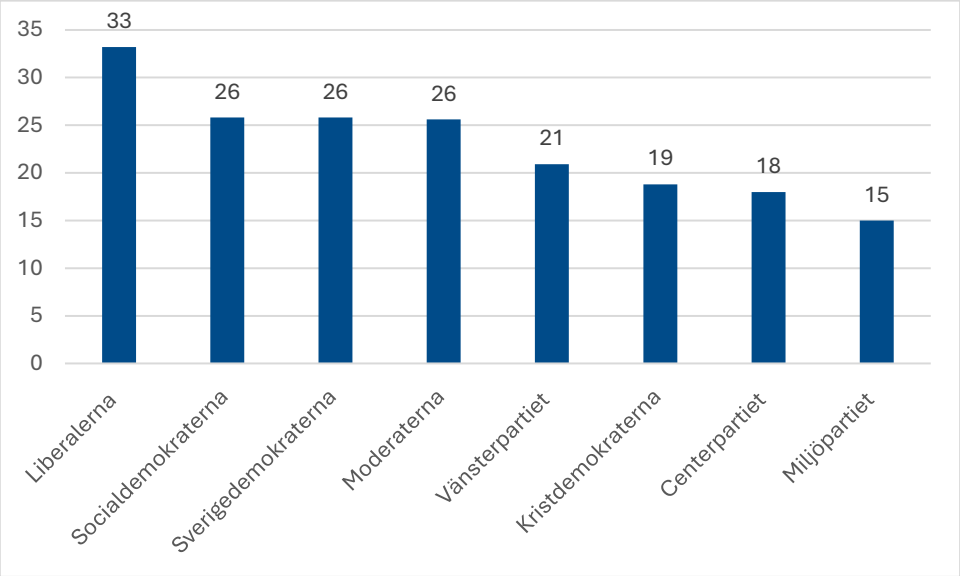
Finally, it is worth noting that the Sweden Democrats receive roughly equal contact as the other parties, even though research has shown that right-wing populist parties often perceive themselves as disadvantaged by the news media (Schulz et al., 2020; Wettstein et al., 2018). At the same time, the Sweden Democrats was at the time the second largest party in parliament and played an important part of the Tidö-coalition governing Sweden between 2022 and 2026. Its news value was therefore high. The results may also reflect that the Sweden Democrats over time have become more normalized.

5. Intra-party conflict

When covering politics, journalists frequently highlight conflict (Lengauer et al., 2012; Van Der Goot et al., 2025). They likely do so because (1) conflict is the essence of politics; (2) it attracts attention of the audience; (3) it helps journalists remain balanced by representing multiple sides. While inter-party conflict has received ample attention in the literature, intra-party conflict is often overlooked. We therefore decided to examine how often journalists report on intra-party conflict, which parties they cover, and where they get their information from.

For each political party, we therefore asked journalists how often they have reported on intra-party conflict in the past 3 months. In Figure 9 we present the percentage of journalists who indicated to have reported on intra-party conflict within each party (> than never) (N=488).

Figure 9. Reporting on internal party conflict



The results show that 33% of the journalists has at least once reported on intra-party conflict within the Liberal party, most likely related to the internal disagreement about whether or not to collaborate with the Sweden Democrats. Furthermore, around 26% has reported about internal disagreements within the Social Democrats, Sweden Democrats, and Moderate party.

These figures seem notable. While the majority of political journalists did not report on intra-party conflict during this period, the percentages are substantial given that political parties often have strong incentives to keep internal divisions out of the public eye. Unlike inter-party conflict, which parties sometimes actively stage in other to present clear political alternatives to voters (Van der Goot et al., 2025), visible internal differences and intra-party conflict could signal weakness and confuse voters about what the party stands for. This gives political parties incentives to manage those conflicts out of the public sphere. While the substantial coverage of intra-party coverage may have coincided with increased party tensions, the results may also indicate that journalists are actively seeking out and highlight such conflicts.

If parties actively suppress discussing internal divisions, journalists may need to rely on alternative channels to access this information. For this reason, we asked journalists to identify their most important source of information about intra-party conflicts. Most indicated to have received information from an anonymous party insider (38%) or from party

representatives or officials (25%). Fewer journalists named other media or journalists (12%), social media (7%), politicians from other parties (2%), party leaders (2%), or party press or communication staff (1%).

The prominence of anonymous insiders as leading sources may suggest that information about intra-party conflict reaches journalists through unofficial channels, which would be consistent with the idea that parties tend to handle these conflicts internally. At the same time, journalists also seem to rely on party representatives who are not anonymous, which is an indication that these conflicts are also strategically disclosed and used by the parties themselves.

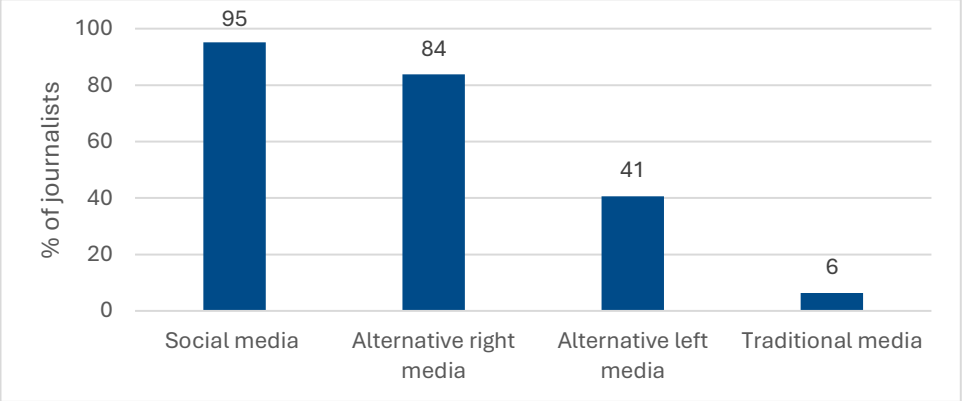
6. Political misinformation

Political misinformation, that is false or incorrect information spread intentionally or unintentionally, constitutes and important challenge for democracy and journalism (see, for example, Strömbäck et al., 2022). Misinformation seems to play an increasing role in politics and could have important implications by contributing to misperceptions, contributing to increasing skepticism to science, and blurring the line between facts and opinions (Young, 2023). In this context, journalists face a difficult dilemma whenever false and misleading information comes from political actors (Strömbäck, 2026; Thompson & Sengul, 2026). Uncritical reporting may help journalists stay close to their core principles of impartiality but could also further amplify the false information. At the same time, critical reporting could result in accusations of bias. In the survey, we therefore asked journalists how they view the role of misinformation in politics and how they think journalism should deal with it.

Misinformation perceptions

We first asked about journalists' perceptions towards which actors are responsible for the spread of misinformation. We asked the question both for different media and political actors. Figures 10 and 11 show the percentage of journalists believing the actors contribute to the spread of misinformation (scoring a 5 or above on a 7-point scale from do not contribute at all (1) to contribute to a large extent (7) (N=395).

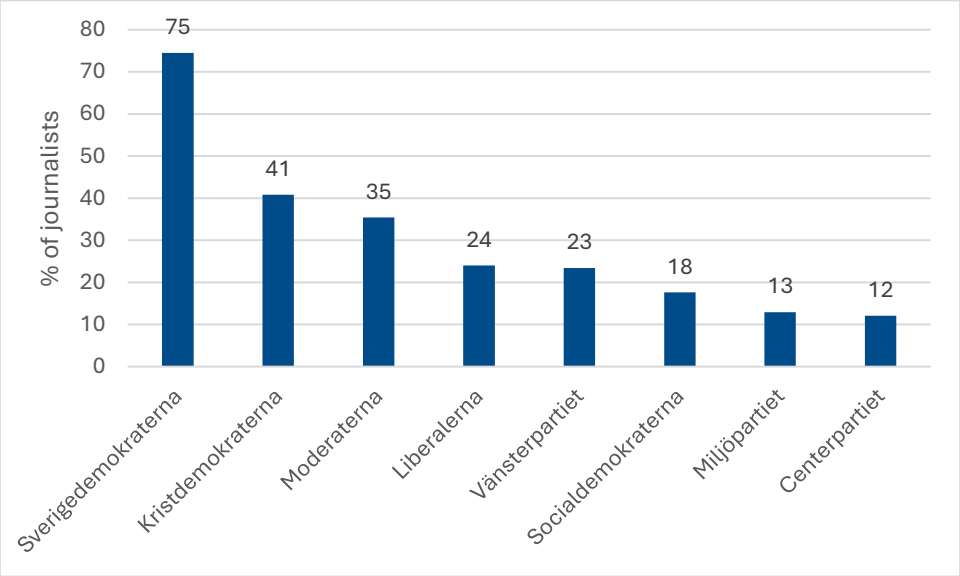
Figure 6.1. Percentage journalists indicating these **media** contribute to the spread of false or incorrect information



The results show that almost all journalists (95%) believe social media contributes at least to some degree to the spread of misinformation and that only few (6%) believes traditional media contributes. This latter finding is interesting, considering that research also finds that traditional media can play an important role in misinformation's dissemination (Tsfati et al., 2020). Regarding social media, it should however be noted that the category includes a number of different types of actors and media, in contrast to the other types of media.

When it concerns political parties, we observe differences between how much the parties are perceived to contribute. A large share of the journalists (75%) believes the Sweden Democrats contribute to sharing false and incorrect information. This aligns with scientific findings such as the populist right-wing parties are found to be the most likely to spread misinformation online (Törnberg & Chueri, 2025). Interestingly, quite a significant number of journalists also believes the Christian Democrats and the Moderate party contribute to spreading false and incorrect information.

Figure 11. Percentage journalists indicating these **political actors** contribute to the spread of false or incorrect information



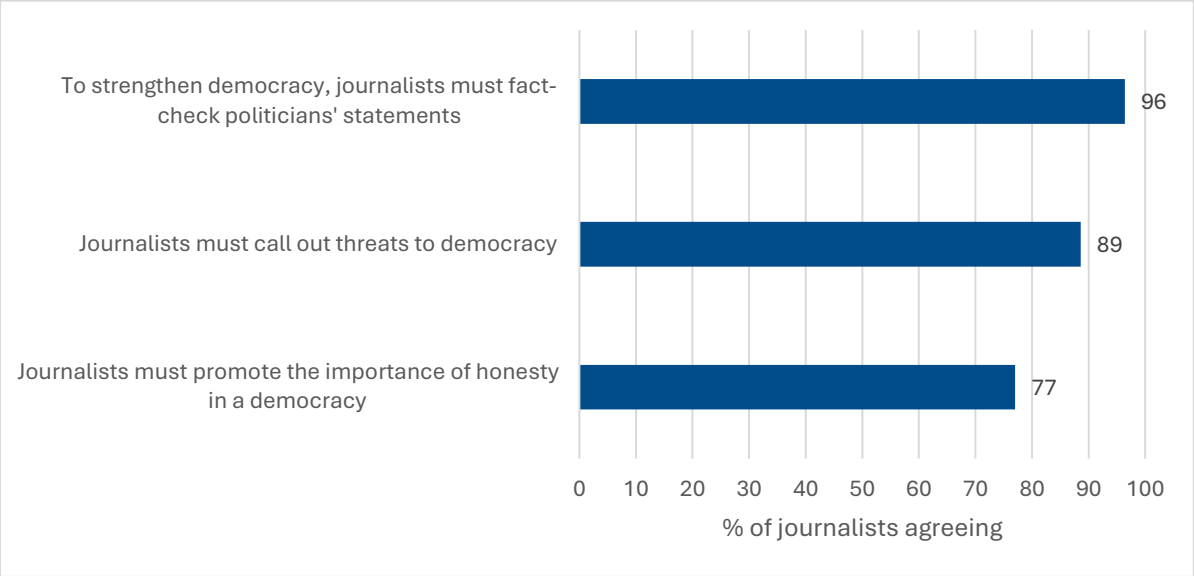
Reporting on misinformation

Second, we asked questions related to reporting on political misinformation. As it is essential for reporting that journalists are aware when something is false, we assessed journalists' confidence in identifying political misinformation. Overall, journalists expressed confidence in their abilities: 69% indicated that they were quite to very certain that they would be able to identify it.

We also presented journalists with a dilemma: whether to pay attention to misinformation because the public needs to be aware, or to ignore it because doing so would give further attention to the false narrative and the politicians spreading false and incorrect information. The results show that there was a clear preference for giving attention to misinformation: 87% of journalists believed it was important, whereas only 13% believed it should be ignored.

In the same context, we asked journalists about three roles pertaining to journalism and democracy and to what extent they believe journalists should fulfill these roles. In the literature this has been termed pro-democracy reporting. In Figure 12, we present the share of politicians agreeing with the need to fulfill these pro-democracy roles (N=387).

Figure 12. Percentage journalists agreeing about pro-democracy roles

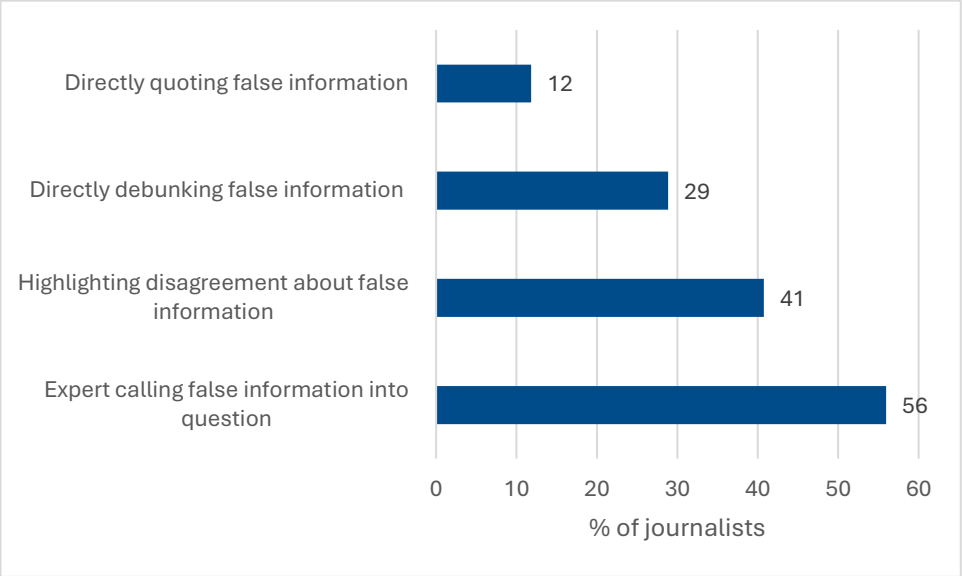


The results show that almost all journalists agree that they should defend and strengthen democracy by fact-checking politicians (96%) and calling out threats to democracy (89%), while a smaller but still large share agree that they should promote the importance of honesty (77%). These preferences align with journalistic norms around informing the public and scrutinizing political actors.

The way in which journalists report on politicians' misinformation may at the same time have implications for audiences, such as whether or not they believe the false information (Nyhan, 2021). It may for example be more effective to fact-check false statements than to provide neutral coverage of factual disputes in order to reduce misperceptions.

Therefore, we sought to understand how journalists might report on politicians making false and inaccurate claims. To investigate this, we presented them with a fictional scenario in which a politician made a false and incorrect claim. We then presented them with four potential headlines and asked journalists how likely they would be to use each one. It is important to note that both the scenario and headlines are somewhat simplified and do not necessarily reflect the complexities of the real world. Nevertheless, they provide an indication of the type of headlines that journalists would consider using in this context. Figure 13 shows the percentage of journalists willing to use each headline type (N=370).

Figure 13. Percentage journalists using types of headlines for misinformation



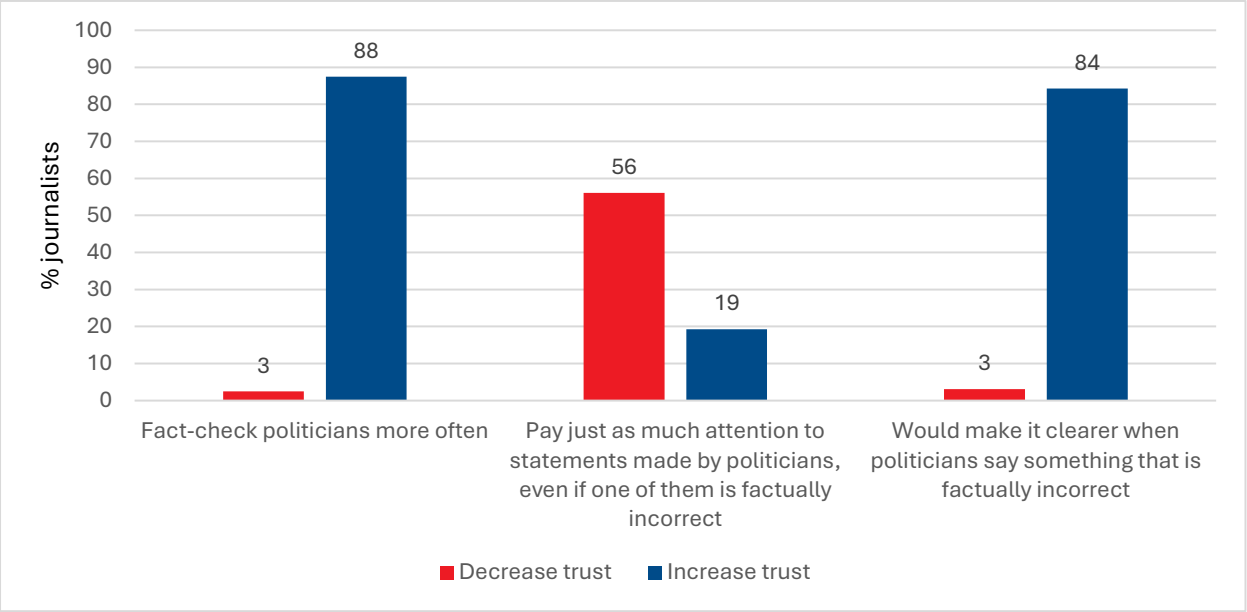
The results show that the smallest proportion of journalists (12%) would directly quote the false information. This is a promising finding as repetition of false information may make people believe it (Fazio et al., 2019), and they may not be exposed to a debunk in the article itself, if one is included at all. Most journalists (56%) would refer to an expert in the headline debunking the claim. This if often referred to as a more confrontational approach and is arguably the most effective for correcting a misleading claim (Nyhan, 2021). Quite a significant proportion of journalists (41%) would also highlight disagreement surrounding the false claim. Although this fits a commonly used 'he said, she said' approach, this approach has been criticized in the context of misinformation. The reason is that it may create the false impression that both sides of a factual conflict are equally valid, even when one side's evidence or scientific basis is flawed (see, for example, Terzian, 2025; Strömbäck, 2026). Finally, 29% of journalists state that they would directly debunk false information. While this might be an effective strategy to lower misperceptions, it does require journalists to take a clear stance, and this may clash with objectivity expectations.

This leads to the question how different reporting styles might influence trust in the news media (Fawzi et al., 2026). Although objective answers are missing, Figure 14 shows how journalists think different reporting styles might influence media trust. As shown, most journalists believed that fact-checking politicians (88%) and clarifying when a politician is

incorrect (84%) would increase trust in the media. Staying closer to neutrality and reporting on statements even if one of them is incorrect is perceived by most to contribute to media distrust (56%), but quite a few (19%) also believes this would increase trust. This latter finding again shows the tension between journalists functioning as a detached observer, explaining which sides there are to a story, and acting as a watchdog.

In future analyses and studies, we aim to understand what drives the reporting preferences of journalists and what effects different reporting styles have on citizens.

Figure 14. Percentage of journalists indicating how reporting might contribute to media trust



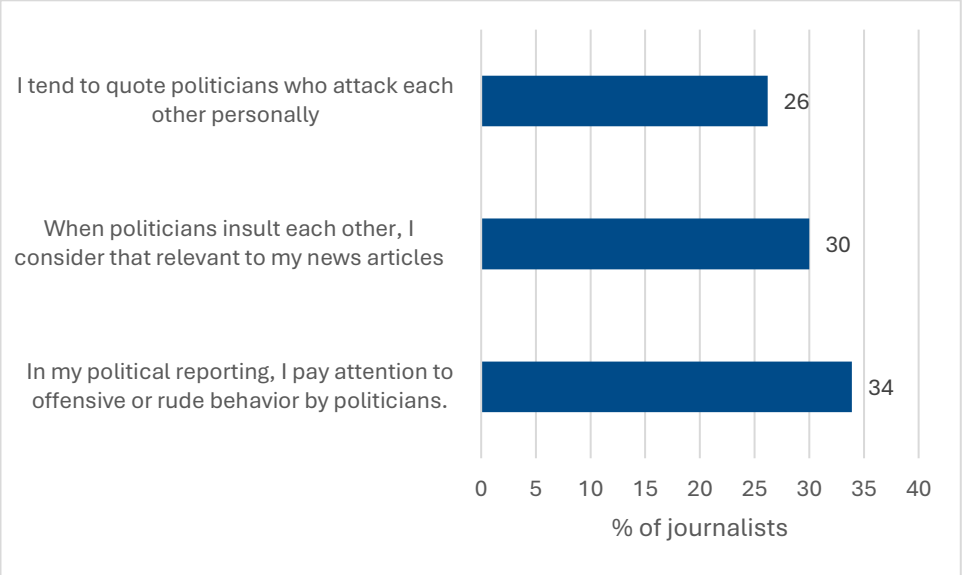
7. Political incivility

Political incivility – the use of impolite, rude, or disrespectful language by politicians – is a key element of contemporary politics (Berry & Sobieraj, 2014; Frimer et al., 2023). Media tend to cover such uncivil utterances, often based on the assumption that they capture audience attention. While scholars have examined how incivility-focused reporting shapes citizens' political attitudes and behavior, journalists' perceptions towards reporting on uncivil politics and awareness of potential consequences has rarely been examined.

Therefore, we asked journalists about their reporting practices surrounding uncivil politics, and its potential impact. As shown by Figure 15, roughly a quarter of the journalists say that

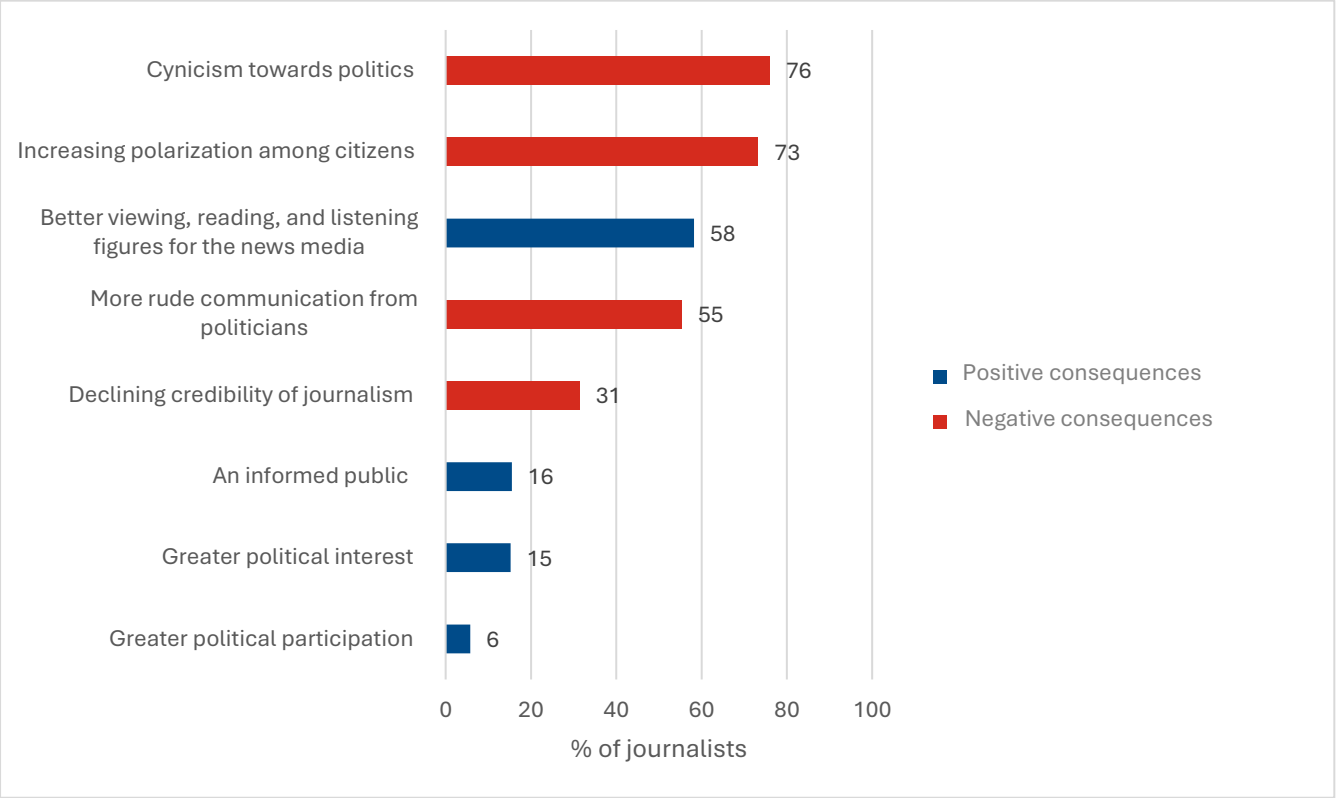
they tend to quote politicians who attack each other personally, while roughly a third of the journalists report to highlight incivility in their news coverage (scoring a 5 or above on a 7-point scale from totally disagree (1) to totally agree (7)) (N= 357).

Figure 15. Percentage of journalists reporting on political incivility



At the same time, most journalists express concerns about the effect. As shown by Figure 16, 76% believes it leads to cynicism towards politics, and 73% think it contributes to polarization. Half of them (55%) also believe that providing attention to incivility incentivizes politicians to engage in further uncivil behavior. In terms of positive consequences, only few believes it could be informative (16%), spark political interest (15%), and foster political participation (6%).

Figure 16. Perceptions towards the consequences of incivility



What stands out is journalists' negative perception of incivility, whereas the scholarly literature actually suggests a more nuanced picture. Research indicates that incivility may also have positive democratic consequences (Brooks & Geer, 2007; Mutz, 2015; Sydnor, 2019). By being attention grabbing, it may for example increase citizens' involvement in politics. Furthermore, incivility may be informative and could tell something about a politicians' character or their values.

This tension deserves some attention. The challenge for journalists is not only whether to cover uncivil behavior, but also how to do so effectively. Rather than sensationalizing it when politicians engage in uncivil behavior, journalists could for example consider providing context and connecting the behavior to substantive issues.

Part 3: Summary and conclusions

Despite this report being brief and largely descriptive, our survey provides insights into how journalists shape their professional roles amid several key challenges.

First, while it is common for journalists to receive audience reactions, these reactions are not necessarily perceived as helpful. For almost half of the participants these audience reactions take on more hostile forms. Hence, a key question is how citizens could become involved in more meaningful ways in the production of news.

Second, our findings show that journalists tend to highlight (intra-party) conflict and incivility in their news products. This is interesting, given that journalists indicate the negative consequences of highlighting uncivil conflict and downplay its positive potential. We encourage journalists to think about striking the right balance between reporting on intra-party conflicts and uncivil behavior to inform and engage citizens, while avoiding coming across as sensationalist.

Finally, journalists see themselves as having an important democratic role in correcting politicians' false claims. Rather than ignoring politicians' misinformation, most believe the media should actively correct it. When doing so they seem to prefer to rely on an authoritative source who debunks the false claim, rather than doing so themselves directly, potentially as the latter approach might clash with expectations of neutrality. Whether journalists can or do fulfil this role in practice is a however a different question that deserves further attention.

This brings us back to what we noted in the introduction: in this report we have focused on providing some more descriptive findings. Further down the road, the results from this survey will be analyzed in much greater depth.

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