

## Research Paper

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# How do journalists view the world?

A comparative empirical analysis of personality traits and political views, based on the German Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP)

**Abstract:** How different are the characteristics and views of journalists from those of the population on which they report? What are the predominant political opinions among these professionals? Which political features do they share? Which personality traits, such as a willingness to take risks, do they display? In this paper, we examine these questions based on data from the German Socio-Economic Panel Study (SOEP), using this large representative sample to identify the journalists it contains based on the information they provide on their work (while still preserving their anonymity). Multivariate analyses allow these data to be compared with data for the adult population as a whole, the electorate, and the group of people intensively engaged in politics. The results corroborate earlier studies that show that journalists do not reflect the population; their characteristics and views only match the diversity of society to a certain extent. Although the proportion of journalists with a history of migration is now around the same as that for the population as a whole, the journalists' countries of origin are mostly European states. Furthermore, these professionals are more likely than average to have parents who went to university, tend to be politically slightly left of center, and are significantly more likely to vote Green. Journalists consider themselves more creative, more curious, and more imaginative than the reference groups; according to their self-perception journalists are also more willing to take risks and have an above-average level of trust in other people.

**Keywords:** SOEP, panel survey, social characteristics, personality traits of journalists, diversity, political views, history of migration

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## 1. Introduction

Both academic and political circles have repeatedly discussed how representative journalism is of society and the extent to which the characteristics and views of journalists differ from those of the adult population as a whole. Which political opinions dominate among these professionals, and which social characteristics? This is relevant in view of the vital role that journalism plays in public communication and the way opinions are formed in a democracy – even, or perhaps especially, in an age of digitalization and structural change (cf. SCHUDSON 2018: 107-112, 190-194; HABERMAS 2022: 38-67, 96-103).

The links between characteristics of journalists, such as their political preferences, and their reporting are not immediately clear, and undoubtedly controversial (cf. KEPPLINGER 1979; WEISCHENBERG et al. 2006: 98-101; REINEMANN/BAUGUT 2014). After all, factors relating to organization and systems arguably have a more significant impact on media content than individual views (cf. SHOEMAKER/ REESE 2014). But the idea that personal characteristics could be totally irrelevant appears implausible, not least given the existence of editorials in which the authors explicitly express their opinions. In addition, opinions, attitudes and trust relationships can influence news selection and other journalistic decisions (cf. PATTERSON/DONSBACH 1996; KEPPLINGER 2011: 101-128; STEINDL 2021: 299-301).

As complex as these relationships may be on an individual level, the idea that journalists' views and social background, either alongside or in connection with other factors, can be significant for reporting is one of the standard assumptions of journalism research (cf. MCQUAIL 1994: 201-204; WEAVER 1998: 456; PEISER 2000; SHOEMAKER/REESE 2014: 204-238), and is also the starting point for the debate on »diversity« (cf. LÜCK et al. 2022; HARUNA-OELKER 2023; HOFFMANN 2023). Is journalism dominated by male views? Are experiences and viewpoints from East Germany sufficiently represented in the German media (cf. MÜKKE 2021; BLUHM/JACOBS 2016)? Do people with a history of migration also get to write editorials? Can children from working class families make it in influential media houses (cf. ATAMAN 2021; BEER 2022: 24; FRIEDRICHS 2023)? All these questions imply an expectation that topics and perspectives in reporting are influenced by the composition of an editorial office. Regardless of any effects this may have on content, it is also reasonable to demand, in the interests of justice and equality of opportunity, that those people who were previously largely denied it should now be given access to key journalistic positions.<sup>1)</sup>

1 The taz cooperative, for example, explicitly states the importance of personal biographies when writing to its members (on February 13, 2023): »Editorial offices in Germany and also at taz are very homogeneous: The journalists come from university-educated families; most grew up in urban milieus. Their view of the world shapes their questions, their reporting, and their critique. The taz Panter Stiftung is therefore looking for people with different experiences [for a scholarship program for trainees]. The program brings

This paper does not, and indeed cannot, go into the theoretical and normative background to these demands. Instead, its focus is on answering the empirical question of similarities and differences between journalists and the population in Germany. Researchers have long been aware that journalists do not reflect the population in general (cf. WEISCHENBERG et al. 2006: 69-72), but few major studies have been conducted on how and where exactly they differ.

Within the framework of a large representative population sample in Germany (SOEP; cf. Section 3 below) that allows comparisons between various groups and an analysis of professions (professional groups) (cf. DETER/VAN HOORN 2023), the socio-economic background (which is especially relevant for diversity), political views, general personality traits, and subjective judgments of journalists, are considered below. As the questions in the SOEP are targeted at the general population and at all professional groups, it is impossible to learn from these data anything about how journalists in Germany see their professional role or about the specific working conditions in the media. Nor is it possible to analyze journalistic sub-groups, such as data journalism (cf. WEINACHT/SPILLER 2022) or »constructive journalism« (cf. STEINIGEWEG 2022) here. Instead, we can compare the socio-demographic features of journalists in Germany with those of the general population and further comparison groups, and extend this comparison to personality traits, worries, trust, satisfaction, and the opportunities for influence that journalists feel they have.

The paper thus follows on from established survey studies in journalism research, but uses a different data base. It uses the German Socio-Economic Panel Study (SOEP), which is representative of people in Germany aged 17 and over, to compare the features of journalists with those of the population as a whole. Some of the results corroborate older findings from previous research, such as a higher-than-average preference among professional journalists for the Green political party »Bündnis 90/Die Grünen.« In places, the analysis throws up new and unexpected empirical findings, such as those on the willingness to take risks. It is also surprising to see that, in our analysis, the proportion of journalists with a family history of migration is similar to that of the population as a whole.

## 2. Empirical studies on the social structure and views of journalists in Germany

Following the investigations set out by Siegfried Weischenberg and his team in the 1990s and early 2000s (cf. WEISCHENBERG et al. 1993, 1994, 2006), the

into editorial offices people who are underrepresented there – such as women with a history of migration, or people who have not been to university.«

international »Worlds of Journalism« study is the most recent to provide extensive data on the social structure, working situation, and views of journalists (cf. Hanitzsch et al. 2019a). A new wave of surveys began in 2022, which in Germany was launched under the leadership of a team headed by Wiebke Loosen from the Leibniz Institute for Media Research (Hans Bredow Institute) (cf. LOOSEN et al. 2023). In previous years, a group led by Thomas Hanitzsch (University of Munich) had coordinated the »Worlds of Journalism« study and published results for Germany from surveys conducted in 2014/15 (cf. STEINDL et al. 2017; HANITZSCH et al. 2019b).

Based on representative samples ( $n = 775$  and  $n = 1.221$ ), the analyses for 2014/15 and 2022/23 provided up to now the best overview of central features of professional journalists in Germany (cf. STEINDL et al. 2017: 406-413; LOOSEN et al. 2023). The research groups used various sources in order to determine the basic population of journalists, which is not easy to pin down. The data used includes information from journalistic associations and media company websites.

Given that »journalist« is not a protected title in western societies, it is notoriously difficult to define and delineate journalism as a profession. This was already a problem in the early American survey studies (cf. WEAVER/WILHOIT 1986, 1996), from which both German and international investigations would later follow. Just like the pioneer studies from the USA, »Worlds of Journalism« only includes professional journalists for whom journalism is their main job. Work in press offices or public relations does not count as journalistic work (cf. STEINDL et al. 2017: 407). In contrast, the statistics from German's Federal Labour Office (Bundesagentur für Arbeit) also include people for whom journalism is not their main job and those who do not provide core journalistic services, such as »technical editors.« This may cause information on the size and social profile of journalists as a professional group to vary (cf. STEINDL et al. 2019: 37).<sup>12</sup> These investigations provide the following profile of journalists in Germany (taking the variables that we analyze below on the basis of the SOEP into account):

## 2.1 *Socio-demographic features*

The average age of journalists in Germany in 2022/23 was 45 years (LOOSEN et al. 2023: 8). Making up 44 percent of journalists (2014/15: 40 percent), women are

2 »The Federal Labour Office (2017) states that around 200,000 people in Germany currently work in journalistic professions, of whom around 150,000 work directly in journalism. However, it is important to note that the Federal Labour Office (2010) also counts as journalists people who neither work in journalism as their main job nor are assigned predominantly journalistic tasks. For example, technical editors, editorial assistants, and people who work with fictional storytelling are all counted as journalists. It is therefore no wonder that the figures for journalists in Germany vary, often widely. Other sources, for example, quote a figure of more than 100,000 freelance journalists – this ignores the journalists in regular employment, however« (STEINDL et al. 2019: 37).

less well represented than men, and account for an even smaller proportion in higher positions (cf. STEINDL et al. 2017: 413-417; LOOSEN et al. 2023: 8). Figures from »ProQuote Medien« on the proportion of women in leading positions in national newspapers corroborate this, showing that there are few women in the German daily newspapers *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ), *Welt* and *Bild* and the weekly magazine *Focus* in particular, while at the left-leaning newspaper *taz* there are more women in leading positions than men (cf. PROQUOTE 2022).

On the political desk of German media, the proportion of women is generally below average (cf. LÜNENBORG/BERGHOFER 2010: 9; DINGERKUS/KEEL 2021: 411). An older investigation found that women were also clearly underrepresented as authors of editorials and comment pieces in newspapers, as were East Germans and younger people aged under 40 (cf. PFETSCH et al. 2004: 56-57). From an intersectional point of view, women from West Germany are most likely to have benefited from initiatives like ProQuote and the increasing proportion of women in some leading editorial positions, while East Germans benefit less (cf. ECKERT/ASSMANN 2021, 2023).

Around a quarter of journalists earned a net monthly income of between EUR 1,801 and EUR 2,400 in 2014/15; a fifth earned between EUR 2,401 and EUR 3,000 (cf. STEINDL et al. 2017: 415). Many journalists, especially women and freelancers, work in economically precarious circumstances (cf. STEINDL et al. 2017: 417; STEINDL et al. 2018; SCHNEDLER 2017; HANITZSCH/RICK 2021).

Most journalists in Germany have a university degree. The proportion of those with a degree has risen over the decades, recently reaching around 70 to 75 percent (cf. STEINDL et al. 2017: 414; LOOSEN et al. 2023: 8). The »Worlds of Journalism« study cannot currently provide information on family background (cf. the survey in HANITZSCH et al. 2019: 257-268). In the Weischenberg team's study in 2005, 67 percent of the journalists questioned had fathers who were civil servants or white-collar workers, while just nine percent were the children of blue-collar workers. Just three percent of the mothers were blue-collar workers (more than half were white-collar, and around a fifth of the mothers did not work outside of the home at all) (cf. WEISCHENBERG et al. 2006: 69).

A study at three professional schools of journalism in Germany also found that most of those undergoing training there came from middle class families (cf. ZIEGLER 2008: 14). A study on the sociology of elites suggests that top journalistic positions – especially in Germany's private media companies – are mainly filled with people whose family is in a good or very good economic position (cf. HARTMANN 2013: 73-74).

Few data is available on the question of how many journalists come from families with a history of migration. Older estimates produce a figure of just 1.2 percent for German daily newspapers (cf. GEISLER et al. 2009: 92), or between four and five percent for all media (cf. PÖTTKER 2016: 15). A more recent survey

by the organization »Neue deutsche Medienmacher:innen« found that 118 of 126 editors-in-chief (94 percent) at the media in Germany with the widest reach are German with no history of migration; none are people of color (cf. NdM 2020).

## 2.2 *Personality traits*

We are not aware of any systematically collected data on the general personality traits and mental condition of journalists. Largely on the basis of anecdotal evidence, journalists are said to be curious with a thirst for knowledge, flexible, open, and spontaneous. Attributes like these are also demanded or recommended in practical guides: »There are a few fundamental traits that somebody who wants to become a journalist should bring with them – above all strong nerves, a disciplined approach to work and a quantum of self-confidence. [...] People who are slow, shy or sensitive should probably not choose this profession« (SCHNEIDER/RAUE 2012: 15). According to this, curiosity, belligerence, a backbone, and mistrust are important. Others write of communication skills, resilience, and creativity (cf. MAST 2018: 486-488). It is far from certain, however, whether journalists really are especially likely to display these attributes.

## 2.3 *Trust, worries, and satisfaction*

No doubt as a result of their profession, journalists working in Germany have comparatively low trust in parties and politicians. Their trust in the judiciary and the police, however, is much higher (cf. STEINDL 2021: 215). In international comparison, trust in political institutions, such as the parliament and the government, is high (cf. HANITZSCH/BERGANZA 2012: 803). We are not aware of any current data on how high journalists' trust in other people is in general, although interpersonal trust can be a key factor in other forms of trust (cf. GRANOW et al. 2020; JAKOBS et al. 2021: 474-480).

Looking at the worries and satisfaction of journalists, there is clear information on the profession's workload, which is often considered high. Thus studies indicate that younger journalists in particular are thinking more about switching professions (cf. SCHMIDT et al. 2022: 67-69), and that the media sector should fear a brain drain (cf. SCHNEDLER 2017). All in all, however, journalists consider that they enjoy a high degree of freedom in decision-making (cf. STEINDL et al. 2017: 418), which can be important for the attractiveness of the profession and the satisfaction of those working in it. In an online survey of more than 1,000 journalists conducted in 2020, 43 percent stated that they were »more satisfied than dissatisfied« with their profession, while 26 percent were »very satisfied.« At the same time, 43 of those journalists for whom journalism was their main job saw their working situation as »precarious« (HANITZSCH/RICK 2021: 2). And women

are more likely to view their situation in this way than men (48% vs. 40%), more often stated that they work part-time, and are more likely to choose a freelance model in order to balance their work with family life. As a result, female journalists take home just 83 percent of the mean income of men working in journalism (HANITZSCH/RICK 2021: 5-7, 13).

As far as we are aware, there are no current studies on German journalists regarding general satisfaction with life and worries that are not directly associated with professional activities, but that are included in the data base analyzed by us (SOEP).

#### 2.4 Political views

In terms of their political views, journalists in Germany in 2014/15 are slightly to the left of center on average, with a mean of 3.96 on a scale from 0 (»left«) to 10 (»right«) (cf. STEINDL et al. 2017: 414). Those who work on the politics desk are actually slightly further left, with a value of 3.6 (cf. DINGERKUS/KEEL 2021: 414). The higher the professional position (leading journalists) and the higher the journalists' income, the closer they are likely to be to the political center (cf. DIETRICH-GSENGER/SEETHALER 2019: 65; also based on the »Worlds of Journalism« survey).

Although preference for a political party was included in earlier investigations, it was not asked in the 2014/15 »Worlds of Journalism« study. In 2005, the Greens led with 36 percent, with just nine percent for the CDU/CSU; 20 percent of those surveyed stated that they have no party preference (cf. WEISCHENBERG et al. 2006: 71). A 2009 online survey of more than 900 political journalists also put the Greens in first place with 27 percent, and 36 percent responded with »no party preference« (cf. LÜNENBORG/BERGHOFER 2010: 13). In general, journalists in Germany set great store by professional non-partisanship, seeing themselves predominantly in a »neutral disseminator role« and as »impartial observers« (STEINDL et al. 2017: 419; LOOSEN et al. 2023: 9-11).

We will examine how the professional group of journalists looks in the aforementioned profile areas when a large representative sample, based on a different methodology as the specialized studies, is used: the German Socio-Economic Panel Study (SOEP). We expect the findings to corroborate the information from older studies. However, since the methods and times of the surveys vary, there may also be differences for whose direction we have no hypotheses. And the SOEP data also includes personality traits that have not been included in surveys in journalism research before.

### 3. Method

The representative population survey in the Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP) makes it possible to analyze individual professional groups in Germany. For example, Deter and van Hoorn (2023) used the SOEP as the basis for investigating features of those employed in the financial industry. We are exploiting the possibilities offered by the large sample by identifying the journalists contained within this annual data set based on the information they provide on their work (in anonymized form with regard to their personal identity, which is not contained in the data set). We then compare this group with Germany's adult population as a whole, the electorate, and the group of those people in Germany who are intensively engaged in politics (defined as persons who state that they are active in political parties, local politics, or citizens' initiatives at least once a week). It is important to note that the group of those intensively engaged in politics is very small – just 1.5 percent of the adult population.

#### 3.1 *Distinguishing journalists in the SOEP data set*

A representative sample like the SOEP is an interesting alternative to the studies outlined above, as a large sample of the population automatically includes persons active in journalism. And the large sample size implies that the sample size of journalists included is sufficient to draw statistically relevant conclusions.

Like the studies quoted in Section 2, our investigation includes only those people who state that they work as journalists as their main job, regardless of whether this is in traditional or new media (for the questionnaire, cf. for example for 2019: KANTAR PUBLIC 2020: 11-12). The starting point was all observations for which »journalist« was coded in the data set (cf. HARTMANN/SCHÜTZ 2002).

The coding of the journalists is based on the SOEP respondents' statement of their precise job description in plain language. However, we had access not only to the codes, but also to the plain language entered for the job description and in addition the economic sector in which the respondents work. This allowed us to exclude people who worked in fields such as public relations, marketing, and publishing (e.g., »head of editorial office at a school textbook publisher«). The exclusion process was based on independent »nominations« made by the three of us authors. Using the plain language descriptions, we unanimously excluded eleven respondents that we do not count as journalists.

Given that people working as journalists as their main job make up – as an estimate – only around 0.2 percent of the adult population and 0.3 percent of the working population (cf. Section 2 above), the sample size for journalists in the SOEP is so small that we have pooled the observations from the years 2013 to 2020. This gives us a population of 129 journalists, who were surveyed 415 times between 2013



and 2020. As we will see, this sample size is sufficient to find statistically relevant differences between journalists and the comparison groups. Small differences are not significant due to the large confidence intervals for journalists – but one can assume that such small differences are not very relevant in life, either.

In addition, we distinguished 41 people with leading roles from the group of journalists in the SOEP. We can assume that these people are especially influential in terms of not just editorial policy, but also media content, given that they have the opportunity to select topics and, for example, write journalistic comment pieces and editorials themselves. This method allows us to examine whether this presumably particularly influential group differs even more significantly from the remaining population. We call this group »leading journalists,« while others consider their prominence and strength of opinion and choose terms such as »alphas« (WEISCHENBERG et al. 2006: 52-56), »influential journalists« (MEYER 2015: 7), or an elitist »commentariat« (PFETSCH et al. 2004). As well as the population as a whole, we also compare journalists with the electorate and with people engaged in politics.

The leading journalists are distinguished by at least one of three survey characteristics, while always maintaining their anonymity. First, when asked to state their job description, they respond that they are employees conducting highly qualified activities or in a leadership function, including employees who report extensive leadership tasks. Second, they work full time. And third, the plain language they use in their responses indicates that they work as journalists, (chief) editors, or heads of department. We deliberately distinguish this group as little as possible in order to avoid the risk of accidentally revealing their identities through additional characteristics (such as age or place of residence).

The number of 41 leading journalists is at the lower limit for a sample size that can be used as the basis for statistically relevant conclusions. As would be expected, the uncertainty range (confidence interval) for many of the examined characteristics of this group is very large (cf. also Section 4.1. below). Nevertheless, there are some statistically significant differences between all journalists and the leading journalists. Although we name these in the text, we have not included them in the printed results charts in order to make the charts easier to read (the results can be found in the online appendix). Given the total of 129 journalists in the data set, the proportion of those who see themselves as leaders is very high – although it is worth remembering that our analysis does not include the large number of journalists for whom journalism is a side job.

### 3.2 *Dimensions of the investigation*

Our analysis begins by comparing the (usual) socio-demographic features of journalists with the comparison groups investigated here. Some of these results

are also compared with the older studies on the professional situation of journalists quoted in Section 2.

The second thematic block is divided into three sub-sections. The first looks at the personality traits based on the »Big Five« personality traits and the willingness to take risks (for a summary of the concepts, cf. LECKELT et al. 2022; HESS et al. 2018; RICHTER et al. 2017). On a scale from one (does not apply at all) to seven (applies fully), respondents state the extent to which the following statements apply to them regarding the Big Five: I work thoroughly; I am communicative; I am sometimes too coarse with others; I am original; I often worry; I can forgive; I tend to be lazy; I am sociable; I appreciate artistic experience; I am a little nervous; I complete tasks effectively and efficiently; I am reserved; I am friendly towards others; I have a lively imagination; I handle stress well; I am curious. On a scale from one to ten, respondents also state how willing they are to take risks, both in general and in specific areas of their lives (zero = not at all willing to take risks; ten = very willing to take risks).

We do not condense the 16 questions and answers on individual personality traits in the SOEP into the five traits of openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism. Instead, we consider the individual items separately, as this tells us more and can be statistically valid thanks to the large number of cases in the SOEP data base (compared with many psychological studies, even the case number of just 129 for journalists can be considered large).

The second thematic block looks at satisfaction and worries. On a scale from zero (not satisfied at all) to ten (very satisfied), the respondents state how satisfied they are with the various areas of their lives: general satisfaction with life; health; sleep; work: household income; personal income; leisure; and family life (cf. PRIEM et al. 2015).

When it comes to their worries, the SOEP respondents are asked to enter »not worried,« »somewhat worried,« or »very worried« on a scale for the following fields: general economic development; their own economic situation; their own health; environmental protection; climate change; maintaining peace; development of criminality in Germany; job security; immigration; and xenophobia (cf. ROHRER et al. 2021).

The third thematic block centers around party preference and other views. The respondents state which political party they prefer and place themselves on a left-right political scale, where zero is far left and ten is far right.

A question developed by Lauterbach et al. (2016: 62ff., esp. 65) relates to the political influence that respondents believe that they have. The question is: »How do you personally see your opportunity to influence public decisions at the following levels: district level, regional level, state level, national level, international level?« Respondents can answer on a scale from one (no opportunity at all) to seven (huge opportunity).

In order to highlight the similarities and differences between the journalists and all adults and voters in Germany as comparison groups, the pooled SOEP data from 2013 to 2020 is used as the basis for conducting multiple linear regression analyses containing two variable categories. As well as a 0,1 dummy variable that indexes journalists, six 0,1 dummy variables are also used to control for the year of data collection in order to prevent any purely temporal effects (e.g., the consequences of refugee immigration) which could distort the results for the journalist effect. No additional control variables are used for the comparison groups »electorate« and »total population«; this allows us to draw conclusions on the extent to which journalists (aggregated) differ from these groups in general.

In the regression analyses for the comparison group »intensively engaged in politics,« statistical control is conducted not just for the survey year but also for gender, age (and age squared), and education, in order to reveal specific properties and life circumstances that go beyond gender, age, and level of education. The regressions are conducted based on weighted data.

## 4. Results

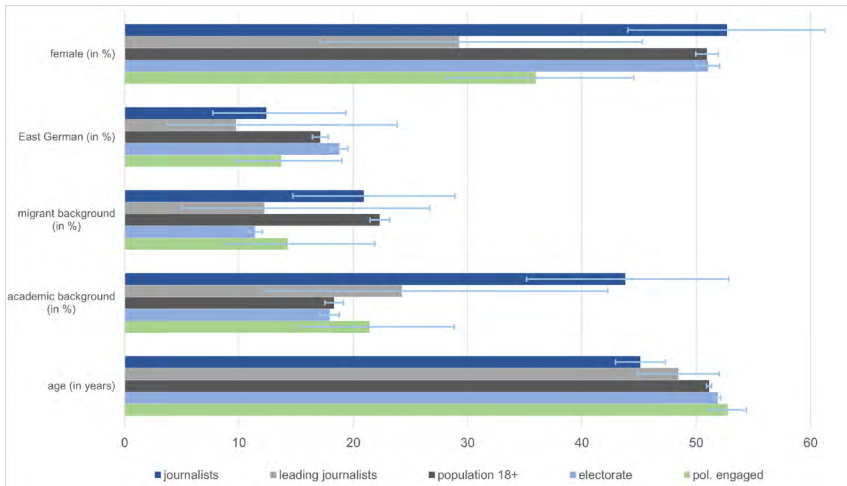
### 4.1 *Socio-demographic features*

Figure 1 shows characteristic socio-demographic features of the populations analyzed. The results for the journalists (n=129) and leading journalists (n=41) are based on the pooled data from 2013 to 2020. This data pooling means that, when repeat surveys are conducted, as is the case for the SOEP, some journalists are included in the data set multiple times. In order to prevent repeat respondents from being overrepresented in the sample, only the most recent observation is included in each case.<sup>[3]</sup> The results for the comparison groups are based on data from 2019.

The distributions of gender and East/West region (current place of residence, rather than region of origin) among all journalists do not differ significantly from those of the comparison groups. Unlike in other journalism research studies, there is no significant gap in representation here. But this is not the case when it comes to leading roles: Men are much more strongly represented among leading journalists than in the population as a whole; the same goes when comparing leading journalists with the group of citizens intensively engaged in politics.

3 Due to the relatively low number of journalists in the sample, two measures were conducted to validate the reliability of the results and minimize potential distortion. First, the sample was weighted; second, the distribution of the journalists in the SOEP's various sub-samples was examined. The sample weighting did not result in any relevant change to the results, nor was any overrepresentation of journalists in the individual sub-samples found (e.g., migration samples).

Figure 1  
Socio-demographic characteristics of the journalists and the comparison groups



**Note:** The values for the comparison groups are based on weighted data for the adult population (18+) from 2019 (the question on political engagement is only asked every two years, most recently in 2019; and therefore not in the most recent data from 2020). The values for the journalists and the leading journalists are based on the most recent data from the period 2013 to 2020. This data is not weighted. Source: SOEP v.37.

It is surprising to find that, measured against the comparison groups, it is by no means rare for journalists in Germany to have a history of migration. Instead, the proportion of journalists with a history of migration is the same as for the comparison groups, or even higher (when compared with the electorate as a whole). This contrasts with estimates from earlier studies and shows that numerous people with a family history of migration (now) work in journalism. However, a closer look at the data reveals that this does not reflect the largest groups of migrants in Germany. Almost exclusively, the journalists surveyed come from European countries, and the small sample does not contain a single person from the African continent, for example.

Journalists are also much more likely than any other comparison group to come from families with an academic background. Specifically, around 40 percent of journalists have at least one parent with a university degree.

Because journalists are necessarily of working age, their average age of 45 years is significantly lower than that of the adult population as a whole, the electorate, and people intensively engaged in politics.

Table A.1. in the appendix shows that more than half of journalists are in full-time employment, around 36 percent part-time, and more than ten percent in the category »Other« (in training or in irregular or minimal employment yet still as their main job). Journalists are more likely than the comparison groups to work full-time or part-time – of course due to the fact that their being active in journalism means that they cannot be unemployed.

As would be expected, journalists have a higher level of formal education than the comparison groups; the smallest difference is between journalists and people intensively engaged in politics (see Table A.1). The SOEP results confirm those of the large survey studies in journalism research: Journalism as a profession is dominated by graduates. Furthermore, journalists live in households with a significantly higher monthly net income from employment than the comparison groups; leading journalists lead the ranking with a monthly income of almost EUR 5,000 (note the large margin of uncertainty, see Tab. A.2).

#### 4.2 Further features

The rest of our results are based not on simple descriptive analyses, but on regression analyses. These make it possible to pool observations from different calendar years while also highlighting which of the differences between the journalists and the comparison groups are statistically significant.

In the charts below, the dots represent the coefficients of the 0,1 dummy variables for the group of journalists in such away that the dots show where journalists are positioned compared with the respective comparison group (red line). The top line (for the trait »I work thoroughly«) in Figure 2.1, for example, shows that journalists are slightly more likely than the population as a whole (aged 18 years and over) to state that they work thoroughly, but that this difference is not statistically significant. This is shown by the lines surrounding the dots: The lines show the 95% confidence intervals, i.e., the range of results in which there is a 95% probability that the true result lies. An effect can only be said to be statistically significant if the confidence interval does not include the red line (this is the case, for example, in the fourth block in Figure 2.1 for the level of originality of journalists compared with all adults and the electorate). Because the number of journalists in the sample (129) is relatively small, any effect needs to be relatively large in order to be statistically significant and thus relevant in terms of content.

#### 4.2.1 *Personality traits*

The »Big Five« charts (Fig. 2.1 & Fig. 2.2)<sup>4</sup> show that journalists differ significantly from the comparison groups when it comes to the personality traits that they describe for themselves (since the SOEP is not a specific survey on journalism, we can reasonably expect that the journalists surveyed did not give responses deliberately targeted at the expectations of the profession). The journalists show more or less significantly higher levels of communicativeness, originality, interest in artistic experience, imagination, and curiosity than the three demographic comparison groups. It may be more surprising to learn that journalists see themselves as having a tendency for laziness (compared to the whole population and to the electorate). Journalists consider themselves stronger than the politically active in terms of artistic experience and imagination, but do not provide statistically significant higher values for communicativeness and originality than citizens engaged in politics.

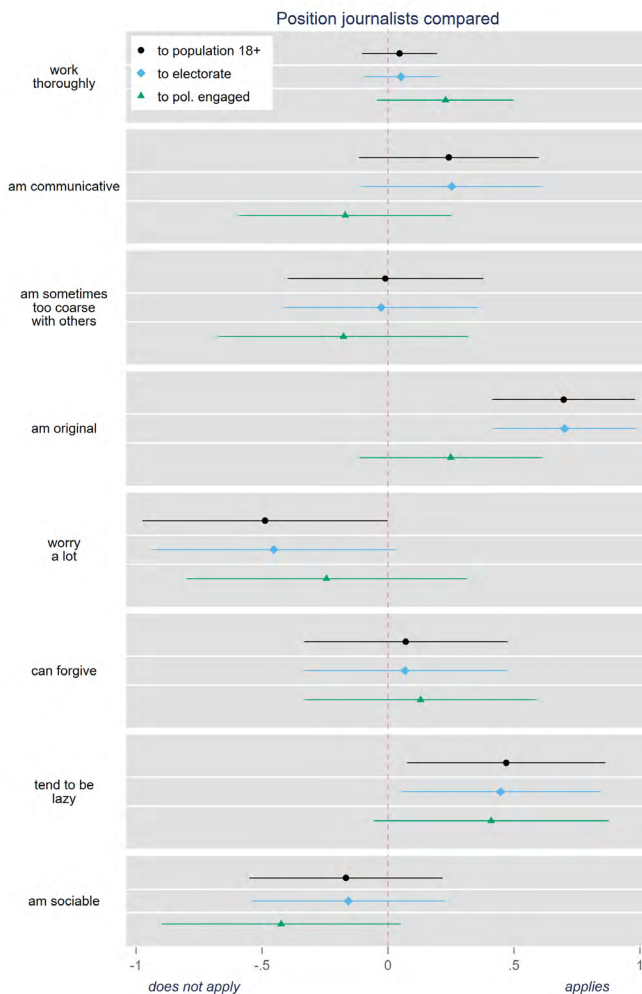
The data for leading journalists (see figures in online appendix, Fig. A.1.1) reveals that the only difference between them and their colleagues is their bigger belief in their ability to forgive. Compared with the other population groups, leading journalists see themselves as less nervous, more curious, more imaginative, and more resistant to stress.

The general willingness of journalists to take risks is distinctly higher than that of the adult population as a whole and the electorate (albeit with only weak statistical significance). This was to be expected given that journalists as a professional group have a higher level of education, which is associated with a greater willingness to take risks (see Fig. 2.3). More surprising is the finding that the journalists' willingness to take risks is lower than that of people engaged in politics – which in turn is significantly far higher than that of the adult population as a whole (cf. HESS et al. 2018). It is less surprising, on the other hand, that the journalists, whose professional field is comparatively open, after all, stated a significantly higher willingness to take risks with regard to their careers than the comparison groups.

Interestingly, in their self-perception journalists tend to have greater trust in strangers than the population as a whole and the electorate. They are also more willing to take risks in relation to leisure and sport. When it comes to financial investments and their own health, however, the results clearly show that they are less willing than the comparison groups to take risks.

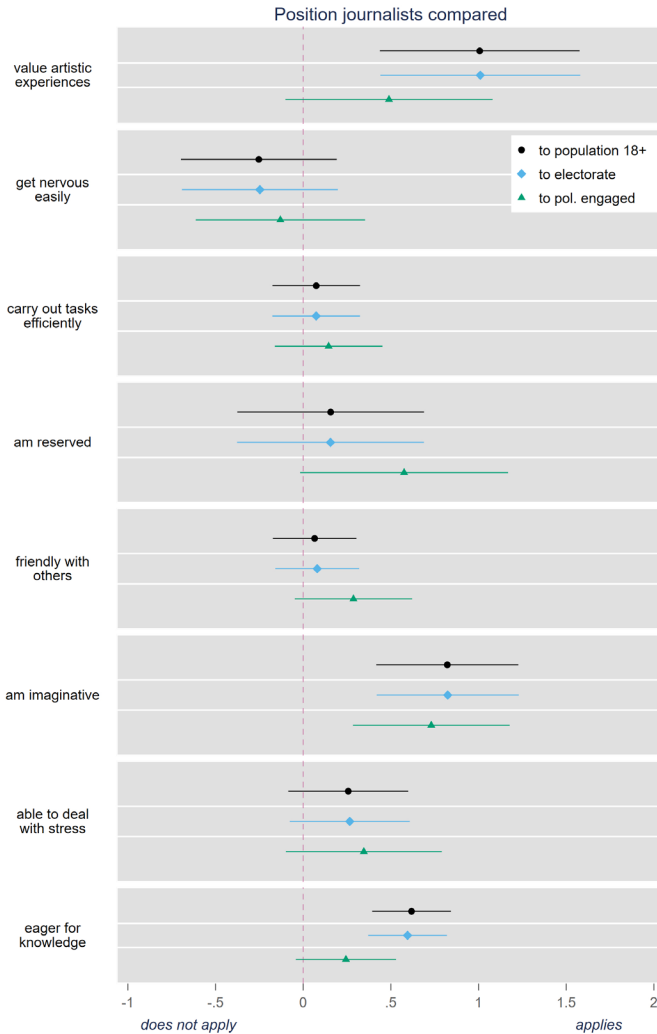
4 The Stata charts for Figures 2 to 4 come from Bischof (2017).

Fig. 2.1  
Big Five personality traits I



\* Scale for personality traits: does not apply at all (0) – applies fully (7). Source: SOEP v.37; analyses based on pooled data 2013 to 2020, controlled for the year of collection. In addition, »people engaged in politics« is controlled for gender, age, age<sup>2</sup> and education. Note: Points denote the position of the journalists compared to the respective reference groups. Reading aid: Journalists state significantly higher values than the population as a whole and the electorate for the dimension »I am original.« Their responses do not differ significantly from those of people engaged in politics.

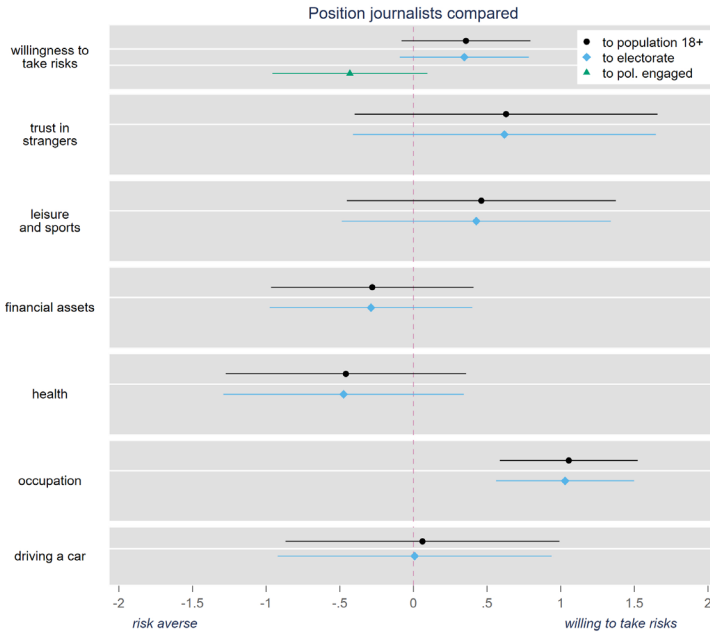
Fig. 2.2  
Big Five personality traits II



\* Scale for personality traits: does not apply at all (0) – applies fully (7). Source: SOEP v.37; analyses based on pooled data 2013 to 2020, controlled for the year of collection. In addition, »people engaged in politics« is controlled for gender, age, age<sup>2</sup> and education. Note: Points denote the position of the journalists compared to the respective reference groups.



Fig. 2.3  
Self-assessment of willingness to take risks



\* Scale for willingness to take risks: not at all willing to take risks (0) – very willing to take risks (10); \*\* Data on the general willingness to take risks is gathered annually (here: pooled results for 2013-2020). Willingness to take risks in specific fields was only asked in 2014 and is thus based on responses from 61 journalists. Due to a lack of (sufficient) values, no conclusions can be drawn here on people engaged in politics or on leading journalists. Note: Points denote the position of the journalists compared to the respective reference groups. Analyses based on pooled data 2013 to 2020, controlled for the year of collection. In addition, »people engaged in politics« is controlled for gender, age, age<sup>2</sup> and education. Source: SOEP v.37

#### 4.2.2 Satisfaction and worries

Looking at Fig. 3, it is striking that journalists are significantly more satisfied with their lives in general, and with their health and their sleep, than the population as a whole and the electorate. This comes as little surprise, however, given that both comparison groups also include people who are not in employment due to illness, and the effects are not controlled for the effects of age. The journalists’ satisfaction with their lives thus does not differ significantly from that of people engaged in politics (although it is slightly higher). When it comes to satisfaction with work and leisure, journalists give average results, with leading journalists

slightly less satisfied with their work (see online appendix, Fig. A.2, cf. also findings on worries below). However, the data does show (statistically insignificant) greater satisfaction with family life.

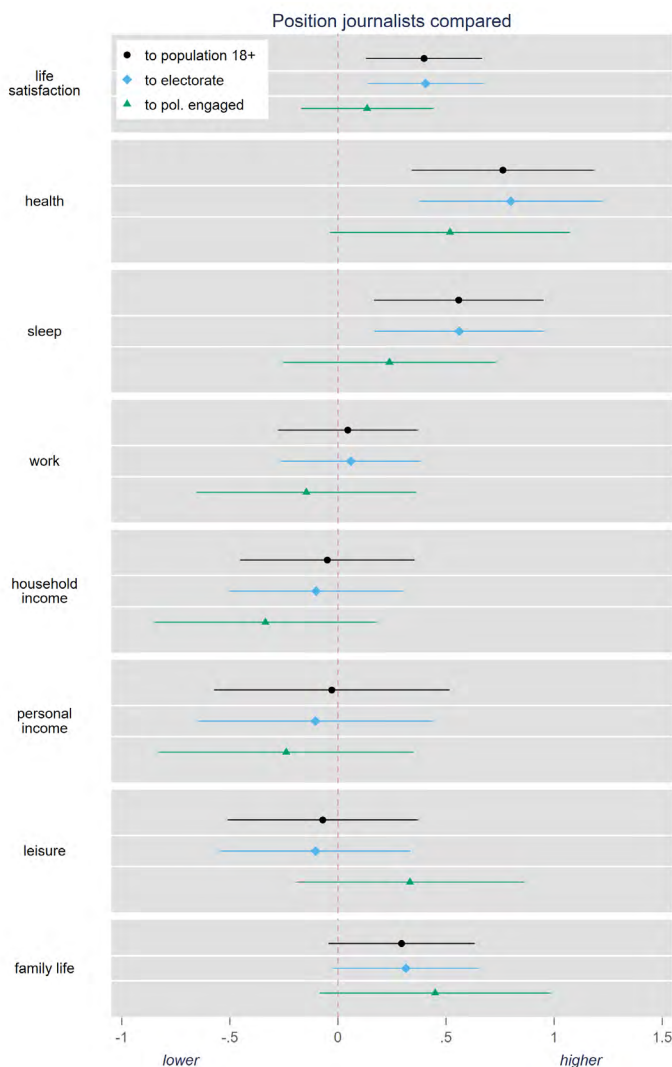
The material situation in life is recorded here based on satisfaction with the personal and household income. Although not always statistically significant, the trend is clear: Journalists are less satisfied than the comparison groups with both their personal and their household income. However, this does not apply to leading journalists, who are significantly more satisfied with their personal income than their colleagues – and than the comparison groups of the population as a whole and the electorate. What is the situation when it comes to worries and the topics that are seen as politically important? The results on »worries« (Fig. 4) show that journalists displayed an approximately average level of concern about the general economic situation (in 2013 to 2020). With regard to their own economic situation, too, in the observed period the journalists do not differ significantly from the adult population as a whole, nor from the electorate. However, they are more worried about their own economic situation than those engaged in politics are, albeit not to a statistically significant extent.

Although journalists are said to have a stressful profession and many of them indeed bemoan an exhausting job situation (cf. LOUSEN 2023: 15), they are on average less concerned about their health than the demographic comparison groups. Given the complaints in the media sector about precarious employment, it is also surprising to find that journalists are only worried about their job security to an average extent (and leading journalists even slightly less than their colleagues, see online appendix, Fig. 3). Although this may be a result of the sample, given that it does not include journalists for whom journalism is a side job, for example. Only the citizens especially engaged in politics are less worried about their jobs.

The other worries asked about in the survey show that journalists are on average significantly more worried about »green« issues such as environmental protection and climate change than the adult population as a whole and the electorate (the same cannot be said for leading journalists). Journalists are less concerned about the development of criminality and immigration. The differences from the group of citizens engaged in politics are interesting in particular: There is little difference between journalists and those engaged in politics when it comes to worries about maintaining peace, environmental protection, and climate change, but those engaged in politics are significantly more concerned about xenophobia and immigration to Germany.<sup>5</sup>

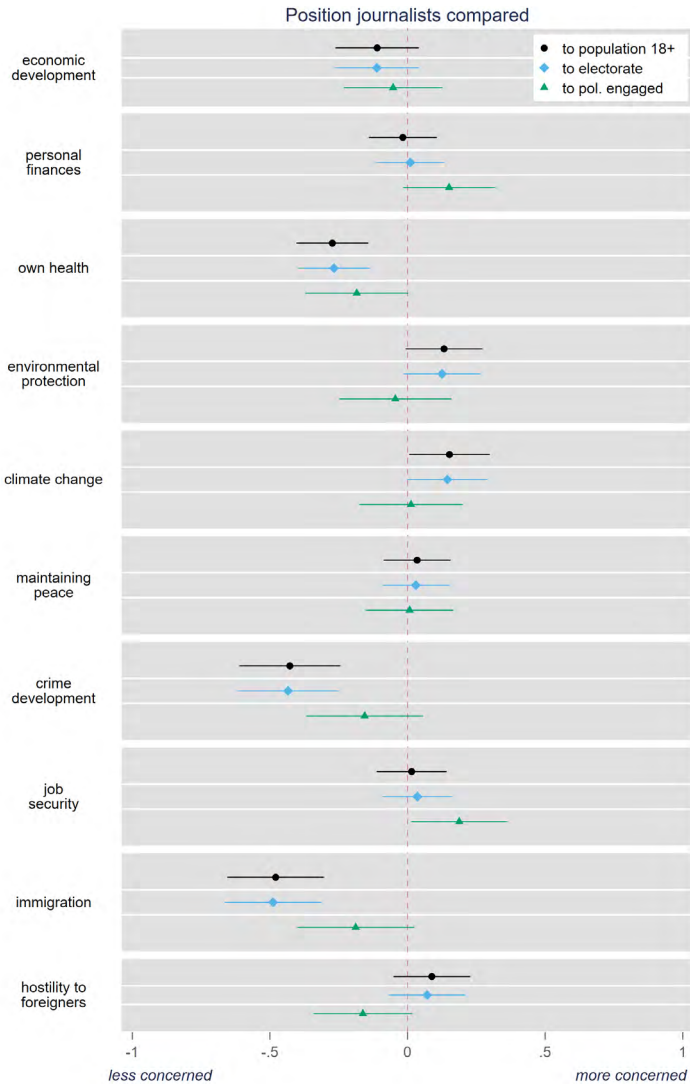
5 As the most recent data included in the analysis is from 2020, the wars in Ukraine and in Israel do not impact the responses.

Fig. 3  
Satisfaction



\* Scale for satisfaction: not satisfied at all (0) – very satisfied (10). Note: Points denote the position of the journalists compared to the respective reference groups; analyses based on pooled data 2013 to 2020, controlled for the year of collection. In addition, »people engaged in politics« is controlled for gender, age, age<sup>2</sup> and education. Source: SOEP v.37

Fig. 4  
Worries

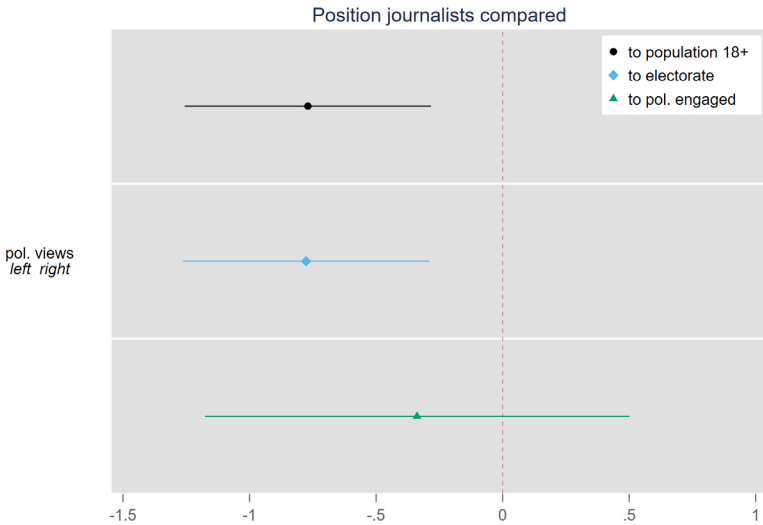


\* Scale: no worries (1) – major worries (3). Note: Points denote the position of the journalists compared to the respective reference groups; analyses based on pooled data 2013 to 2020, controlled for the year of collection. In addition, »people engaged in politics« is controlled for gender, age, age<sup>2</sup> and education. Source: SOEP v.37

### 4.2.3 Political views and party preference

Given the structure of the journalists' worries, the results on their political views can no longer come as a surprise (Fig. 5.1): On a left-right scale, journalists in Germany – as in the studies quoted in Section 2 – place themselves (statistically significantly) slightly to the left of the demographic comparison groups. The difference between journalists and citizens engaged in politics in this regard is not significantly significant.

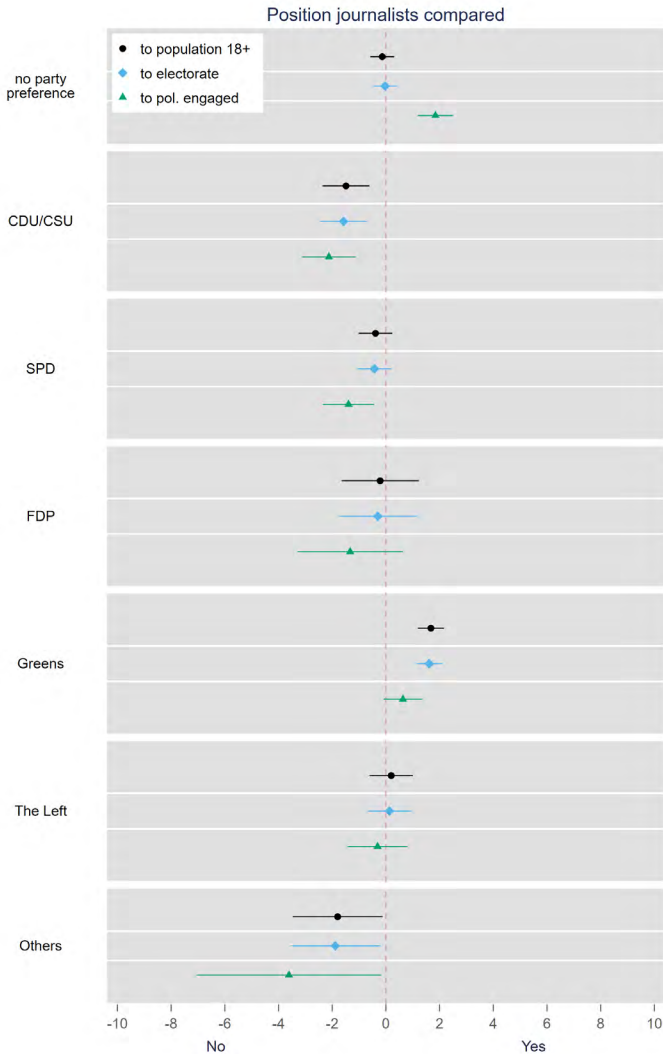
Fig. 5.1  
Political Views



\* Scale for political views: left (0) – right (10). Note: Points denote the position of the journalists compared to the respective reference groups; analyses based on pooled data 2013 to 2020, controlled for the year of collection. In addition, »people engaged in politics« is controlled for gender, age, age<sup>2</sup> and education. Source: SOEP v.37

Very clear structures can be seen regarding party preferences (Fig. 5.2). This is also emphasized in the available literature. Journalists in Germany are significantly less likely to prefer the conservative CDU/CSU than any other comparison group, and significantly more likely to prefer Die Grünen (Green Party).

Fig. 5.2  
Party preference



**Note:** Points denote the position of the journalists compared to the respective reference groups (odds ratio); analyses based on the pooled data 2013 to 2020, controlled for the year of collection. In addition, »people engaged in politics« is controlled for gender, age, age<sup>2</sup> and education. Source: SOEP v.37

Their preference for the SPD (Social Democrats) and Die Linke (Left Party) is more or less the same as in the comparison groups (except leading journalists, who are much less likely to prefer Die Linke; see online appendix, Fig. A.4); although journalists are much less likely to prefer the SPD than those engaged in politics are. At the same time, they are slightly less likely than the three demographic comparison groups to prefer the FDP (Free Democrats – a business oriented liberal party), although the difference is not statistically significant. Interestingly, journalists are less likely to prefer other parties (including the right-wing AfD) than any other comparison group, especially those engaged in politics. Overall, it is worth noting that a majority of the total adult population (2019: 57%) and almost half (44%) of journalists stated that they do not prefer any particular party – a figure that puts the other party preferences named strongly into perspective.

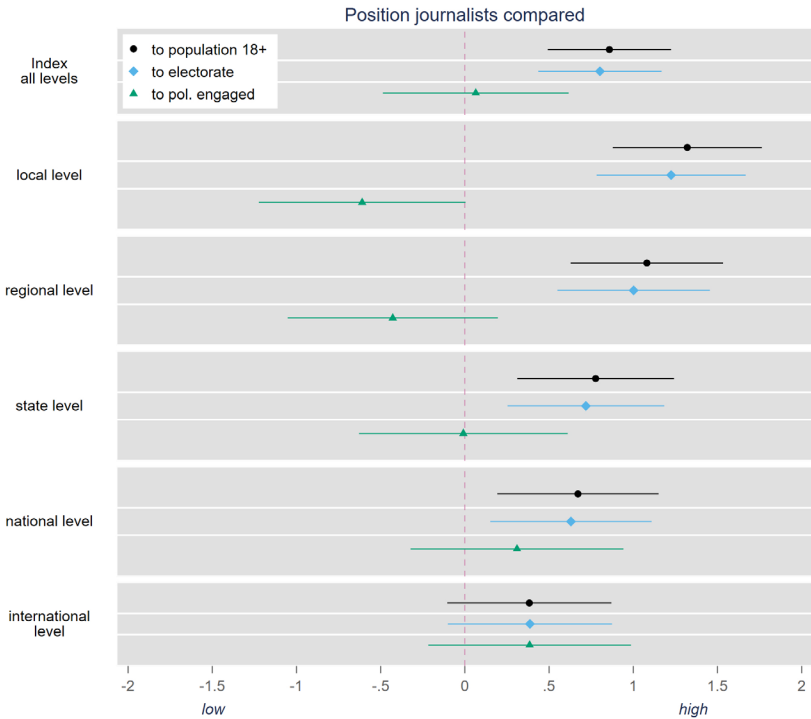
When it comes to their opportunities for political influence (Fig. 5.3), journalists at all levels see themselves as much more influential than the comparison groups – with the exception of the citizens engaged in politics. Only on an international level do the journalists not see significantly more opportunity as the comparison groups to influence public decision-making.

## 5. Discussion and conclusion

Journalists do not mirror the population, and the extent to which their biographies and views reflect society's diversity and the population average is limited. Although this fact has long been known within communication studies, few studies have been able to draw comparisons on a representative basis. With this in mind, this paper has drawn on data from the German Socio-Economic Panel Study (SOEP) – tapping an established source that has not previously been used in journalism research and that contains, in particular, variables on personality that have not previously been analyzed. Furthermore, the SOEP makes it possible to draw targeted comparisons with other population groups, in particular the group of citizens intensively engaged in politics.

These data cannot define whether or, if applicable, how a journalist's views and milieu influence reporting. As a general rule, it is important to be cautious when drawing conclusions about effects on reporting based on the views and social characteristics of individual journalists. Such connections are obviously complex (cf. LÜCK et al. 2022: 562-565; HOFFMANN 2023). Furthermore, the analysis using the SOEP data is based on a very small sample of journalists for whom journalism is their main job – offering limited opportunity to differentiate within this group.

Fig. 5.3  
 Estimation of opportunities for influence (2019)



\* Scale for estimation of opportunities for influence: no opportunity at all (1) – huge opportunity (7); \*\* The estimation of opportunities for influence was only included in the survey in 2019 and is therefore based on the responses of 42 journalists. Note: Points denote the position of the journalists compared to the respective reference groups; analyses based on pooled data 2013 to 2020, controlled for the year of collection. In addition, »people engaged in politics« is controlled for gender, age, age<sup>2</sup> and education. Source: SOEP v.37

The first task of this study was to record which features are typical of journalists in Germany. Corroborating previous study results seems important here. After all, surveys in the media sector face a large number of difficulties, for example in determining the population, selecting the sample, and the number of responses received. The data base and the methods on which our analysis is based differ fundamentally from the survey studies conducted in journalism research. One key advantage of the SOEP data set is that it is representative of the population as a whole, with the group of journalists included automatically alongside all other professional groups and asked the same questions. Replication of the results for



characteristics like age, income and political views can therefore be seen as a sign of the quality of the various studies and their design.

When it comes to the respondents' age, level of education, social background and political views, the results for 2013 to 2020 corroborate the trends found in older investigations by Weischenberg et al. (2006) and Hanitzsch et al. (2019b) and in a new study by Loosen et al. (2023). The majority of journalists in Germany come from an academic background. East Germans (measured by place of residence) are underrepresented among those working in journalism. Despite widespread discussion and awareness of the problems related to precarious employment in the media sector (cf. Hanitzsch/Rick 2021), people who work in their first jobs as journalists tend to live in households with an income higher than the average for the population as a whole. Politically, journalists tend to be slightly left-wing and have a clear above-average preference for the Green Party (Die Grünen). And there is further evidence to support the theory that journalists are dominated by an urban, green milieu: They are significantly more worried about the climate and environmental protection than the population as a whole. Their worries are similar to those of the small group of citizens intensively engaged in politics. However, journalists are less concerned than the politically engaged when it comes to topics like criminality and immigration – yet another indication of a more left-wing, liberal attitude.

The analysis of the SOEP expands and refines what we know about journalism in Germany in many ways. One surprising result relates to the journalists' migration history. Previous assumptions on this have been based on older rough estimates or on analyses of a small, selective group (e. g. main editorial offices). The SOEP data now shows that the proportion of journalists with a history of migration – who were either born abroad themselves or have at least one parent who is not from Germany – is larger than was thought: around 20 percent, or close to the proportion of the population as a whole. However, it was found that a large majority of people working in journalism with a history of migration come from neighboring European countries, with only a tiny minority from Asia, and not a single journalist from Africa in the sample. Migrants are also underrepresented among leading journalists.

Our representative data show that journalists see themselves as creative, curious and imaginative to a much greater extent than other people do. Furthermore, their responses in the SOEP show them to have above-average trust in other people – all characteristics that can make a positive contribution to their satisfaction with life. When it comes to satisfaction with life, the results do not necessarily correlate with common ideas or prejudices. Despite the pressure being put on journalism by the digital transformation, journalists' satisfaction with their work, lives and leisure time differs little from that of the rest of the population. They do not stand out at all as a group that is struggling. They

might not be too satisfied with their income, but when it comes to their family life and their health, journalists actually tend to be more satisfied than average. Although leading journalists are slightly less satisfied with their work than their colleagues are, they are significantly more satisfied with their personal income.

It is worth noting that these findings are all for journalists in Germany who work in journalism as their main job and have already established a career. In fact, the media sector as a whole may in future see an increasing trend for people to work as journalists as a side job or leave the field of journalism. And this analysis was unable to reflect any shrinking of the field of professional journalists or the problems this creates, and thus may underestimate the professional difficulties that (young) journalists currently face and will continue to face in the future.

Debates about journalism as a sector in crisis can quickly lose sight of the fact that many, indeed most, sectors of the economy are also facing enormous challenges and uncertainty, and that the situation in which many media workers find themselves may not necessarily be worse, and in some cases may be better, than that of other people in work. The SOEP data showed that journalists are less risk-averse than average and more willing than average to take risks in their professional careers. Another factor in their satisfaction with life may be that they assume more strongly than others that their work gives them political influence and the ability to make a difference.

All in all, the results paint a picture of a fairly satisfied, fulfilled professional group. The evaluation could be different or become more complex if problems and symptoms of crisis in the media sector were explicitly addressed. However, it is interesting that the journalists were certainly not found to be particularly dissatisfied in direct comparison with other population groups. This may also be linked to their level of education and their personality traits, which indicate that they are more open than average to new experiences and are able to handle professional strain and changes in society comparatively well. In addition, many journalists are driven by idealism to join the profession and see it as meaningful (as demonstrated by their level of satisfaction with life). As a result, they may be willing to accept strain up to a certain level. For example, journalists may have vital resources and mentalities that help them not only to ensure the dynamic transformation of the media, but to play a constructive role in shaping it.

For future studies in journalism research, it may be worth integrating features like those examined in the SOEP (e.g. Big Five variables). Systematic comparisons with other population and professional groups, investigated not only with the SOEP but also with other surveys (like the European Social Survey or the World Value Survey), could provide further insight into professional journalists as a group.

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## Appendix

Table A.1  
Socio-demographic features of the journalists and the comparison groups

	Journalists		Leading journalists		Population 18+		Electorate		People intensively engaged in politics	
	%	Mean	%	Mean	%	Mean	%	Mean	%	Mean
Gender										
Male	47.29		70.73		49.06		48.96		64.03	
Female	52.71		29.27		50.94		51.04		35.97	
Region of residence										
West Germany	87.60		90.24		82.88		81.23		86.3	
East Germany	12.40		9.76		17.12		18.77		13.7	
Age		45.12		48.94		51.14		51.89		52.76
History of migration										
No HoM	79.07		87.80		77.69		88.59		85.75	
Direct HoM	13.95		7.32		16.04		6.00		9.49	
Indirect HoM	6.98		4.88		6.26		5.41		4.76	
Level of education										
No qualification (yet)	0.00		0.00		3.28		2.07		1.76	
Lower high school certificate	0.00		0.00		29.97		29.19		17.22	
Advanced high school certificate	7.09		7.32		26.07		28.88		17.36	
University entrance qualification	19.69		12.20		16.08		15.02		15.16	
Graduates	73.23		80.49		24.60		24.85		48.51	
Family background										
Graduate background	43.80		24.24		18.32		17.93		21.42	
Non-graduate background	56.20		75.76		81.68		82.07		78.58	
Employment status										
Full time	52.71		100.00		39.66		40.06		38.31	
Part time	36.43		0.00		13.98		13.86		19.56	
Unemployed	0.00		0.00		38.81		38.58		36.39	
Other	10.85		0.00		7.55		7.5		5.74	
Net household income (in €)		4315		4910		3312		3361		3922
N		129		41		29.145		23.543		454

**Note:** The values for the comparison groups are based on weighted data for the adult population (18+) from 2019 (political involvement is only included in the survey every two years, most recently in 2019; therefore the most recent data is not from 2020). The values for journalists and leading journalists are based on the most recent data between 2013 and 2020 in each case. This data is not weighted. Source: SOEP v.37

Table A.2

Socio-demographic features of the journalists, incl. 95% confidence intervals (margin of uncertainty)

	<b>Journalists</b>				<b>Leading journalists</b>			
	%	Mean	Lower ci	Upper ci	%	Mean	Lower ci	Upper ci
Gender								
Male	47.29		38.76	55.98	70.73		54.70	82.87
Female	52.71		44.02	61.24	29.27		17.13	45.30
Region of residence								
West Germany	87.60		80.63	92.30	90.24		76.15	96.40
East Germany	12.40		7.70	19.37	9.76		3.60	23.85
Age		45.12	42.93	47.30		48.44	44.87	52.01
History of migration								
No HoM	79.07		71.11	85.29	87.80		73.29	94.97
Direct HoM	13.95		8.93	21.14	7.32		2.30	20.97
Indirect HoM	6.98		3.65	12.94	4.88		1.17	18.17
Level of education								
No qualification (yet)	0.00							
Lower high school certificate	0.00							
Advanced high school certificate	7.09		3.70	13.13				
University entrance qualification	19.69		13.61	27.60	7.32		2.30	20.97
Graduates	73.23		64.79	80.26	12.20		5.03	26.71
Family background					80.49		65.04	90.15
Graduate background	43.80		35.16	52.84	24.24		12.27	42.26
Non-graduate background	56.20		47.16	64.84				
					75.76		57.74	87.73
Employment status								
Full time	52.71		44.02	61.24				
Part time	36.43		28.52	45.15				
Unemployed	0.00							
Other	10.85		6.50	17.57				
Net household income (in €)		4315	3914	4716		4910	4262	5558
N	129				41			

Note: The values for journalists and leading journalists are based on the most recent data between 2013 and 2020 in each case. Source: SOEP v.37.