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RESEARCH ARTICLE



Nowhere to Feel Safe Anymore Mapping Public and Organisational Violence Against Journalists in Belgium

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ABSTRACT

Violence against journalists is on the increase around the world: murders, physical assaults, verbal abuse, etc. (Brambila and Hughes 2019; Waisbord 2020). As this has been more likely to occur in countries in extreme risk situations (Frère 2015), the situation in Belgium has never quite been a cause for concern. However, in recent years, Belgian journalists have also been experiencing situations of violence. In a national survey, 5069 Belgian journalists were questioned, 27.5% of whom responded. This article focuses on three specific points: (a) considering the importance of diverse forms of violence (intimidation, verbal violence, physical assault and sexual transgressive behaviours); (b) identifying to what extent certain social and professional identities are more affected, by looking at the gender, age and professional status; (c) analysing the psychological, physical, professional, and legal consequences of this violence and the ways in which journalists react to and cope. Our contribution suggests to study violence against journalists as a whole, not just in public terms but also organisational terms. Finally, we discuss the different dimensions of violence: the *experience* of, the *production* of, the *resignation* to, and the *resistance* to violence in journalism.

KEYWORDS

Violence; journalistic identities; Belgium; survey; gender

Introduction

Public violence against journalists takes many forms: murders, kidnappings, physical assaults, verbal abuse, abusive lawsuits, etc. (Brambila and Hughes 2019; Le Cam, Pereira, et al. 2021), and it has been more likely to occur in countries in extreme risk situations, such as Mexico, Rwanda, Brazil and Israel (Brambila 2017; Frère 2015; Rios and Bronosky 2020). In recent years, public violence seems to be spreading all over the world. Gender-based violence, cyber-harassment, and physical attacks on journalists carrying out their work are illustrative of this major challenge for both the profession and press freedom (Corcione 2018; Høiby 2016; Löfgren Nilsson and Örnebring 2016; Waisbord 2020).

Even in Belgium, a country ranked 16th in the Press Freedom Index¹, the professional and academic worlds are taking a closer look at public violence against journalists (De Vuyst and Raeymaeckers 2019). Several online harassment cases of journalists have been in the news in recent years. As in many other countries (Chen et al. 2020; Koirala 2020), women journalists - especially television journalists - and people of colour were initially the most affected. Moreover, some journalists have also been physically attacked while covering rallies or demonstrations related to the health measures imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic². In a study conducted in 2022, Belgian media managers pointed out that violence against journalists, and specifically online violence, had grown in recent years, that it was encouraged by the publication of specifically political, social and health news and that it no longer exclusively affected specific journalistic identities (Malcorps, Libert, and Le Cam 2022a, 2022b). It is therefore important to pursue research on public violence against Belgian journalists and to measure the extent of this violence.

Nevertheless, violence is not only external to the world of journalism, which is most often highlighted by experts, but is also polymorphous and can occur within media organisations and newsrooms, with managers or colleagues as the perpetrators (Brambila and Hughes 2019). Studies on the crossroads between journalism studies and feminist media studies investigate how women journalists experience and deal with sexual harassment within newsrooms (De Vuyst and Raeymaeckers 2019; Le Cam, Libert, et al. 2021; North 2016; Ross 2001). A more limited number of studies have documented the persistence of racialised aggression in Western newsrooms (Douglas 2022; Louazon 2024; Nishikawa et al. 2009).

Our main contribution is to look at violence as a whole, not just in public terms but also in organisational terms. We aim to get a comprehensive overview of the violence journalists encounter, whether they have to deal with it during fieldwork, in the newsroom, or online. Importantly, we want to identify the journalistic identities that are most attacked, as well as the physical and psychological consequences of, and reactions to, violence. Therefore, we conducted a national representative survey of 1396 Belgian journalists in 2023. The aim of this article is to map the journalistic identities that are most attacked in Belgium and the way in which journalists perceive the diversity of violence. The challenge is to surpass the anecdotal evidence, often based on highly publicised cases, which are not always representative of how journalists experience violence in their everyday practice. The central question guiding our study is the following: how do Belgian journalists experience and react to violence, online as well as offline? Our contribution suggests to look at violence as a whole, not just in public terms but also in organisational terms, so as not to separate acts linked to the popularity of journalists, for example, from the day-to-day life at work experienced by any newsworker. It also allows us to better understand the issues surrounding violence in countries where it was not considered an issue (unlike other contexts, such as Mexico or Africa). This research provides a solid basis to discuss the diverse dimensions of violence: the *experience* of, the *production* of, the *resignation* to and the *resistance* to violence in journalism.

Literature Review: Violence in Journalism

Working on violence raises the question of how to define this phenomenon. Research in psychology has shown that a comprehensive definition of violence must include

“4 essential elements: behaviour that is (a) intentional, (b) unwanted, (c) nonessential, and (d) harmful” (Hamby 2017). In psychology, as in sociology, violence is not vague; it is embodied in acts and actions. It can be physical, psychological, or “symbolic”, as proposed by Bourdieu and Passeron (1970); it can be spectacular and easy to spot, but it is often insidious. In all cases, it reveals tensions and problematic social situations (Michaud 2014). It can also be unintentional, yet perceived as unwanted on the receiving end (Miller and Lewis 2022). Over the last few years, journalism scholars have examined the multiple and growing phenomena of violence against media workers. Research seems divided into two sub-fields: *public violence* (Harlow, Wallace, and Cueva Chacón 2023; Le Cam, Pereira, et al. 2021; Markov and Đorđević 2024) and *workplace violence* (Bowie, Fischer and Cooper 2012; Courcy, Savoie, and Brunet 2004). Both affect journalists: on the one hand, because they exercise a public profession with a strong political and cultural resonance, and are therefore likely to be recognised and the target of verbal, physical or psychological violence; and, on the other hand, because they are workers in a company which, like any other workplace, can be the site of various forms of violence, whether hierarchical, between colleagues, with the public served, etc. Acts of violence against journalists are not new; they are even the subject of a special entry in the *International Encyclopedia of Journalism Studies* (Brambila and Hughes 2019). In the next paragraphs, we will provide an overview of the existing literature on both public and workplace violence, and identify recurring patterns in terms of targeted groups, consequences and coping strategies.

In many countries, journalists have been working for a long time in extremely difficult security conditions. Public violence against journalists has typically been documented in regions suffering political conflicts, wars between ethnic groups, or the presence of violent actors (drug cartels, major political corruption, extremist groups, etc.) (Brambila 2017; Frère 2022; Holland and Rios 2017; Knightley 2002; Shelley 2001). In non-democratic or destabilised countries, war correspondents, investigative journalists as well as journalists in certain news domains with a strong emphasis on the watchdog role, such as politics, face aggression from actors who feel threatened by their work (Brambila and Hughes 2019).

In recent years, situations of violence have gradually spread beyond these areas of conflict. They now affect the everyday actions of journalists worldwide. Those covering demonstrations, having a presence on social networks, interacting with certain sources, are legally and repeatedly attacked (Borg-Barthet, Lobina, and Magdalena 2021). Scholars now refer to the consequences of this scattered violence against journalists as mob-censorship (Waisbord 2020). Clear signs of hostility from the political world, for example, from Donald Trump (Carlson, Robinson, and Lewis 2021) and Bolsonaro (Nicoletti and Flores 2022) among others, the increase and brutalisation of hate speech (Badouard 2018) (which has led journalists to adopt a form of “digital discursive resistance”) (Cheruiyot 2024), the various forms of cyber-harassment experienced (Holton et al. 2023) and physical attacks on journalists in countries that were not previously considered vulnerable to this type of behaviour, have added to the complexity of the violence suffered. These phenomena most often affect women journalists (Miller 2023; Posetti et al. 2021) but seem to be widespread. So much that Waisbord asks: “Can Journalists Be Safe in a Violent World?” (Waisbord 2022).

The changing work climate has led many professional organisations to develop initiatives aimed at monitoring violence against journalists and enhancing journalists' safety. A notable example is the Dutch platform *Persveilig.nl*, which is a collaboration established in 2019 between the media sector, the police and the Prosecutors Office. In addition to the creation of a website providing information and tools, or the organisation of safety trainings, the parties involved have also signed a Press Safety Protocol. This entails that journalists will always file a complaint with the police when they suffer from violence, and that the police and Public Prosecution Service will take these complaints seriously and act accordingly. In Belgium, the Flemish Association of Journalists (VVJ) has launched a similar but more limited initiative, *Persveilig.be*, to monitor the frequency and types of violence against journalists and provide training and tools. Yet, many acts of violence remain under the radar, something our survey will confirm. Moreover, journalists report a perceived lack of systemic efforts to tackle online harassment and feel very isolated in dealing with it. As such, they turn to coping strategies ranging from withdrawal from social media to exiting the profession (Holton et al. 2023).

The violence to which journalists are subjected is far from being the sole preserve of those outside their working environment. Violence obviously penetrates newsrooms and does not leave journalists unscathed. Newsrooms and media companies are workplaces where horizontal and/or vertical power relations can contribute to generating toxic environments for individuals. The newsroom can sometimes be perceived as a "battleground" (Zaman 2013). The Covid-19 pandemic was also a period that transformed internal organisational relations (Hoak 2021), both through changes in media coverage practices and through upheavals in work organisation. The violence of the market is also an "invisible force [that] oppresses journalism" (Pickard 2019). Journalists may experience high levels of stress (Fedler 2004; Monteiro, Marques Pinto, and Roberto 2016) or be at the centre of tensions and verbal violence (Goyanes and Cañedo 2023) or be victims of more or less inappropriate behaviour (Corcione 2018). When journalists recount an incident of suffering, a moment, an attitude, a situation, they are recounting a difficult relationship with their work situation, which can have personal, family, and professional consequences (Asamani 2016). These consequences are still relatively little studied, except for a few studies on burnout (MacDonald et al. 2016; Reinardy 2011).

What the literature on public violence and that on workplace violence have in common is the identification of certain groups of journalists who are at a higher risk to be targeted by such violence. A lot of research, on the crossroads with feminist media studies, documents how women journalists face much more sexism and sexual harassment in male-dominated newsrooms (De Vuyst and Raeymaeckers 2019; Le Cam, Libert, et al. 2021; Luqiu 2022; Ncube 2022) as well as much more online harassment (Idås, Backholm, and Korhonen 2019; Sampaio-Dias et al. 2024). More recently, studies have laid bare the discrimination and racism experienced by ethnic minority journalists (Douglas 2022; Nishikawa et al. 2009; Shafer 1993) and yet more work needs to be done on intersectional dynamics are at play and how other marginalized groups (e.g., gender non-conforming journalists) in the newsroom navigate experiences of public and workplace violence (Sampaio-Dias et al. 2024).

Research has documented both the direct physical (e.g., damaged material, physical wounds or decreased health) and mental (e.g., anxiety, depression, stress, burnout, low job satisfaction) consequences of public and workplace violence for individual journalists (Blumell, Mulupi, and Arafat 2023; Brambila and Hughes 2019). Concerns have also been raised about the indirect consequences, such as a chilling effect or self-censorship, which may ultimately limit press freedom and freedom of expression (Brambila and Hughes 2019; Idås, Backholm, and Korhonen 2019). Considering the lack of systematic support from news organisations, journalists mainly deal with public and workplace violence individually.

Violence against journalists has been studied in Belgium from the perspective of the constraints encountered by female journalists in newsrooms (De Vuyst and Raeymaeckers 2019; Le Cam, Libert, et al. 2021), cyber-bullying or the consequences of the pandemic for journalists (Malcorps, Libert, and Le Cam 2022a, 2022b). But violence was not the central focus of these studies. Above all, they did not allow Belgian journalists to testify and recount the violence they had suffered, and to indicate the reactions they had afterwards, a gap which our study intends to fill. Our main research question focuses on how Belgian journalists experience violence, and who the most affected journalists are.

Methods

This study is based on the results of a national survey, carried out for the third time (over a period of 10 years, see Raeymaeckers et al. 2013; Van Leuven et al. 2019; Libert et al. 2023) and concerns journalists who are members of the two main professional associations in the two language communities of Belgium, “Association des journalistes professionnels” (AJP) and its Flemish counterpart, “Vlaamse Vereniging van Journalisten” (VVJ). The databases of these two associations - which represent the large majority of Belgian journalists - include all members, as well as those applying to renew their press cards³. Thanks to this partnership, we were able to distribute the questionnaire online to 5069 journalists. To be more precise, there are 4539 “professional journalists” working for general news media, 293 trainee journalists (who are just starting out in the profession) and 237 journalists working for the specialist periodical press⁴. Of course, some Belgian journalists are not members of these associations, do not hold press cards, and therefore remain outside the scope of this study. Our approach allowed us to reach a very large number of journalists in Belgium, as well as to check the representativeness of our sample and to compare our data with that of the target population. Distributed between December 2022 and February 2023, this questionnaire provides a snapshot of the configuration of the professional group in 2023. A total of 1396 journalists responded, giving a response rate of 27.5%.

Following the traditional methodological principles of surveys like this (Weaver and Willnat 2014; Hanitzsch et al. 2019), our questionnaire covers demographics, training, political orientation, professional situation, working conditions, daily practice, relations with sources, and journalists’ perceptions of changes in their profession. For this 2023 edition, the questionnaire proposed a new set of questions concerning the various forms of violence encountered by Belgian journalists. We called this violence “transgressive behaviour” as an umbrella for all types of behaviour that are

experienced as transcending a person's boundaries. We asked journalists about their personal experience with five prominent forms of violence (see Brambila and Hughes 2019; Douglas 2022; Goyanes and Cañedo 2023), i.e., verbal violence, physical violence, discrimination, intimidation, and sexual transgressive behaviours. The aim was to take account of both public violence and workplace violence, which is often not done in existing research, in order to understand how these different acts of violence interact and impact journalists. Studying public violence whilst neglecting workplace violence provides an underestimation of the total violence experienced by journalists. Therefore, we aim to complement existing research by providing a comprehensive overview of violence within the journalistic profession. As such, for each type of violence encountered by a respondent, we asked a series of follow-up questions. First, we asked about the frequency of such violence and whether it occurred online, during fieldwork or in the newsroom. Next we asked about the psychological, physical, professional, and legal consequences of such violence. Finally, we wanted to collect reactions to this violence and the way in which it was or was not handled (no response, reporting the violence to the employer, reporting the online violence to the social media platform, reporting the violence to the professional association, avoiding writing about certain topics, avoiding the physical or online space where the violence occurred, addressing the violence with the perpetrator, filing a complaint with the police, or seeking psychological support). With closed and open questions, journalists had the chance to share comments and testimonies. Our methodology enabled us to explore three objectives:

1. To measure the importance and frequency of diverse forms of violence (intimidation, verbal violence, physical assault and sexual transgressive behaviours);
2. To identify to what extent certain social and professional identities are more affected, by looking at the gender, age, and professional status of respondents.
3. To analyse the consequences of the psychological, physical, professional, and legal consequences of this violence and the ways in which journalists react to and cope with these.

Results

The questions on transgressive behaviours were asked one after the other, according to the behaviour in question (verbal and physical violence, discrimination, intimidation, and sexual transgressive behaviours). The following analysis presents the general results, using one or other of these behaviours as an example. The analysis focuses firstly on the scale of the phenomenon, then on the journalistic profiles that are most exposed to it, the consequences of this violence for journalists and, finally, the way in which they react to it.

A Large-Scale Phenomenon

Our first objective was to measure the rate and frequency of diverse forms of violence. The results are impressive: more than half of the journalists surveyed had already

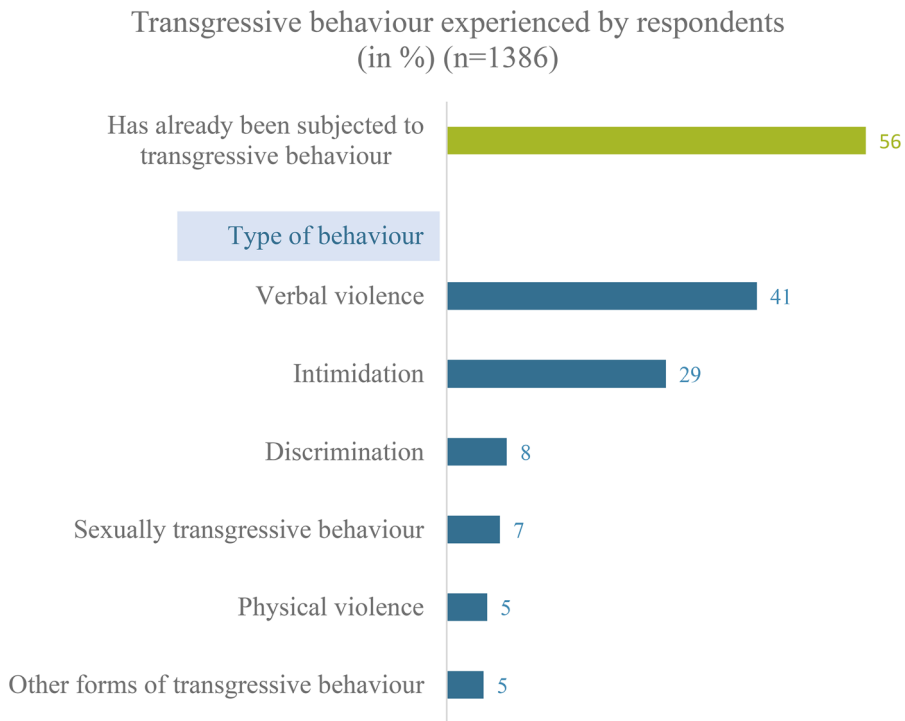


Figure 1. Transgressive behaviour experienced by respondents (in%; $n = 1386$).

been confronted with transgressive behaviour (56%) (see [Figure 1](#)). The most frequent form of violence experienced was verbal violence, which affected almost 41% of respondents. Various forms of intimidation (such as legal threats, threats to sources, etc.) were also experienced by almost a third of our panel (29%). In addition, 8% of respondents (103 people) indicated that they had experienced some form of discrimination. Furthermore, 7% of the respondents had been subjected to sexually transgressive behaviour, 5% to physical violence and 5% said they had been confronted with other forms of transgressive behaviour, such as attempts at bribery, managerial pressure, abusive termination of collaboration, or moral harassment from superiors, colleagues or sources.

Although all types of violence are experienced both within and outside the newsroom, [Table 1](#) shows that physical and verbal violence and intimidation mainly occur outside the newsroom. Typically, these forms of violence occur when journalists are interacting with sources or the public, and such violence is often related to the work carried out by these journalists. Journalists are most vulnerable to physical violence and intimidation during fieldwork (respectively 98% and 67% of the respondents who encountered these types of violence did so during fieldwork), whereas they are most often confronted with verbal violence online (69%). Online spaces are therefore presented as the main areas of verbal violence for journalists (see [Table 1](#)). Although research has mainly focused on public violence in online spaces, it is important to keep in mind that journalists can also be exposed to workplace violence online (e.g., in work-related WhatsApp groups, email, etc.).

Table 1. Places where different forms of violence occur (in %; respondents could indicate more than one answer.).

Forms of violence	In the newsroom	During fieldwork	Online
Verbal violence (<i>n</i> = 573)	18 %	56%	69 %
Intimidation (<i>n</i> = 404)	20 %	67 %	49 %
Discrimination (<i>n</i> = 111)	78 %	45%	27 %
Sexually transgressive behaviour (<i>n</i> = 99)	68 %	51%	21%
Physical violence (<i>n</i> = 75)	5%	98 %	–
Other violence (<i>n</i> = 68)	–	–	–

In contrast, acts of discrimination and sexual harassment were most often experienced within the workplace (respectively 78% and 68%), even though about half of respondents who have been victim to these forms of violence also met perpetrators during fieldwork. This confirms that the violence faced by journalists is not just a matter of the public and the *brutalisation* of the public arena; it also emanates from the newsroom and media organisations. Journalists experience both public and organisational violence.

Who Are the Journalists Affected by Violence?

The percentage of journalists who have experienced violence is very high for both men and women. However, women are proportionately more likely to be subjected to transgressive behaviour. 64% of female respondents said that they had encountered at least one form of transgressive behaviour in the course of their work, compared with half of the male respondents (51%). More specifically, almost one in five women (19%) had already been confronted with sexually transgressive behaviour, compared with only 1% of men; almost three times as many women (15%) as men (4%) had already been victims of discrimination.

On the other hand, a higher proportion of men (7%) than women (3%) had experienced physical violence. There was no significant difference between men and women in terms of having experienced verbal violence or intimidation (see [Figure 2](#)).

Age is a second factor that differentiates exposure to violence. We might have expected more experienced journalists to report having been exposed to transgressive behaviour because of the length of their career. On the contrary, we find that the percentage of respondents who say they have already been exposed to such behaviour decreases with age: 61% of respondents under 35 say they have already been exposed to violence, compared with less than half of the oldest journalists (48% of those over 55).

The question is whether this indicates a general increase in aggressive behaviour in recent years or a lower tolerance towards transgressive behaviour among young journalists who have grown up in a time when #MeToo and Black Lives Matter movements created more awareness about the issues of gender or racial violence and other types of toxic behaviour. This could also be linked to a more prominent presence of young journalists on social media and therefore greater exposure to online violence. Our data do not allow us to prove this explanation, but they do indicate that among our respondents who have been victims of verbal violence, younger respondents are more to have been confronted with online verbal violence: this is the case for 75% of under-35s and 74% of 35–44-year-olds, compared with 64% of 45–54-year-olds and 61% of respondents aged 55 or over. In addition, Miller (2023) points to the fact that

Transgressive behaviour experienced by respondents, by gender (in %) (n=1386)

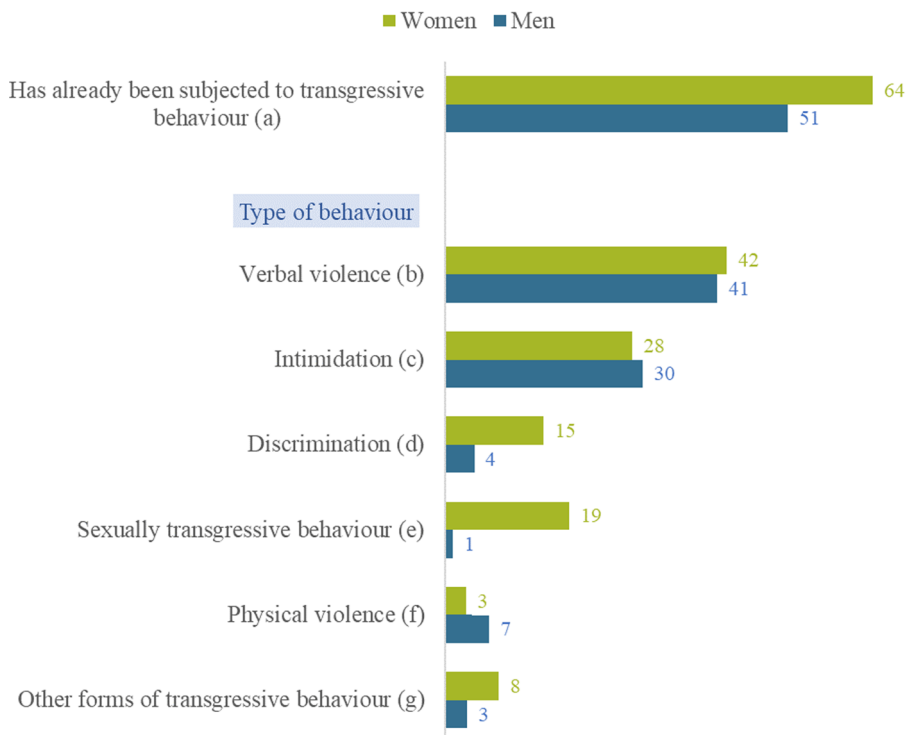


Figure 2. Transgressive behaviour experienced by respondents, according to the gender (in%; $n=1386$). (a): $\chi^2(1, n = 1386)=19.9, p = 0.000$; (b): $\chi^2(1, n = 1386) = 0.228, p = 0.633$; (c): $\chi^2(1, n = 1386) = 0.338, p = 0.520$; (d): $\chi^2(1, n = 1386)=46.1, p = 0.000$; (e): $\chi^2(1, n = 1386) = 139.4, p = 0.000$; (f): $\chi^2(1, n = 1386) = 6.41, p = 0.008$; (g): $\chi^2(1, n = 1386) = 13.9, p = 0.000$.

younger journalists are often in more vulnerable employment positions and more often work alone, making them easy targets for different types of violence. Disparities by age may also be linked to a combination of all these factors.

In addition to the factors of gender and age, our analysis also aimed to determine whether professional status represented a differentiating factor in terms of exposure to transgressive behaviours. This was not the case: there was no statistically significant difference between staff reporters and freelancers.

Visible Psychological and Professional Consequences

The survey also aimed to find out, for each type of aggressive behaviour, how often it occurs, what the consequences are for the journalists affected, on their well-being and their relationship with their work, and how journalists react to it. It should be borne in mind that the answer “no consequences” was not given; but this response was mentioned by journalists in the open comments. The following graph details, for example, the consequences experienced after verbal abuse, which is one of the main transgressive behaviours experienced by journalists (see [Figure 3](#)). The consequences are far-reaching.

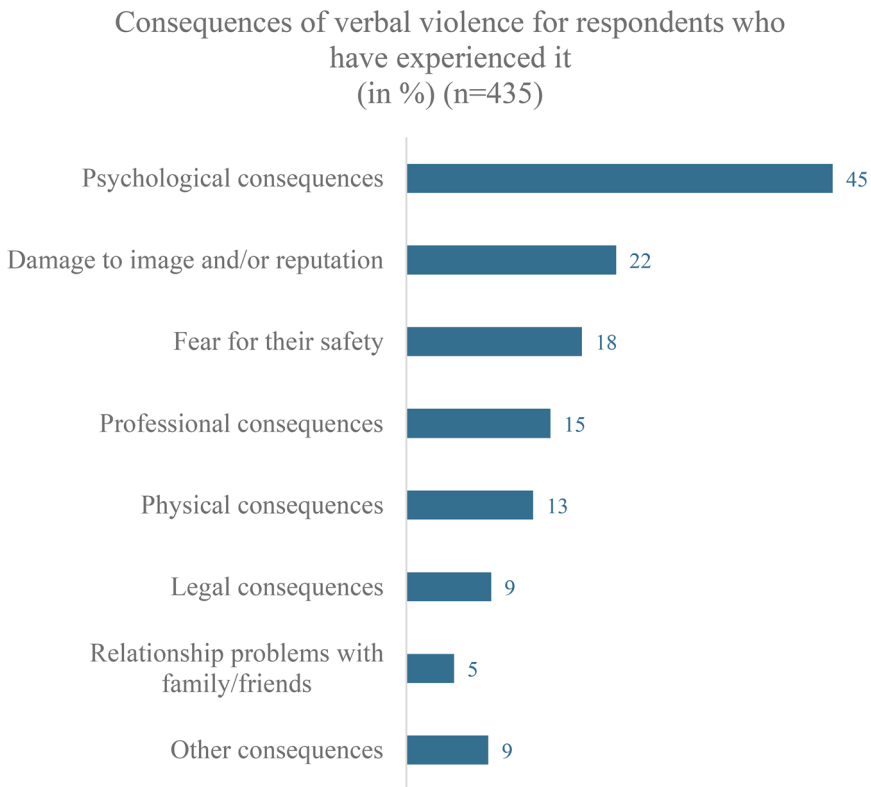


Figure 3. Consequences of verbal violence for respondents who have experienced it (in%; $n=435$).

Forty-five percent of respondents who had been verbally abused reported psychological consequences, such as anxiety, stress or unhappiness. One in five (22%) said that the violence had damaged their image or reputation; one in five (18%) said that they had feared for their personal safety. One respondent in six (15%) said that the violence had had professional consequences (change of specialisation or section, self-censorship, desire to leave journalism, etc.).

Acts of discrimination also have multiple consequences for individuals. In our survey, 103 people responded that they had experienced some form of discrimination. Gender, age and origin are clearly the three major factors in discrimination in journalism. Of these 103 people, 58% had experienced discrimination because of their gender, 37% because of their age, 23% because of their origin, 5% because of their religion, 3% because of their sexual orientation and 2% because of their disability. The consequences of these acts were primarily psychological (stress, anxiety, etc.) for 68% of those affected, but they were also very largely professional. Fifty-four percent of these people felt that it had had or may have had an impact on their change of specialisation or section, on their career or on their desire to leave journalism.

The second set of consequences includes damage to the image and reputation of the person being discriminated against (18%) and physical consequences, such as sleeping disorders, eating disorders, etc. (15%). The third set of consequences concerns

problems with family and friends (6%) or legal consequences (5%). A small percentage also expressed fears for their job security (3%). The comments left (10) emphasise the demotivating effect that such discrimination has. “De-motivation”, “frustration”, “disappointment”, “loss of self-confidence”, all of this means that “simply, you give up”. Violence clearly has an impact on the way people relate to their work.

And in the Face of Violence? Silence

In addition, for all forms of transgressive behaviour, we asked journalists how they reacted (see Table 2). Did they report the incidents to their employer or to a professional association? Did they lodge a complaint with the police? Did they respond directly to the perpetrators of the violence? Despite the serious personal and professional consequences, many journalists said that they did nothing, they did not react, they did not report the violence. They sometimes even said that they avoided the places of the violence and certain interactions, or that they no longer published on certain topics. We consider that not reacting to violence, not reporting it and avoiding places and topics that expose journalists to violence more frequently are forms of silence. And, according to our survey, silence is the most common response to violence.

For example, 99 journalists testified to having been exposed to a sexual transgressive behaviour (as mentioned above, 19% of the women in our sample had already experienced this type of behaviour, compared with 1% of the men). Three out of four (76%) of those who had experienced sexually transgressive behaviour deliberately chose to ignore it and did nothing about it. Only a quarter told their employer (25%) or approached the perpetrator directly (25%). Nine percent of them have since avoided the scene of the attack, and very few have notified the police (3%) or the AJP (2%). Five percent sought psychological help.

Not reacting to violence, or choosing to ignore it, is also the most frequent response to acts of discrimination or verbal violence (77% of respondents having suffered discrimination and 63% of respondents having suffered verbal abuse indicated this response). It also concerns 50% of those who were intimidated and 47% of the journalists who had experienced physical violence.

Table 2. Distribution of respondents who had experienced verbal violence according to their answer “how did you deal with this verbal violence?” (in %; respondents could indicate more than one answer).

How did you deal with this verbal violence?	% within respondents who had experienced verbal violence (n=573)
I did nothing or deliberately chose to ignore them.	63%
By reporting to my employer.	35%
By directly contacting the perpetrator.	34%
By avoiding places of verbal violence.	7%
By denouncing the perpetrator to the online platform manager.	10%
By reporting it to the police.	6%
By reporting it to the professional association.	6%
I no longer publish on certain subjects.	6%
By seeking psychological help service.	2 %

Discussion and Conclusion

The aim of our study was to document the experiences of Belgian journalists with violence, based on a survey with 1,396 participants in 2023. Our findings show, first, that violence is a significant phenomenon in Belgian journalism: more than half of the journalists surveyed (56%) had already been confronted with transgressive behaviour, mostly verbal violence and intimidation, but also physical violence, discrimination and sexually transgressive behaviour. However, not all journalists are equally affected by violence.

Nevertheless, our study shows, surprisingly, that a democratic country like Belgium is also confronted with problems concerning the safety of journalists. This can have consequences on journalists and the way they see their profession, and finally on media coverage and press freedom. Belgium has a relatively undiversified professional group in terms of gender (only a third of journalists are women) and minorities. This context of violence could therefore exacerbate their difficulties. As international studies also show (Löfgren Nilsson and Örnebring 2016; Luqiu 2022; Waisbord 2020), violence in Belgium is diverse and, even if it is widespread, affects mainly women. Our results show that age is also a factor in journalists' experiences. Further (qualitative) research is needed to study these age-related differences in experiences of violence in more detail. Since only a few respondents in our sample self-identify as belonging to an ethnic minority, we did not, for the purposes of this research, investigate the role played by this factor in exposure to violence. However, our results show that 23% of journalists who had experienced discrimination were convinced that it was due to their origin. A recent report about the Dutch public broadcaster also shows that many ethnic minority journalists felt discriminated against⁵. Whilst research often focuses on the representation of ethnic minorities in news reporting, we definitely need more quantitative and qualitative research (e.g., in-depth interviews) on the lived experiences of minority journalists in Belgian and international newsrooms.

Second, our research demonstrates the importance of using a 360° approach when studying violence in the journalistic profession. Indeed, our results show that the field, the web and the newsroom are all likely to be places where journalists experience violence. Intimidation, verbal or physical violence are mainly perpetrated outside media companies, i.e., on the field or online. This has been documented by previous research on public violence (see Waisbord 2020), although some of the online verbal violence reported in our study might also be organisational violence. In contrast, discrimination and sexually transgressive behaviour are mainly produced in the newsroom, by colleagues, managers or others, although journalists are also vulnerable to this type of violence during fieldwork or online.

This dispersal of acts of both public and organisational violence across a variety of spaces makes the issue of violence, and hence the safety of journalists, more complex. Although current research tends to focus on the *brutalisation* of the public arena, we also need to investigate the violence that emanates from the newsroom and media organisations. All types of violence have major psychological consequences for many journalists. They suffer from stress, anxiety, unhappiness or worse. Importantly, our study confirms that violence does not only have personal but also indirect

professional consequences (Brambila and Hughes 2019; Idås, Backholm, and Korhonen 2019; Miller 2023). Some respondents take actions, such as changing the topics they write about or even self-censorship, with potentially far-reaching implications that may damage democratic public debate.

Third, this research points to two concomitant phenomena: many journalists (particularly the younger generation) report violence in our survey; and, at the same time, the majority of the respondents report doing nothing, saying nothing, not alerting their superiors, colleagues, or others. Some of them choose avoidance (of places or topics that expose them to violence). These results suggest that violence leads to forms of silence: doing nothing, or avoiding situations, does not make them public and does not handle them. This silence has already been observed repeatedly in international research (Brambila and Hughes 2019; Douglas 2022; Idås, Backholm, and Korhonen 2019), and also in Belgium in a survey on media management of cyber-harassment of their employees (Malcorps, Libert and Le Cam 2022a).

The harshness of the profession, often cited by journalists, is an important factor in explaining the weight of silence (Feinstein, Owen, and Blair 2002). The magnitude of silence reveals the extent to which the personal and/or collective management of public or organisational violence remains an issue for the journalistic world, in Belgium as well as internationally (Scarduzio, Sheff, and Smith 2018). This silence may be motivated by a desire to maintain one's image, fear of being seen by others, or denial of the consequences, but it can also reveal a form of resignation. In this sense, some journalists may not react to the violence they encounter because they are resigned to it – potentially due to the frequency of such acts, their *trivialisation* within the profession, or the feeling of a lack of support, while others, currently the youngest journalists according to our data, denounce them.

The mythical representation of the harshness of the profession, of the fact that journalists are exposed publicly and must resist “criticism”, still seems to have a strong hold in the professional ideology. But this representation also seems to have an impact on the way journalists live in the newsroom. Violent acts and behaviour can be observed, certain norms and cultures of reference in the media or the profession encourage or legitimise these acts, and the impact on journalists and the editorial staff is rarely measured by researchers (unions and professional associations do so sporadically). Like much other research, this study objectifies journalists' experiences of violence and opens up new avenues for our research. So, while changes in work and in the relationship to work are often seen as contributing to the development of violence, our research leads us to believe that the relationship between violence and journalism goes beyond the experience of individuals (without minimising it, of course). Our research has led us to identify four dimensions covering the relationship between violence and journalism. For some dimensions, our research offers results, for others, it opens up avenues for future research: (a) the experience of, (b) the production of, (c) resignation to and (d) resistance to violence in journalism.

This study has shown how journalists experience violence (a). Acts of violence can be recorded. They take place in public, in organisations and in the day-to-day work of journalists. They affect particular profiles of journalists (women, minority groups, young people), but also journalists in general. They have consequences for press freedom and freedom of expression, for the public image of journalism and for the

health, safety and well-being of journalists at work. In these experiences of violence, journalists may be victims or witnesses.

Our results also show (b) that the world of journalism is itself a producer of violence. Newsrooms are places where violent relationships are present. Journalists, as colleagues or line managers, can produce or reproduce violence. They are the actors of transgressive acts and behaviour (verbal or physical). But this production of violence also needs to be made more complex from an analytical point of view. The hypothesis of the production of violence (symbolic or otherwise) towards audiences and sources must also be posed (even if it does not appear in the questionnaire data). The daily work of the journalist, the practices of interviewing, reporting or investigating, the work of quoting sources, can produce violence for audiences. They may feel betrayed, unrepresented or misrepresented, etc. and thus feel a form of violence towards themselves. Violence is therefore both experienced and produced. It is this double movement that also needs to be analysed.

Our research also allows us to think about resignation to violence (c). The data show that journalists seem to live with certain acts of violence. For some, they feel that there have been no consequences. For others, they keep quiet and do not inform their colleagues, management or professional organisations. The rhetoric that justifies these attitudes seems to be based on a representation of the harshness of the job. But further research is needed to understand these forms of resignation, or lack of reaction, to violence, as well as the silence of those who witness it or manage the media. To what extent is silence an acceptance? A strategy for getting round it? And does it represent a generational divide?

And finally, the results also show forms of resistance (d). In our survey, young journalists were more likely than their older colleagues to report having been confronted with transgressive behaviour. This could be a sign of greater sensitivity or resistance to acts of violence. The survey evidence shows that both individual and collective forms of resistance may be at work. The reactions of individuals, the internal policies of the media and the actions of professional associations all constitute forms of resistance: denunciations, safety training, even self-defence, the creation of safe spaces, etc.

We believe that these four dimensions make it possible not only to map the forms of violence and identify the victims and their reactions, but also to understand the causes and implications of this violence. The idea is also not to isolate the acts, but to understand them as being one of the manifestations of phenomena that may be linked to the public representation of journalism, the economic conditions of journalistic work, the structural discrimination experienced by certain persons, the deterioration in organisational working conditions, and so on. This perspective should enable us in our future research to gain a better understanding of what is at stake in violence against, and between, journalists.

Notes

1. Reporters Without Borders (2024). Press Freedom Index 2024. <https://rsf.org/en/index>.
2. Touriel, A. (4 February 2022). "Je reçois des messages de haine tous les jours", quand le travail des journalistes est entravé par la peur". RTBF. <https://www.rtb.be/article/je-recois-des-messages-de-haine-tous-les-jours-quand-le-travail-des-journalistes-est-entrave-par-la-peur-10928299>.

3. Journalists whose main activity is journalistic production, and who have been active for two years, can apply to be recognised as a “professional journalist” or “journalist from the specialist periodical press”. These titles, protected by law (1963 and 1965), require a certain number of conditions to be met, the ability to prove that most of one’s salary comes from journalistic activities. The granting of the press card is decided by approval committees and the document is then issued by the Federal Public Service of the Interior (Ministry). The status of trainee journalist was created by the professional associations, AJP and VVJ, to enable journalists with less than two years’ experience in journalism to benefit from the associations’ services.
4. These three statutes reflect the organisation of the Belgian journalists’ group.
5. Bremmer, David and van Mersbergen, Chris. (2024, February 1). ‘Wie zou je liever pijpen, poesje?’: Dit zijn de 14 vernietigende conclusies uit het rapport over de Nederlandse Omroep. *Humo*.

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This project respects the ethical expectations of our three universities.

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