

## Is the pen mightier than the sword? A qualitative survey of German and American journalists on the professional and personal effects of violence

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# Imprint

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Disrupt Adapt: New Ways to Deal with Current Challenges in Media and Communication

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# Is the Pen Mightier Than the Sword?

## A Qualitative Survey of German and American Journalists on the Professional and Personal Effects of Violence

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Victoria Niemsch

### Abstract

In recent years, reported violence, both physical and psychological, against journalists in Germany and the United States has increased threateningly. This development needs to be reviewed in more detail, since freedom of speech and freedom of the press in journalism particularly serve the public interest by fulfilling fundamental democratic tasks. The so-called chilling effect describes how pressure and threats of violence can influence journalists' work and cause changes in content and style of reporting. This development is especially problematic, as it interferes with the most basic societal functions of journalism. To explore these developments, a qualitative study of the situation in Germany and the United States was conducted to determine whether editorial work in news reporting is already influenced by violence against journalists. Data for this study was collected in guided qualitative interviews with 22 journalists from Germany and the United States. The study reveals that the most common consequence of increasing violence is the implementation of a wide range of security measures by journalists and news organizations. Nevertheless, effects on reporting are mostly denied. The research unfolds that there is a wide range of individual experiences with violence and consequences for journalistic work. This demonstrates the relevance of further research in this area in order not to endanger the press and freedom of expression in democracies.

### Keywords

Violence Against Journalists, News Reporting, Editorial Work, Freedom of the Press

## Introduction

Violence against journalists is a phenomenon that increasingly affects countries of the global north, as the “sharp decline in the safety of journalists” in Western Europe and North America indicates (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2018, p. 35). The United States is a particularly drastic example of this: The Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press (RCFP, 2021, p. 8) recorded three times as many attacks on journalists here in 2020 as in the previous three years combined. How this surge of violence affects the political stability of these democratic states can be seen in Germany, where according to Reporters Without Borders (2021a) “dozens of journalists were attacked by supporters of extremist and conspiracy theory believers during protests against pandemic restrictions”. Because of this development, the organization downgraded the country's rating in the World Press Freedom Index from “good” to “satisfactory” (Reporters Without Borders, 2021a; Reporters Without Borders, 2021b).

This illustrates the high political relevance of the scientific examination of the problem. As violence against journalists is associated with negative effects on press freedom, the consequences of the attacks pose a potential threat for democracy. To allow an appropriate response by democratic institutions from media, politics, and civil society, a deeper understanding of the phenomenon is necessary. However, while the prevalence of violence is relatively well recorded thanks to the monitoring of NGOs (European Center for Press and Media Freedom [ECPMF], 2021; Reporters Without Borders, 2021a; RCFP, 2021), there is little research on the impact of attacks against the press in Western democracies. This study aims to contribute to this field of research by comparing effects in Germany and the USA. These states make for compelling case studies, as they are Western countries that are heavily affected by the rise of attacks against the press and have strong democratic traditions, yet very different media systems. We consequently formulate the following main research question:

*To what extent does violence against journalists influence editorial work in news reporting in Germany and the United States?*

In order to concretize this research interest, central theoretical concepts like the chilling effect as well as the current state of research on violence against journalists are analyzed. On this basis, three subordinate research questions

are developed, drawing on models of the journalistic process, journalists' professional understanding, and frameworks of different media systems. To investigate these research questions, 22 guided qualitative interviews with journalists from Germany and the U.S. were conducted.

## Literature Review

In 2021, after his appearance as a guest in a TV show, the crime reporter Peter R. de Vries was gunned down in the center of Amsterdam and died a few days later (Erdbrink & Moses, 2021). Six years earlier in 2015, twelve people were killed in the attack on the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* including eight cartoonists and authors (Penketh, 2015). Drastic attacks like these have not been commonplace in the Western world. Nevertheless, they are an extreme example of the more general problem of increasing violence against journalists. This will be presented in the following chapter by analyzing the empirical and theoretical state of research to subsequently develop further research questions.

## Theoretical Foundations of Violence against Journalists

In order to grasp the issue of violence against journalists, the following section will explain basic terms and theoretical concepts. This will examine why the protection of journalists is of utmost relevance.

As a complex system that is interconnected with many other areas of society, journalism can be defined in diverse ways (Vos, 2018, p. 2). Zelizer (2005) considers one of its core functions to be communicating complex events in an understandable way (p. 69). According to McNair (2005), journalism encompasses three functions (p. 28). First, it provides the necessary information to follow events in a social environment (McNair, 2005, p. 28). Second, it provides a source and aid for participation in public life and in political debate (McNair, 2005, p. 28). Third, journalism also takes on the role of an entertainment, enlightenment, and learning medium (McNair, 2005, p. 28). Objectivity and a claim to complete reporting are of particular importance in journalism: Journalists function above all “as recorders, observers, and scribes, reliably taking account of events as they unfold” (Zelizer, 2005, p. 69). While this is a global quality criterion, the “objectivity norm” is a salient feature of American journalism (Schudson, 2011, p. 163), according to which news reporting should be done without commenting or subjectively influencing it (Schudson, 2011, p. 150). European journalism did not develop this objectivity norm from the beginning and pursued it less intensively than its American counterpart later on (Schudson, 2011, p. 166). On the political

level, news media are also expected to perform democratic tasks, including informing citizens about political actors and their ideas, interpreting those ideas, scrutinizing the powerful, and encouraging citizens' political participation (De Vreese et al., 2016, p. 1). In order to ensure the professional communication process between journalists and their audience via mass media at any time, journalists and other media actors should not have to work under fear of interference or reprisals. However, although freedom of speech and freedom of the press are considered important human rights (Brunetti & Weder, 2003, p. 1801), targeted attacks on journalists and media workers occur time and time again.

For a more detailed examination of violence against journalists, it is first necessary to clarify which types of attacks the phenomenon encompasses. Violence is not only physical attacks – verbal threats also play a role. Violence occurs in many facets and is a universal and complex phenomenon (Miller, 2020, p. 5; Krug et al., 2002, p. 4). Therefore, it is first necessary to clarify which types of attacks violence encompasses. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines violence in its World Report on Violence and Health as:

The intentional use of physical force or power threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation. (Krug et al., 2002, p. 5)

This definition illustrates that violence includes not only the physical act carried out, but also the intended or threatened action. However, verbal threats, insults, and hateful words can also index or provoke violence, which causes concern even for advocates of absolute freedom of expression (Miller, 2020, p. 6; p. 85). Thus, violence includes physical, psychological, and emotional components (Bishop & Phillips, 2006, p. 377). Pressure or threats against journalists can have an impact on the working methods of journalists (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights [FRA], 2016, p. 2). If the selection of information to be conveyed and the way in which it is reported consciously undergoes an adjustment, this describes the “chilling effect” (FRA, 2016, p. 2). The underlying basis of the effect is fear of consequences, which prevents a person from engaging in an activity (Schauer, 1978, p. 689). In the U.S. American law, a chilling effect is “when a person, deterred by fear of some legal punishment or privacy harm, engages in self-censorship, that is, censors themselves and does not speak or engage in some activity being lawful or even desirable” (Penney, 2022, p. 1454).

However, this is problematic because any restriction on the individual journalist's freedom threatens the journalist's autonomy and safety (Hamada, 2021, p. 2).

## State of Research on Violence against Journalists

Acts of violence and intimidation against media professionals are on the rise worldwide (Geamănu, 2017, p. 123). While research mostly focuses on countries of the global south and war zones (Larsen et al., 2021), the trend is particularly strong in countries that were not previously considered crisis regions (UNESCO, 2019, p. 14). This holds true for Germany, where in 2020 the number of attacks was at the highest level since the beginning of records (ECPMF, 2021, p. 3; Reporters Without Borders, 2021a). In the same year, the U.S. also saw an all-time high of 438 recorded acts of violence and 139 arrests of journalists (RCFP, 2021, pp. 8–12). These numbers can be attributed primarily to the international trend of increasing violence during demonstrations (Smyth, 2020, p. 1). As these statistics do not include verbal or psychological violence, additional evidence can be drawn from surveys of journalists. Papendick et al. (2020) provide numbers in a survey of German journalists, where 16.2 % of respondents had experienced physical attacks, 59.9 % verbal attacks, and 15.8 % death threats in their professional lives (p. 3). It becomes clear that physical attacks make up only a fraction of the violence against journalists. Online harassment in particular has become a common problem in recent years (FRA, 2016, p. 2; Waisbord, 2020, p. 1030). Not all journalists are affected to the same extent, with members of ethnic or religious minorities being particularly at risk (FRA, 2016, p. 2). Furthermore, violence against journalists is also gender-specific: Male journalists are more often victims of physical violence, while female journalists experience more sexualized assaults (Clark & Grech, 2019, p. 55) and sexualized online harassment (FRA, 2016, p. 2; Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe [OSCE], 2015, p. 10). Along with racist and sexist motivations, populism is one of the most important drivers of violence against journalists, as it sees the media as part of a self-serving elite (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 81): “Journalists become targets and enemies” (Le Cam et al., 2021, p. 16). A prominent example of this is former U.S. president Donald Trump, who wrote 632 tweets critical of the media in 2020 alone, calling the image of a journalist injured by a rubber bullet a “beautiful sight” (RCFP, 2021, p. 7). Reporters Without Borders attributes the rise in violence to this rhetoric: “Fueled by years of Trump's demonization of the media, unprecedented violence breaks out against journalists” (Reporters Without Borders, 2020).



This hostility increasingly puts journalists under pressure, which stems from a high-risk perception: Many European journalists consider it likely that they will experience psychological (60 %) or physical violence in their work (41 %) (Clark & Grech, 2019, p. 52). This places a high emotional burden on media professionals, with 67 % of respondents reporting psychological consequences ranging from stress to post-traumatic stress disorder (Clark & Grech, 2019, pp. 39–40). At first glance, these mental health effects seem to have only a limited impact on the professional lives of journalists. For example, violent or traumatic experiences in the context of everyday work have little negative impact on professional commitment, job satisfaction, and morale (Beam & Spratt, 2009, p. 432). Brodeală et al. (2020) also find the journalists “have experienced targeted intimidation and harassment but still continue to carry out their watchdog function with determination” (p. 82). Based on these findings, journalists are said to have a special robustness and resilience (Beam & Spratt, 2009, p. 432). This is interpreted as the result of an idealistic understanding of their profession: “The journalists' resilience was powerfully motivated by a sense of responsibility” (Brodeală et al., 2020, p. 121). Remarkably, this does not align with findings from Clark and Grech's (2019) anonymized quantitative survey, where 31 % of respondents reported to tone down criticism due to attacks (p. 44). The apparent resilience of journalists might be a product of social desirability that could even be enhanced by the strong professional ethos of journalists: “Feelings of fear, although experienced, were often difficult to acknowledge. This may be interpreted as a form of identity construction that is an essential part of socialization into the journalistic profession” (Brodeală et al., 2020, p. 73). Journalists thus find it difficult to admit the consequences of experiences of violence, which would damage their idealistic self-image of free critical reporting.

### Research Questions

While the main research question already indicates the applied overarching framework of international journalism research, some violence- and profession-related sub-aspects shall be examined in more detail. These can be divided into three subordinate research questions.

Journalistic news selection is a central issue in communication research (Donsbach, 2004, p. 131). Traditionally, journalists have a gatekeeper function, making them central to the process of “selecting, writing, editing, positioning, scheduling, repeating, and otherwise massaging information to become news” (Shoemaker et al., 2009, p. 73). In addition, it is often decisive which journalistic product is targeted, since “different kinds of news stories

[...] have different expectations about the kinds of information each highlights, the style in which it is written, the position that it occupies in the newscast or newspaper” (Zelizer, 2005, p. 70).

Thus, many factors exist that are meant to ensure journalistic standards, which could be influenced by violence. This project explores the extent to which violence as an influencing factor on topic choice and task distribution could potentially overpower traditional professional structures or news values. Keeping in mind different stages of journalistic work, it is to be determined to what extent violence changes or even prevents those established processes. This is expressed in the first subordinate research question:

**RQ1:** *To what extent does the perceived increasing threat to journalists potentially change the selection of topics and areas of responsibility?*

The way journalists handle their professional duties and external influences is not only prescribed through organizational rules or codices, but also by their personal understanding of their occupational obligation. It is necessary to examine the professional understanding of journalists, which on the one hand can be derived from the given definitions of journalism and on the other comes from the journalists’ personal perspective. Correspondingly, Zelizer (2005) argues: “by extension, journalism as a frame of mind varies from individual to individual” (p. 66). It can be deduced that classical quality demands are by far not the only factors to be considered when it comes to determining journalistic action. Individual work ethic, as is reflected in the “on-call status” attributed to journalists, also strongly influences occupational decisions, suggesting that tasks should be pursued under all circumstances (Zelizer, 2005, p. 71). In a research context, the distinction between editors and reporters is especially important (Nerone & Barnhurst, 2003, pp. 441–444). This is due to different tasks and potentially varying personal priorities in their professional work. Other noteworthy demands put onto journalists are made by codes of ethics that emphasize journalism’s duty to contribute to democracy and the importance of free speech in both Germany and the U.S. (Deutscher Fachjournalisten Verband, n.d., p. 2; News Leaders Association, n.d.).

In the context of this research project, it is therefore relevant to find out what role social expectations, occupational demands, and the professional self-image play in the context of journalists’ experiences of violence. This is examined in the next subordinate research question:

**RQ2:** *To what extent does a conflict arise for journalists between their obligation to report and the perceived danger?*

National contexts are of great importance in the stated research context, on the one hand for the threat posed by violence, and on the other hand for the general professional framework. As has already become evident in the discussion of relevance, the increased potential for violence in both Germany and the United States cannot be ignored. Despite current efforts by the U.S. government to ensure press freedom and government accountability, there are many “chronic, underlying conditions” that limit journalistic work (Reporters Without Borders, 2021c). These include the decline of the local press as well as widespread distrust of media (Reporters Without Borders, 2021c). Contrastingly, Reporters Without Borders (2021a) rates the German constitutional framework in conjunction with an independent judiciary as a “favorable environment for journalists”, but also criticizes laws on access to information as weak and highlights the decline of media pluralism.

“The press always takes on the form and coloration of the social and political structures in which it operates” (Siebert et al., 1956, pp. 1–2). Therefore, it is crucial to consider how recorded and perceived press freedom violations, as well as political or economic alignment of media, influence violence perception in the profession. Varying patterns in reporting are often related to differences in the structure of media and political systems, as well as in the professional cultures of media types (Esser et al., 2016, p. 23). This raises the need for international comparative research because editorial orientations and processes may differ in addition to different external influences, including violence. According to Esser et al. (2016), it should be a research responsibility to identify such distinct national and organization-specific news cultures and to distinguish them from remaining elements of divergence (p. 23). The latter are attributed to changes over time and external influences (Esser et al., 2016, p. 23), which can potentially include violence. Differences in the context of this research are to be expected, since according to Hallin and Mancini’s (2012) construct of media systems, the U.S. belong to the economy-dominated liberal model while Germany is more socially and politically oriented (p. 11). It thus belongs to the democratic-corporatist model (Hallin & Mancini, 2012, p. 11).

All of this should be considered when putting the results gathered from examining the previous research questions in a binational comparison. In summary, the final subordinate research question is:

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**RQ3:** *To what extent are differences between the effects of perceived danger in German and U.S. newsrooms apparent?*

## **Methodology**

To investigate the research questions developed in the previous chapter, the qualitative guided interview was chosen as a method. Its semi-structured nature on the one hand allows the deductive implementation of the empirical and theoretical considerations. This is achieved by a questionnaire, which determines topic blocks and associated questions in line with the research questions and theoretical preliminary considerations. On the other hand, the method leaves room for an inductive, exploratory approach as it is characterized by open questions and a high degree of flexibility due to the possibility of spontaneous follow-up questions and a free order of questions. This is especially desirable as psychological consequences of violence are very complex and individual topics, for which insights beyond previously defined categories are to be expected.

The questionnaire consisted of 16 main questions, with additional sub-questions and optional follow-up questions. The eight main questions that concerned RQ1 focused on the topics of general editorial processes, the distribution of tasks and the impact of violence on journalistic topic selection. RQ2 was examined through seven main questions, which included journalists' understanding of their profession and their experiences with violence, as well as the personal consequences of violent acts suffered and the respondents' perception of risk. RQ3 was investigated by one question regarding the international comparison and by comparing the responses of US-American and German journalists. A total of 30 to 45 minutes was allotted for the duration of the interviews. Before the survey was conducted, the questionnaire was tested in a trial interview.

Since potential violence affects journalism as a whole, this study's basic population encompasses all active journalists in the U.S. and Germany. Furthermore, their occupational specialization is considered by focusing on those working in editorial positions and reporting. Editors are thus responsible for selecting topics and assigning tasks, while the journalists' main job is active reporting. Those occupations were selected to provide an overview of the current situation in as many different areas of diverse media reporting as possible and to avoid biased results. This is also ensured through including journalists who work in professional print, online, TV, and radio journalism, hence covering different types of media for journalism. The drawn sample consists of editorial authorities and reporters who work in press and

broadcast journalism, whereby equal representation of both countries was ensured during the sampling process. Both regional and national media were included. The interviewees were recruited in November and December 2021 via email, phone, and several social networks, namely LinkedIn, Twitter, and Instagram. Finally, all 22 interviews were conducted via Zoom in January 2022.

The final sample includes eleven U.S. and eleven German interviewees from various major media institutions. These are mainly print and online newsrooms, 13 out of 22 in total. Furthermore, six television and two radio newsrooms are included. While the distribution of newsroom types is very balanced in both countries' samples, the German sample furthermore includes a journalistic union. Regarding occupational distribution, six interviewees work as editors or union managers while 16 are reporters.

Qualitative content analysis was used to evaluate the data obtained. The combination of methods is suitable since qualitative content analysis is also characterized by an explorative character with simultaneous standardization. Central to the method is a category system that was created by deriving categories from the literature guided interview questions. Further, a coding definition was created for each of them. This was followed by a trial coding of the material, in which new findings were incorporated into the category system by adding several inductive categories that were not yet adequately represented.

## **Results**

As described above, the study is divided into three parts based on the research questions. Consequently, the results of the research results are also presented according to this order.

### **Changes Regarding Reported Topics and Areas of Responsibility**

Regarding the first subordinate research question, our data reveals that reporters covering events on the scene, especially demonstrations, are at particular risk of experiencing physical violence. According to the interviewees, freelancers are in an especially vulnerable situation. Respondents primarily pointed to the vulnerability of press photographers, video journalists, and freelance reporters. This is consistent with previous research which also suggests freelancers to be a particularly vulnerable group (Clark & Grech, 2019, p. 57). Some newsrooms increasingly rely on photo and video material from news agencies due to security concerns regarding their employees. In

addition, agency reports serve as the primary source and point of reference for reporting on controversial issues.

Most of the interviewees stated that security concerns have no influence on the selection of topics and the way of reporting. Nevertheless, it was questioned whether journalists would be aware of changes. Overall, there is a fundamental tendency to be more cautious when dealing with topics that have a lot of potential for conflict. The reason given for this is that journalists are afraid of violent backlash. This applies to the choice of a subject focus, the framing of conflicting issues and the use of opinion-based reporting. Almost all respondents agree that despite increasing dangers for journalists, reporting continues on all important topics.

Increasing violence against journalists leads to greater implementation of security measures. According to the interviewees, newsrooms are getting more cognizant of preparing their reporters. As a result, more time is being invested in the logistics surrounding the journalists' assignment, and the amount of work involved in security measures is increasing.

Those security measures can be divided into two types. Firstly, editorial buildings are being better secured through entry controls, surveillance cameras, bulletproof glass, and door security systems. Secondly, journalists are physically protected. While reporting from the scene, reporters are equipped with safety vests, helmets, pepper spray and bodyguards. In the case of potentially dangerous topics, extensive research on people and places is often conducted in advance. Additionally, many journalists remove their private address from the civil register. Communication about violence is seen as more and more significant by media companies. Most journalists believe that the issue of violence is taken seriously by their employers. Many emphasized the trusting relationship with the editors-in-chief or department heads, who often serve as the first point of contact for those affected. Communication about threats to journalists takes place both internally between journalists and externally with security consultants and psychologists. However, there are significant differences between editorial offices. While some media houses talk openly about the threats for journalists, in others the topic is not discussed at all.

Journalists' assignment to potentially dangerous topics depends primarily on their areas of responsibility. These are usually defined thematically or locally. However, most respondents emphasized that people who do not want to report on a certain topic out of fear are not forced to do so. However, some journalists spoke of an underlying pressure in the professional environment, saying that it is not common in journalism to turn down an assignment even if a journalist fears for his or her safety. The willingness to engage

in high-risk missions varies widely among journalists. While some question their reporting obligations due to fear, others speak of a resistance effect that arises after violent acts and motivates them to report critically about the people in question. One respondent stated that she is even more encouraged by violent assaults because she does not want to be treated that way. Overall, the interviewed journalists reported professional changes due to fear of violence primarily in the form of increasing awareness of the dangers in their workplace.

### **Conflict Between Professional Obligation and Self-Protection**

According to the interviewees, journalists see their social task primarily in informing the population about socially relevant topics and ensuring a basic supply of information that is accessible to all people. They want to provide social orientation and help the population to form their own knowledge and opinions on issues. The intention is to help society make its own decisions – in elections, for example. Journalists consider their profession to be a very important task for the protection of democracy. However, most of them assess the current social mood toward journalists as relatively bad. Some respondents assume that this is due to a lack of understanding of the tasks and working methods of journalists among the population. Nevertheless, most journalists do not feel that the performance of their tasks has been impaired by the negative social mood. Journalists consider themselves obligated to neutral reporting to society and their professional ethics and aim to achieve this through balanced reporting of differing opinions.

In terms of experiences of violence, almost all journalists have experienced some form of violence in the course of their work. The respondents consider verbal violence to be an almost daily phenomenon in their jobs, but even more common than verbal assaults is online harassment. This is regarded as the most common form of violence against journalists and includes different aspects, from insults and threats of violence to death threats, as well as hacker attacks and shitstorms. Just like the other forms of violence, physical violence also manifests itself in different ways. Even if not all journalists have experienced physical violence themselves, the victims report attacks that were very severe and traumatic. These attacks range from being jostled and kicked to even being beaten up. In regard to sexual violence, the journalists did not mention any physical assaults. However, some female interviewees mentioned verbal attacks in the form of insulting, sexualized comments and even rape threats.

The personal consequences of violent attacks and threats differ for each journalist. Some experience no consequences, while others report them having a large impact on their lives. Overall, the impact on everyday working life was estimated to be lower than on their private life. Very few respondents reported changing the way they work, but many expressed concerns about their private safety and that of their family. Consequently, many respondents have become more cautious and are more aware of the risks involved in online communication. For instance, some journalists think twice before posting content on social media to avoid conflict. In a few exceptions journalists reported that they developed a resistance to the threat. As a result, they saw the attacks as a confirmation of the great importance of their work. When asked if they would consider changing careers due to the increased threat most interviewees answered in the negative.

Regarding the perceived risk, most interviewees would classify themselves as moderately endangered in their job. Yet, the estimated occupational risk differs greatly. Journalists, who primarily work in an editorial office, rate their occupational risk as rather low, while field reporters see themselves as more at risk. One group standing out in their assessment are investigative journalists. They see themselves and their colleagues as particularly endangered to experience violence. Another risk factor mentioned is how obviously a person can be identified as a journalist – for example, cues such as a microphone or camera equipment increase the risk for journalists in public. As particularly vulnerable groups, women were mentioned, as well as journalists with an immigrant background and those who do not look Caucasian. In the U.S., African American men are considered to be especially at risk.

As the most dangerous groups for journalists the interviewees named above all political extremist groups, especially the radical right. Political motives were mentioned as a very frequent cause for violence against journalists. Also, racism and sexism, conspiracy theories and lies, prejudice, economic interests, and hatred were listed as reasons. Further, the police were named as an aggressor. Their role is assessed very differently, as there are strong differences in journalists' personal experiences with them. On the one hand, the police protect journalists, on the other hand, police violence against journalists was reported by interviewees in both countries – mostly in the context of demonstrations.

Most interview partners named a change in their risk perception as the most noticeable consequence of the rising threat. This does not mean that they are constantly afraid at work, but that they are generally more aware of the potential danger to journalists and security measures are taken consequently.



## Differences Between Germany and the U.S.

The research findings reveal both differences and similarities regarding the impact of rising violence against journalists in Germany and the United States. Journalists from both countries said that the rise of social networks is having a great effect on violence against journalists. One respondent even stated that the digital revolution has changed everything. The interview partners see a tendency toward increasing anonymity and a communication characterized by hate. Some mentioned the formation of so-called echo chambers and filter bubbles as problematic developments.

Different social and political events and developments that have influenced the mood toward journalism were named. In Germany, these include demonstrations against the COVID-19 protection measures, the G20 summit in Hamburg, demonstrations on May Day, the increasing distrust of the press, as well as the emergence of the German term “Lügenpresse”, which can be translated into “lying press”. Furthermore, the founding of the Islamophobic, racist and far-right organization Pegida and the strengthening of the far-right political party AfD, which is highly critical of much of the German press, have worsened the general attitude towards journalists in German society. U.S. journalists primarily mentioned the election and presidency of Donald Trump and his rhetoric as key factors that have worsened social sentiment toward journalism. They see this as a major turning point for the way people view the media, especially because former president Trump himself has repeatedly attacked the press directly. The storming of the U.S. capitol on January 6, 2021, marked the peak of this negative trend. In general, the reputation of journalism within U.S. society has worsened, leading to a declining understanding of the function of journalism. Some interviewees see the beginning of this development within the financial crisis of 2008/2009.

In terms of the topics associated with attacks, German respondents named COVID-19 protection measures, the so-called refugee crisis, terror from the right-wing and Islamist milieu as well as feminist and critical or investigative reporting in general. In the U.S., primarily political topics – such as the policies of former U.S. President Donald Trump and anti-racist movements such as the Black Lives Matter protests – were named as leading to violence against journalists. Our results are thereby in line with statistics from both countries: While 71 % of attacks in Germany occurred at demonstrations against Corona protections (ECPMF, 2021, p. 4), the U.S. saw most attacks in context with Black Lives Matter protests. 82 % of incidents were recorded here and were mostly classified as police violence (RCFP, 2021, p. 4). This aligns with the fact that the respondents' opinions on the role of the police

in endangering journalists differed in both the U.S. and Germany. While police officers in both countries were seen as having a certain protective function for media professionals, cases of police violence against journalists were also mentioned by interviewees in both nations. However, according to the interviewees, the extent of this police violence seems to be greater in the U.S. than in Germany.

Considering how the situation has changed over time, some German journalists see a worsening of the current situation compared to the past, while others see no major changes or even an improvement of the situation. Their U.S. colleagues, on the other hand, almost universally assessed the situation today as worse than in the past. Still, regarding the assessment of their personal occupational risk, U.S. journalists often downplay or relativize the occupational hazards, as they do not consider themselves to be more at risk compared to other groups of people and professions.

The U.S. journalists didn't express the desire for more government measures to protect journalists. They prefer a strict separation of government and journalism. On the other hand, German interviewees typically complained about the lack of state support. Overall, the U.S. interviewees stated that they had hardly any information about the threat situation for journalists in Germany, while German journalists considered themselves to be in a safer position than journalists in the USA. The respondents noted that the kind of unleashed violence that occurred in Trump's America against journalists does not occur in Germany. One of the reasons given for this was the support within German politics. Accordingly, there is a political consensus in Germany about the great relevance of journalism. Thus, Merkel, for example, had repeatedly emphasized that she considered it important for critical reporting taking place.

## **Discussion**

In order to answer the main research question of this study – to what extent violence against journalists influences editorial work in news reporting in Germany and the United States – it is necessary to examine the findings regarding the three subordinate research questions first. Additionally, the results from the interviewees' answers lead to the formulation of three hypotheses which will be described hereafter.

### **Changes Regarding Reported Topics and Areas of Responsibility**

The first subordinate research question examined to what extent the selection of topics and areas of responsibility potentially change due to the

perceived increasing threat to journalists. It is noticeable that even though violence plays a growing role in the daily lives of journalists, responses suggest that the selection of topics hardly seems to be affected by actual or perceived violence. Most interviewees stated that they experience violence in some form or have experienced it at some point as a result of their work. Many even mention it as a common or daily occurrence which they have gotten used to by now. Even in light of these developments, the interviewees mostly stated that events perceived as relevant continue to be reported on regardless of the threat of violence and that changes in reporting occur primarily in the form of a different topical focus or less emphasis on opinionated reporting. This could be due to the journalists' understanding of their profession and their strong work ethics, which they frequently mentioned during the interviews. Their self-proclaimed obligation to report on relevant topics could be a deciding factor in their choice to fulfill their work duties – even if this endangers them in some way. It is also conceivable that their strong sense of work ethic leads them to not being willing to admit – to themselves or others – if their work is influenced by the growing threat. One U.S. reporter even explicitly mentioned the perceived internal pressure in journalism to fulfill reporting duties. The answers given by the interviewees suggest that there are little to no changes regarding the selection of topics and areas of responsibility.

Nevertheless, the responses clearly show that journalists are increasingly confronted with various forms of violence during and as a result of their work. Based on the interviewees' statements regarding the frequency of violence in their daily lives and the intensity of attacks the following first hypothesis can be formed:

**H1:** *In Germany and the USA, violence is increasingly part of journalists' everyday work.*

As a result of the increasing amount of violence, some clear changes to the working methods and organizational structure in the editorial offices can be observed. In the workplaces of most respondents, security measures have been increasingly implemented in recent years. The focus is on measures against digital hate, providing safety equipment and training for the physical protection of journalists on field assignments, as well as increased security in the editorial buildings. Apart from these measures, many interviewees stated that violence is talked about in their working environment – both with colleagues and supervisors – and that they feel their employers are taking the problem seriously. The implementation of these far-reaching security

measures and the increasing communication about the topic result in the second hypothesis:

**H2:** *A growing awareness of the vulnerability of journalists is leading to increased security measures in everyday editorial work.*

Apart from the implementation of security measures and a growing awareness of the phenomenon, the interviewees' answers suggest that the consequences of violence that journalists experience themselves or observe among colleagues primarily affect their private lives. While they are less affected professionally, many reported effects on their psyche in the form of changed behavior and a generally greater awareness of risks in everyday life.

### **Conflict Between Professional Obligation and Self-Protection**

The results of the second subordinate research question – to what extent a conflict arises for journalists between their obligation to report and the perceived danger – suggest a rather minor conflict. Once again, the journalists indicated a very strong professional ethos and a clear understanding of the role of their profession and, as a result, fulfill their obligation to inform. They take this responsibility seriously and carry out the duties set out in their understanding of their profession, despite the risks involved. Topics are dealt with, even in the face of higher associated risk, and precautionary measures are taken rather than refraining from reporting.

Journalists who feel unsafe or uncomfortable in their jobs change the scope and focus of their reporting in some cases, but do not completely refrain from informing society.

A surprising finding here is the apparent contradiction between the additional security measures that were implemented in most cases, and the simultaneous lack of a chilling effect. Instead of feeling intimidated by the rising threat to their safety and adjusting their reporting accordingly, many interview partners remarked continuing with their reporting unperturbed and some even mentioned that they started developing an attitude of resistance. This again can be explained, at least to some extent, by the fact that the journalists interviewed expressed a strong professional ethos which in turn could lead to a high level of resilience. The conviction of the importance of their task would thus help the journalists to withstand the increasing level of stress and to meet their obligation to inform. They therefore fulfill these professional obligations despite the threat of violence. Consequently, the following third hypothesis emerges:

**H3:** *Journalists continue to fulfill their reporting duties to the best of their ability despite increasing threats.*

## Differences Between Germany and the U.S.

In the context of the third subordinate research question – to what extent differences between the effects of perceived danger in German and U.S. newsrooms are discernible – several aspects can be described. First, it should be noted that editorial work in both countries seems to be barely influenced by perceived or actual danger. Nevertheless, the increasing numbers of violent attacks against journalists in both nations are leading to changes in the journalistic profession. In both German and U.S. newsrooms, protective measures are being taken and there is a rising awareness of the problem. Still, journalists from both countries deny these developments having any effect on their actual reporting.

In the same sense, journalists from both countries assessed their own occupational risk as much lower than that of their colleagues or even other professions – like police officers or firefighters. This seems contradictory, seeing that although several interviewees reported serious experiences of violence, most journalists assessed the risk of others as higher than their own. However, differences between editors and field reporters can be noted here, which can presumably be linked to their areas of responsibility differing. According to the interviewees' answers, the occupational risk for reporters who, for example, report on demonstrations in the field is significantly higher than for journalists who primarily work in the newsroom. Correspondingly, answers regarding personal risk assessment were also different. On average, reporters consider their profession to be significantly more dangerous than editors.

When assessing their own professional risk, it is also striking that U.S. journalists do not consider themselves to be particularly at risk – even though the number of reported attacks against journalists is significantly higher in the U.S. than in Germany or other Western democratic countries. This could be attributed to the generally higher level of everyday violence in the United States, which ensures that attacks on journalists stand out less. Journalists could therefore be perceived as not more at risk of dangerous violent attacks than the general public.

Another possible influencing factor is nationality. The general discrepancy between experiences of violence and relatively low safety concerns is noticeably greater among the U.S. respondents than among the German journalists. It is therefore possible that U.S. journalists have an even stronger

understanding of their role than the German journalists. In many cases, references to the First Amendment, which legally guarantees freedom of speech and freedom of the press in the United States, were made by U.S. interviewees. In addition, some respondents spoke of increasing economic pressure on editorial departments due to digitization. Perhaps this puts the burden of attacks on journalists into perspective. It is also possible that the shift to more remote work due to the COVID-19 pandemic leads to more physical security for journalists, which in turn might lower their risk perception.

Overall, individual factors appear to have a major impact on perceptions of and responses to violence. This leads to the formation of the fourth hypothesis:

**H4:** *National journalistic culture and professional norms influence the perception of and response to violence against journalists.*

When asked about the general mood towards journalists in society, the U.S. interviewees unanimously assessed the situation as much worse than in previous years, while some German interview partners assessed it as having improved compared to prior years. The results allow only limited conclusions to be drawn about the further development of violence against journalists. It is therefore conceivable that as society becomes increasingly polarized, violence against journalists will also continue to rise. However, it is equally possible that the potential for violence will decrease again in the future. Given that the social context is not the only decisive factor, and the situation of journalists also depends on professional details that vary within the profession, no general statements can be made about future developments at this point.

It can be stated though that the trend seems to be strongly related to the respective social mood, which becomes apparent when examining the topics and events associated with violence. In both countries, political extremists – especially the far right – have been mentioned as the group posing the greatest threat to journalists. Additionally, many attacks on journalists happened during demonstrations and were exercised by dissatisfied citizens. And while there are clear differences in the motives for violence against journalists in Germany and the U.S., it becomes clear that most of the attacks are not based on personal resentment but are instead related to general social and political developments. Therefore, the fifth hypothesis can be formed:

**H5:** *The general social and political mood in a country has an influence on the potential for violence against journalists.*

Coming back to this study's main research question, it can be stated that the increasing threat of violence against journalists does in fact influence editorial work in news reporting in Germany and the United States.

In most cases, however, this influence does not concern the work itself, but the factors surrounding it – security measures, communication about the topic, or a general higher level of risk awareness in the journalists' private lives.

The research results presented should be considered against the background of some limitations. On one hand, conducting qualitative interviews had the advantage of obtaining detailed and balanced insights from the interviewees, as well as giving them a certain amount of leeway in terms of possible answers. On the other hand, it must be considered that the results from the survey of 22 journalists cannot be transferred to the basic population and thus have no general validity. However, this is a prevalent limitation of qualitative research.

Furthermore, there are indications of specific biases in the sample, as it partly consists of journalists who are at a higher risk due to their work in political or investigative departments. A bias may also have arisen due to the recruitment of a large proportion of participants via Twitter, as it can be assumed that journalists active on social media are more often the target of hate speech. Lastly, reactivity cannot be ruled out in individual questions due to the subject matter. As already explained, the consequences of violence are a sensitive topic for journalists due to their role expectations, which could have led to effects of social desirability in the answers.

## Conclusion

The results of this study reveal that violence against journalists is on the rise in both the U.S. and Germany and is increasingly becoming part of everyday professional life. Reporters at demonstrations are frequently affected by physical violence. Among them, freelancers are especially in a vulnerable position, as they are often not protected by editorial offices. Violence in the digital space occurs mostly in the form of hate comments and incitement. The consequences have little impact on editorial work but are felt primarily in the private lives of journalists, often in the form of psychological stress. To answer the main research question – to what extent violence against journalists influences editorial work in news reporting in Germany and the United

States – several aspects can be mentioned. The results reveal that, among other things, newsrooms are being influenced to pay more and more attention to journalists' vulnerability. This is reflected in the fact that threats to journalists are discussed increasingly within editorial departments. That leads to a growing awareness of the issue and more physical security measures and psychological support. These primarily cover the areas of digital security, physical protection of reporters in the field and securing the editorial building.

Changes in the way of reporting occur in rare cases, which is why the influence on news coverage is rather low. If so, it is either in the form of a modification of the topic focus or a lower weighting of opinion in the reporting. As journalists feel a strong professional obligation to report on socially relevant events, they continue to do so despite the growing threat. In some cases, reporting on high conflict topics is seen as particularly relevant and the associated risk of violence is considered as part of the journalistic work. Some journalists are even encouraged in their conviction of the importance of their own work by the experience of violence.

Regarding the practical everyday work in journalism, the results show that there is still a need for raising awareness in the case of violence against journalists. Against the backdrop of journalists' strong self-commitment, communication about violence is seen as a weakness in some cases. Destigmatizing experiences of violence could therefore lead to better processing of the consequences of violence. Cross-editorial security alliances could provide better protection for journalists. Furthermore, increased communication about journalists' work could lead to greater understanding within society and counteract the increasing propensity to violence.

During the study, some aspects have emerged that could be of interest for further research. For example, the role of society could be investigated, especially the question of how the population evaluates the current situation of journalists and what prior knowledge they have about their profession and everyday working life. Since the interviewees mentioned the police in several cases, an investigation of the role of the police in violence against journalists would also be conceivable – both in a protective function and as an aggressor. Lastly, this study drew a comparison between Germany and the USA, but the research could be extended to other countries. Further investigation in this regard could look at the situation of journalists in other democratic countries.



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