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# Comparing News Beat Structures across 13 Countries: From Geographic to Topical and Sub-Specialised Division of Labour

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## ABSTRACT

Almost 200 years after their inception, news beats became a dominant factor that shapes newsrooms. This study explores the beat mix of leading quality dailies in 13 countries. Findings are based on executive interviews triangulated with other data sources. They indicate a shift from geographic to thematic division of labour and the rising trend of beat sub-specialisation. Newsroom size matters but not linearly: larger newsrooms are not larger across the board. Despite the “interpretive turn”, the iconic figure of the newsroom is still the news reporter, with commentators having a minor share. The studied newsrooms are still based on full timers, with restricted reliance on freelancers and part-timers, mainly in softer news. Gender differences have not disappeared; however, they are smaller and nuanced. These findings suggest that beat systems are responsive to ontological, cultural and environmental changes, while preserving their basic logic of newsmaking at least regarding their core staffs.

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Beat system; specialisation; newsroom structure; news making; international comparison; news beats

## Introduction

Almost two hundred years after their inception, news beat systems became the leading organising principle behind modern newsrooms, where reporters, commentators and editors are assigned to cover specific topics like economics, environment or politics, and different geographic regions (Magin and Maurer 2019; Mellado, Márquez-Ramírez, and Van Leuven 2024; Reich et al. 2021).

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News beat systems regulate which topics and regions inside and outside their country will receive steady or even extra news attention (Magin and Maurer 2019; McCluskey 2008), where journalists can develop subject matter expertise (Marchetti 2005; Reich and Lahav 2021). News beats represent the main “trading zones” (Reich et al. 2021) for the exchange of raw news materials with sources (Tuchman 1978), portraying historical, cultural, and financial trends in the rise and fall of topics of interest (Tunstall 1996). They shape flows of newswork (Reese and Shoemaker 2016; Shoemaker and Reese 2014) and knowledge work (Westlund and Ekström 2019). According to Firmstone (2024, 144), beats reflect and sustain organisational “aims, objectives, and values, which in turn, shape its news production practices and content.”

Despite their momentous impact, most beat studies tend to be either conceptual (Magin and Maurer 2019; Marchetti 2005; Reich and Lahav 2021) or too focused on single beats to allow a holistic understanding of their roles (cf. Mawby 2010; Reich 2012; Robbins and Wheatley 2021; van Dalen et al. 2021). The few comparative studies were conducted 25 years ago, exploring three regional papers in the US (Becker et al. 2000) and the division of labour in German and British newsrooms (Esser 1998).

The 25 years that passed since these studies took place were replete with transformative changes in news beats (Nikunen 2014; Van Leuven, Vanhaelewyn, and Raeymaeckers 2021), including several waves of layoffs (Nikunen 2014; Van Leuven, Vanhaelewyn, and Raeymaeckers 2021), trends of feminisation (van Zoonen 1998), freelancisation (Brumfiel 2009; Hayes and Silke 2018; Nikunen 2014), digitisation (Broersma and Graham 2012; Schaetz, Lischka, and Laugwitz 2025) and a reshaped relationship with audiences (Mellado et al. 2021). According to Reese and Shoemaker (2016), beats are becoming more fluid, networked and collaborative, blurring the lines between professional and non-professional, internal and external contributors. Older beats get cancelled, merged, or assigned to freelancers (Brumfiel 2009; Dick 2012), increasing reliance on external sources of knowledge (Reich et al. 2021).

The study focuses on the composition of news beats in 13 democratic countries (Belgium, Chile, Czechia, France, Germany, Greece, India, Israel, Italy, Mexico, Sweden, United Kingdom, and United States). We focus on leading quality (“Elite”) news outlets that traditionally employ more granular beat systems compared to broadcast (Becker et al. 2000) and online-only news outlets. Findings show a shift from geographic to thematic beats and new trends of beat sub-specialisation. Newsrooms continue to rely mainly on full-timers, with restricted reliance on freelancers, part-timers and commentators. Gender differences are still with us, though they are becoming more nuanced.

## Beats as an Organising Principle of Newsrooms

News beats, according to Magin and Maurer (2019), are domains of news gathering on specific thematic and geographic areas. They embody “places to go and people to see”, where a reporter “makes friends and enemies” (Fishman 1980, 104). Each beat forms a unique “microculture” (Ericson, Baranek, and Chan 1989, 34) where information exchanges and the rules for their exchange are negotiated between reporters and sources (Magin and Maurer 2019; Reich and Lahav 2021; Tandoc and Duffy 2019).

From an organisational perspective, beats are means by which media organisations “seek to structure the social environment they cover” (Magin and Maurer 2019, 1),

reflecting organisational priorities in allocating resources, workforce and cultural capital, determining which areas receive regular and even extra news attention, versus areas that do not. According to organisational theory, the size of the organisation is probably among the most important factors that shape their structure, including task differentiation, ability to adopt innovation and respond to changing circumstances (Abbott 1988; Damanpour 1992; Mansfield 2013; Sen et al. 2023). Larger organisations develop different tiers of workers (Abbott 1988; Mansfield 2013), and newsrooms are no exception (Firmstone 2024; Reese and Shoemaker 2016; Shoemaker and Reese 2014; Westlund and Ekström 2019). Larger news outlets have more financial and technical resources and tend to be more specialised (Becker et al. 2000).

To test the impact of organisational size beyond the American context studied by Becker et al. (2000), we analysed the beat structures of large, medium, and small newsrooms in 13 countries. We examined how these organisations prioritise and allocate their human resources. Our research questions focus on five key populations of journalists and beats that, as we show below, both reflect and shape the structural DNA of newsrooms: (1) reporters vs commentators; (2) specialised beat reporters vs generalists; (3) “hard” vs “soft” news beats; (4) full-timers vs freelancers; and (5) female vs male reporters. In what follows we summarise the literature that gave rise to our research questions regarding each of these populations.

## Reporters and Commentators

Since the nineteenth century, the iconic persona of journalism is the news reporter (Nerone and Barnhurst 2003). Yet commentators have a growing role since the “interpretive turn” of the late twentieth century, when facts are already known, yet become too complex to speak for themselves (Barnhurst 2014; Esser and Umbricht 2014; Fink and Schudson 2014). Commentators are increasingly needed to go “beyond descriptive, fact-based journalism” (Salgado and Strömbäck 2012, 145) to explain, forecast, demand accountability and analyse the nature, meaning and impact of events (Barnhurst 2014), emphasising the “Why” over the other W’s of reporting.

According to a Pew survey, commentators remain less than a quarter of the journalistic workforce (Tomasik and Gottfried 2023). Yet it isn’t clear whether this distribution is consistent beyond the American case and across different organisational sizes. Furthermore, the resources allocated to fact-based versus interpretative or analytic journalism — and, consequently, the balance between reporters and commentators in different countries — can be seen in the light of how journalists and their audiences perceive the core functions of journalism (Juarez Miro, Banjac, and Hanusch 2025). Research evidence suggests that audience expectations consistently privilege fact-reporting, neutrality, and accuracy, while interpretation and analysis are generally seen as secondary (cf. in Germany: Loosen, Reimer, and Hölig 2020; Austria: Riedl and Eberl 2022). Two exceptions appear in Israel, where interpretation is valued somewhat higher than in the other countries (Tsfati, Meyers, and Peri 2006), and in Singapore, where expectations for the analysis of current affairs are relatively strong (Tandoc and Duffy 2016). Moreover, is commentary still concentrated in traditional beats like politics and economics (Salgado et al. 2016; Soontjens 2019), or did it spread to new domains like science and environment (Brügge-mann and Engesser 2017)? This complexity invites a closer examination of whether,

alongside national context, newsroom size is a factor in balancing analytical and factual reporting, leading to the first RQ:

RQ1: How do large, medium, and small news organisations differ in the ways they assign journalists to the roles of reporters and commentators (including commentators who are bylined as editors)?

## Beats and Expertise

One of the most important factors shaping journalists' capacity to acquire knowledge about the reported matters concerns the balance between newsroom specialisation and generalism (Marchetti 2005; Reich and Lahav 2021). In that sense news beats are an "epistemic infrastructure" (Schaetz, Lischka, and Laugwitz 2025) that reflects "the ways in which organisations acquire, apply, and routinely coordinate knowledge" (Westlund and Ekström 2019, 77).

However, the literature leaves open questions that need exploration. For example: can news organisations maintain a generalist-free newsroom, or are they still attracted to the versatility, fecundity, and communicative capacities (Magin and Maurer 2019; Marchetti 2005; Van Leuven, Vanhaelewyn, and Raeymaeckers 2021) of generalists?

According to Gans (1979) suggestion that was widely adopted (Becker et al. 2000; Magin and Maurer 2019; Marchetti 2005), there are three major tiers of reporters' knowledge and expertise:

**Top-level knowledge** characterises "substantive" beats, like economics or crime. They "are the only true specialists" (Gans 1979, 132), "but even they must range over wide territories".

**Bottom-level knowledge** characterises general assignment reporters who cover haphazard stories, "like tourists, albeit in their own culture" (Gans 1979, 140).

**Mid-level knowledge** characterises "locational" journalists' (Gans 1979, 131). "Staffers who collect the news from an entire region must keep up with so many different substantive topics that they remain generalists" (Gans 1979, 132; see also Becker et al. 2000).

The mix of these types is intriguing considering the contradictory pressures on news organisations during recent decades. On the one hand, to establish new beats in order to cover emerging topics, from "Taylor Swift and Beyoncé" beats (Allsop 2023) to weightier topics like social platforms (Napoli 2021) or gender (Heckman 2023). Interestingly, some of these emerging topics involve sub-specialisation, to address the hyper-specialisation of their domains (Burke 2012; Eyal 2019; Millgram 2015). On the other hand, beat reporting is shrinking in size and prominence, following, among others, the need to cut expenses, especially in their labour-intensive beat systems (Crow and Stevens 2012; Nikunen 2014; Reich and Godler 2016; Reich and Lahav 2021; Van Leuven, Vanhaelewyn, and Raeymaeckers 2021), merging and cancelling beats. These contradictory pressures lead to the following RQs.

RQ2: How does the proportion of specialists vs. generalists vary across newsroom sizes?

## Hard and Soft News Beats

Topicality and timeliness are the parameters used in the literature to distinguish between hard and soft news (Hanitzsch et al. 2019; Mellado, Márquez-Ramírez, and Van Leuven

2024; Shoemaker and Cohen 2006; Tuchman 1973; Widholm and Appelgren 2022)—another important comparative parameter of the newsrooms. Politics, economy, international conflicts, and social issues are usually associated with hard news, while soft news is instead connected with lighter topics, such as culture, entertainment, lifestyle, and celebrity news (Widholm and Appelgren 2022). Following a number of authors, Shoemaker and Cohen (2006, 8) have defined hard news as “urgent occurrences that have to be reported right away because they become obsolete very quickly.”

Hard/soft distinctions are never black and white, and yet, they still capture deep editorial tendencies and hence continue to be used by prominent comparative studies (Hanitzsch et al. 2019; Mellado, Márquez-Ramírez, and Van Leuven 2024). Some beats traditionally contain more timely and public affairs-related news and therefore can be described as “hard” and “soft” (Reinemann et al. 2012). Hard news beats are generally larger according to the Worlds of Journalism global survey (Hanitzsch et al. 2019). This gives rise to the third RQ.

RQ3: How does the presence of hard and soft news vary across large, medium, and small news organisations?

## Full Timers vs. Freelancers

The increasing reliance on freelancers is driven by a series of economic, sociocultural, and technological developments (Cohen 2016; Deuze 2007; Rick and Hanitzsch 2024).

Even if precarity and freelance work became the “new normal”, it is “not equal for all” (Melin and Wiik 2024, 216), risking journalists’ professionalism (Örnebring 2018a), specialisation, and willingness to remain in the field. However, data on precarity are scarce and anecdotal. Belgian full-timers were typically assigned to hard, labour-intensive and prestigious news beats like politics, while freelancers were assigned to softer and regional news (Van Leuven, Vanhaelewyn, and Raeymaeckers 2021). British freelancers were found in more central beats like the courts (Jones 2021) and in highly specialised beats like the environment in the US (Schleifstein 2020).

More comparative data cannot only establish the extent to which precariat work became an international standard, but also spread across news sections in larger and smaller newsrooms. This leads us to the next two RQs.

RQ4a: How do large, medium, and small news organisations differ in their use of part-time and freelance journalists?

RQ4b: How does the allocation of full-time, part-time, and freelance reporters vary across different news topics or beats?

## Gender Relations and Beat Structures

While the strong trend of feminisation undermined strict divisions between female and male jobs (Djerf-Pierre and Edström 2020; Klaas and Boukes 2022; van Zoonen 1998), the old “glass ceiling” hasn’t totally shattered. In some studies, female and male journalists have similar shares within hard and soft beats (Hanitzsch et al. 2019). In others, like this Australian study, female journalists are still assigned to soft stories (Carson et al. 2024).

It is important to note that gender has a much broader, dynamic, covert and indirect impact on newsroom performance and output than suggested by the “body-count approach” (Bossio and Carson 2025; Lachover 2022, 2043). According to Lachover (2022), persistent patterns of gendered exclusion, segmentation and stratification are often masqueraded and constructed through seemingly neutral newsroom practices, norms and values. Furthermore, newsroom executives that are often male-dominated tend to perpetuate gender biases. While, according to social role approaches, they assign female journalists to softer beats in order to fit established gender stereotypes (North 2016; Santia, Willnat, and Jastrzebski 2025), according to backlash effect theory (Faludi 1991), they do so to minimise negative audience reactions to growing female equality.

And yet, studies like the GMMP (Global Media Monitoring Project) consistently explore female jobs since female journalists tend to be more affected by work precarity (Melin and Wiik 2024), have greater difficulty reaching higher editorial positions and lucrative beats (Ross Arguedas, Mukherjee, and Nielsen 2024) and developing close connections with newsroom management (Melin and Wiik 2024).

Furthermore, more balanced employment of female journalists can give more voice to female sources that remain underrepresented (Meeks 2024). This leads us to the fifth RQ.

RQ5: How do male and female journalists differ in their representation across specific news beats?

## Methods

To map and analyse the organisational structure of newsrooms on an international comparative basis, we took four key steps: (1) selecting countries and organisations to ensure comparison; (2) selecting appropriate methods for obtaining answers to research questions; (3) agreeing on a unified research tool and (4) cooperating on data analysis.<sup>1</sup>

Each of the scholars involved initiated contact with the media organisation, conducted the interviews and triangulated the data with other sources as detailed in Table 1.

### *Selecting Countries and Organisations*

Countries were chosen trying to cover large, medium and small news organisations, representing all types of Hallin and Mancini’s model, plus non-Global North countries, including the Anglo-American case studies that served as the bedrock of the modern news beat system (Magin and Maurer 2019; Tunstall 1996), and different countries around the world that adapted the news beat paradigm. Yet our data are largely from the Global North, an imbalance we hope to improve in the next wave of the study.

Most of the countries (eight) are from Europe: Belgium, Czechia, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Sweden, and the United Kingdom (UK); three countries from the Americas: Chile, Mexico, and the United States (US); and two from Asia: India and Israel.

Media organisations were chosen based on predetermined criteria: (a) a “quality newspaper”—that traditionally prioritises “information-orientation” factual reporting and public interest and tends to have larger and more intricate beat systems (Lefkowitz 2018); (b) national reach; (c) operates both print and online editions; and (d) has the widest print and online circulation.

**Table 1.** The studied news outlets and the research materials that were used to analyse their beat systems.

Country (and city of main newsroom)	Organisation	Leading quality daily + online	Year established	Total number of journalists <sup>1</sup>	Size	Number of executive interviews	Weeks of byline monitoring	Official newsroom lists	Trade directories
Belgium (Brussels)	De Standaard	✓	1918	220	Medium	5	4	yes	no
Chile (Santiago de Chile)	El Mercurio	– <sup>2</sup>	1900	250	Medium	1	0	no	no
Czechia (Prague)	Právo <sup>3</sup>	– <sup>4</sup>	1920	130	Small	1	1	yes	yes
France (Paris)	Le Monde	✓	1944	500	Large	1	0	no	no
Germany (Munich)	Süddeutsche Zeitung	✓	1945	500	Large	1	4	yes	no
Greece (Athens)	Ta Nea	✓	1931	100	Small	1	4	no	no
India (Delhi)	The Indian Express	✓	1932	100	Small	1	0	no	no
Israel (Tel Aviv)	Haaretz/The Marker	✓	1918	350	Medium	10	4	yes	no
Italy (Milan)	Corriere della Sera	✓	1876	400	Medium	1	0	no	yes
Mexico (Mexico City)	El Universal	✓	1916	130	Small	13	4	no	no
Sweden (Stockholm)	Dagens nyheter	✓	1864	120	Small	9	6	yes	no
UK (London)	The Guardian <sup>5</sup>	✓	1821	700 <sup>6</sup>	Large	3	6	no	yes
US (Washington DC)	The Washington Post <sup>7</sup>	– <sup>8</sup>	1877	1000	Large	2	15	yes	no

Newsroom data is updated to the time of data collection – summer 2023. <sup>1</sup> Numbers represent all journalistic positions, including photographers, editors, and columnists. <sup>2</sup> Was chosen despite the strict separation of its newsroom from its sister online publication due to its long legacy as the leading quality daily and key agenda setter of Chilean politics (Mellado et al. 2021). <sup>3</sup> Based on two interviews with one newsroom executive. <sup>4</sup> Was chosen rather than Mlada fronta DNES (Waschková Císařová 2025) that was considered biased by the interests of its owner, a local oligarch who is also an active politician and businessman (Šlerka, Hrubesová, and Sanda 2022). <sup>5</sup> Data was cross-checked with the Guardian news site, LinkedIn, and X profiles. Some numbers were provided by editors as well as limited trade directories. <sup>6</sup> International editions were excluded. <sup>7</sup> Cross-checked with an internal newsroom list for one major newsroom unit, along with official bios and hiring and promotion press releases on the Washington Post website, as well as LinkedIn profiles. <sup>8</sup> Was chosen rather than the New York Times being ‘one of the leading national and international newspapers in the US’ (Cools and Koliska 2024) with more extensive local news coverage – a historical characteristic of US journalism (Anderson 2020).

Table 1 presents basic information about the investigated organisations and the sources of data used to explore their newsbeat structure. Ten out of 13 studied outlets aligned perfectly with the research criteria, while in three cases, the US, Chile and Czechia, adaptations were necessary to fit the realities of the particular country, as detailed in the Table notes. All the studied organisations are privately owned except for the Guardian owned by the Scott Trust. Five of them were classified as small, four as medium and five as large (for size brackets see measurements). Most outlets are based in capital cities, with the exception of three (Süddeutsche Zeitung, Corriere della Sera and Haaretz/The Marker).

### **Methods of Data Collection**

Data was collected between January and August 2023 and built on two separate approaches: statistical information about the journalistic staff of each organisation and interviews (49) with news executives (see Table 1). This paper is focused exclusively on the quantitative newsroom data, based on interviews with news executives and triangulated with different sources that are detailed in Table 1. They include newsroom lists, byline monitoring, trade directories, organisations' web pages, LinkedIn and X profiles, etc.

### **Data Collection Tools and Topics**

To ensure comparability, all researchers used a unified, pre-prepared research tool developed through several online research meetings. The structural data, used in this study, includes a list of desks, sections, departments, and supplements; a list of beats, both topical and geographic; reporters', editors' and commentators' job titles; gender of journalists; reporters' and commentators' employment status (staffers, freelancers, interns; full-timers or part-time employees).

### **Measurements**

- **Reporter/commentator/editor.** Reporters are journalists whose job is restricted to traditional news coverage; commentators are assigned regularly to write analysis pieces. Editor is mostly a UK term for journalists who contribute primarily to news analysis but sometimes also to news reporting. Categories were determined according to interview data, triangulated with sub-bylines and other sources detailed in Table 1. Commentators include only newsroom employees, excluding all contributors to opinion sections where those sections were separate from the newsroom.
- **Specialist/generalist.** Specialists are all reporters, commentators and editors who are assigned to cover particular topics or regions on a regular basis, while generalists cover different and changing topics. Categories were determined according to interview data, triangulated with sub-bylines and other sources detailed in Table 1.
- **Female/male reporter.** Determined according to interview data and reporters' first names, triangulated with other sources detailed in Table 1.
- **Hard/soft news beats.** Following Mellado, Márquez-Ramírez, and Van Leuven (2024), we considered arts and culture, books, and lifestyle as soft news, while business and

economics, climate and environment, criminal justice, data, education, foreign, health, housing, investigations, local/regional, national security, politics, science, social issues, tech, and transportation beats were classified as hard news. General assignment beats were excluded from this variable. This classification is in tandem with prevailing categorisations: hard news beats typically cover unscheduled events that need immediate coverage, while softer news is more scheduled, “evergreen” and concern entertainment and lifestyle (Hanitzsch et al. 2019; Mellado, Márquez-Ramírez, and Van Leuven 2024; Shoemaker and Cohen 2006; Widholm and Appelgren 2022).

- **Large/medium/small news organisation.** Classified according to the total size of the newsroom detailed in Table 1. Obviously, newsroom size brackets may be operationalised according to the purpose of the study, the character of the organisations and the empirical context. According to Owen, Bahja, and Moshavi (2019), newsrooms with up to 25 journalists are considered small, 26–100 as medium, and 100+ as large. In Becker et al.’s (2000) study, 12 journalists represented small newsrooms, 98 represented mid-range newsrooms, and 500 employees represented large newsrooms. After several discussions among the research team, we agreed on somewhat broader brackets, to address the larger newsroom sizes that characterise leading, national, quality newsrooms: 100–200 journalists for smaller newsrooms, 200–400 for medium and 500+ for large ones.
- **News section.** Sections were mapped by interviewees, triangulated with other sources detailed in Table 1 and recoded into the broadest prevailing sections.

### **Data Analysis**

Our analysis focused on data regarding reporters, commentators and editors who publish bylined content. We excluded editors who do not write, photographers, opinion sections and design personnel. We also excluded sports and beats that are typically confined to supplements such as travel, although we referred to the overall numbers of reporters regarding these beats. To protect anonymity, each journalist was identified by a unique numerical code rather than their name. Data systematisation, cleaning and analysis was led by a team of six researchers using SPSS. Given the nature of the research questions, the analyses used primarily descriptive statistics and comparisons of individual country data.

To examine associations between categorical variables, such as newsroom size and beat allocation, or gender and type of news coverage, we employed descriptive statistics and also chi-squared ( $\chi^2$ ) tests. Our aim was not to test for equal distributions across categories, but to identify statistically significant relationships and patterns within our dataset. We interpret the strength of these associations using Cramer’s V, while acknowledging that statistical significance is influenced by sample size and does not imply generalisability beyond the studied sample.

### **Findings**

The findings show, for the first time since the late 1990s, what newsrooms look like in the studied organisations in terms of their beat composition and their strategies for allocating

reporting resources. These strategies aim to maximise coverage and balance reporting and commentary, specialisation and generalism, hard and soft news, full-time and freelance reporters, as well as male and female journalists.

### ***The Impact of Size***

The first RQ asked how do large, medium, and small news organisations differ in the ways they assign journalists to reporting, commentary, and editorial roles within the different news sections. Chi-squared tests indicate a statistically significant association between newsroom size and beat allocation ( $X^2 = 389.632$ ; Cramer's  $V = .261$ ;  $p < .001$ ), though the strength of the relationship is moderate.

Medium and small newsrooms have a higher proportion of reporters than larger ones in arts and culture, business/economics, and particularly criminal justice, where large news media do not dedicate a significant number of reporters. The larger newspapers have more foreign journalists, given their status as global news players, but small newsrooms have almost twice the proportion of foreign reporters compared to medium ones. In contrast, medium and small newsrooms have fewer regional/local reporters than large ones. Small newspapers stand out with a larger proportion of reporters in their politics beats—almost double compared to large and medium newspapers. These findings support Becker et al.'s (2000) observation that size has a broad impact on beat composition; however, this impact is not linear. The larger newspapers have more journalists assigned to geographic beats, though smaller newspapers have a higher proportion of reporters in several specialised areas, such as politics, arts and culture, and criminal justice (Table 2).

### ***Reporters and Commentators***

As can be seen in Table 3, the iconic persona of the newsroom is still the news reporter, with significantly more representation ( $X^2 = 106.769$ ; Cramer's  $V = .136$ ;  $p < .001$ ). Yet, their share is gradually shrinking from 85% in smaller newsrooms to 69%–81% in the larger newsrooms. Several decades after the “interpretive turn” in journalism, commentators are still marginal players, with 5% to 11% of the newsroom workforce. The highest proportion of commentators was found in books (28.2%), arts and culture (22.3%), lifestyle (12.6%), and politics (11.2%). All other beats consisted of fewer than 7% commentators.

### ***Specialisation vs. Generalism***

RQ2 focused on the relations between being specialists and generalists across newsroom sizes and newsroom beats. According to Table 2, there was a dramatic shift from geographic to “substantive” or topical division of labour. 62% of all journalists were topic specialists while 38% were generalists. These numbers include not only general assignment reporters but also geographic beats (foreign and local/regional), which according to the literature must also report diverse streams of events inside their territory (Becker et al. 2000; Gans 1979).

Even in small newsrooms specialists constitute 67% of reporters, almost double the number of generalists (34%). Similarly, in medium-size newspapers there are fewer

**Table 2.** Size of desks.

News beat	Newsroom size			Total
	Small (N = 250)	Medium (N = 505)	Large (N = 2095)	
Arts and culture	18.4%	16.2%	11.9%	13.3%
Books	2.0%	1.4%	1.3%	1.4%
Business/economics	13.6%	12.9%	8.5%	9.8%
Climate/environment	2.0%	1.8%	3.6%	3.2%
Criminal justice	8.4%	4.8%	1.2%	2.5%
Data	0.0%	0.0%	1.3%	1.0%
Education	2.8%	1.6%	0.6%	1.0%
Foreign	11.6%	6.7%	16.0%	14.0%
General assignment	2.4%	4.2%	6.8%	6.0%
Health	1.6%	1.6%	2.8%	2.5%
Housing	1.2%	1.6%	0.0%	0.4%
Investigations	4.0%	2.2%	2.0%	2.2%
Lifestyle	2.0%	2.4%	4.1%	3.6%
Local/regional	10.0%	12.7%	20.0%	17.8%
National security	0.4%	1.2%	0.7%	1.1%
Nationally distinctive	0.4%	1.2%	0.7%	0.8%
Obituaries	0.0%	0.0%	0.6%	0.4%
Politics	12.4%	20.2%	10.6%	12.5%
Science	2.0%	2.8%	1.2%	1.6%
Social issues	2.4%	1.8%	2.4%	2.3%
Tech	0.4%	2.2%	2.1%	2.0%
Transportation	1.2%	0.6%	1.0%	0.9%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

$\chi^2 = 389.632$ ; Cramer's  $V = .261$ ;  $p < .001$ .

generalists (36.9%) than specialists (63%), and in large news organisations specialists (61%) outnumber generalists (39%) too.

According to our findings, sub-specialisation is no longer the exclusive domain of news sources (Marchetti 2005), but rather can be found in thematic beats like police/crime, health, education, and economics. In business/economics, there are reporters dedicated to alternative economic and business models, sustainability, business and technology, economics and legal affairs, economics and mobility, health economics, industry, biking, among other business and economy specialisations. Health includes a wide range of sub-beats, including a focus on the elderly, health and science, aging, food and nutrition, and well-being. Education beats cover all specialist aspects of education, from early years to lifelong learning. New beats like "breaking news" are also holding a more prominent position. For example, newspapers have dedicated breaking news focusing on foreign and global news, music, movies, celebrities, pop music and celebrities, TV and science, among others. Climate and climate change beats (energy, solutions, policy, environment, to name a few) are also increasingly important, diverse and prominent news

**Table 3.** Type of jobs in different size newsrooms.

Job title	Newsroom size			Total
	Small (N = 250)	Medium (N = 505)	Large (N = 2124)	
Commentator	11.2%	9.7%	5.4%	6.7%
Editor	4.8%	8.5%	21.9%	18.1%
Reporter	84.0%	80.6%	68.8%	72.2%
Other	0.0%	1.2%	3.8%	3.0%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

$\chi^2 = 106.769$ ; Cramer's  $V = .136$ ;  $p < .001$ .

beats across the studied newspapers. Community and society beats are on the rise too. In the context of global crises, conflict, humanitarian issues, migration and political conflict are also emerging as new sub-beats, recently focusing on Russia and Ukraine.

### **Hard and Soft Beats**

The third RQ focuses on the differences in proportions between beats that predominantly consist of hard news and beats that predominantly consist of soft news across different news organisation sizes. Chi-squared tests indicate a statistically significant association between newsroom size and news beats ( $X^2 = 36.255$ ; Cramer's  $V = .079$ ;  $p < .001$ ), though the strength of the relationship is very weak. As can be seen in Table 4, beats with predominantly hard news still dominate significantly over beats with predominantly soft news despite warnings that news is becoming softer (Reinemann et al. 2012), particularly in small newsrooms. Small newsroom journalists cover a slightly higher percentage of predominantly soft news beats (22.4%), compared with medium-sized newsrooms (20%) and large newsrooms (17.6%). Hard news dominance over predominantly soft news beats might be even greater than these numbers indicate, as largely soft news beats consist of a disproportionately greater percentage of freelancers and part-timers ( $X^2 = 230.465$ ; Cramer's  $V = .200$ ;  $p < .001$ ), indicating comparatively greater resources dedicated to predominantly hard news beats.

### **Part-timers and Freelancers**

RQ4a and 4b asked about the relationship between being full-time, part-time and freelancer, and news organisation size and news beats. Chi-squared tests indicate a significant association between newsroom size and job type ( $X^2 = 325.117$ ; Cramer's  $V = .238$ ;  $p < .001$ ). Findings indicate that despite growing financial challenges, the majority of staffs are still full-timers, as can be seen in Table 5. Interestingly, the highest share of full-timers (87%) was found in medium-sized newsrooms, with large and small newsrooms employing mostly full-timers (71% and 66% respectively). Somewhat surprisingly, medium-size newsrooms commission fewer freelancers (22%).

In parallel, RQ4b asked about the relationship between being full-time, part-time and freelancer, and news beats.

The results show a clear logic in the allocation of full-time, part-time and freelance reporters across hard, soft and more general news beats ( $X^2 = 230.465$ ; Cramer's  $V = .200$ ;  $p < .001$ ). Hard news desks tend to have the most full-time reporters to ensure availability. Those include specialist beats such as tech (93%), investigations (92%),

**Table 4.** News type according to size of newspaper.

News type	Newsroom size			Total
	Small (N = 250)	Medium (N = 505)	Large (N = 2126)	
Soft	22.4%	20.0%	17.5%	18.4%
Hard	74.8%	74.7%	73.6%	73.9%
General	2.8%	5.3%	8.9%	7.7%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

$X^2 = 36.255$ ; Cramer's  $V = .079$ ;  $p < .001$ .

**Table 5.** Status of journalists by newsroom size.

Status	Newsroom size			Total
	Small (N = 250)	Medium (N = 505)	Large (N = 2126)	
Freelance	20.0%	3.0%	21.8%	18.4%
Full-time	66.0%	87.3%	70.8%	73.3%
Part-time	3.6%	2.0%	3.2%	3.0%
Unsure	10.4%	7.7%	4.2%	5.3%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

$\chi^2 = 325.117$ ; Cramer's  $V = .238$ ;  $p < .001$ .

housing (92%) and politics (91%). In other hard news beats such as data, business/economics, criminal justice, education and social issues, 80% or more are full-timers. As for the generalists, general assignment full-time reporters are still a significant percentage of across newsrooms (83%). The majority of foreign (63%) and local/regional (78%) journalists also work full-time. Most part-timers tend to work in soft news beats such as arts and culture and lifestyle but are also scattered across a handful of other beats (e.g., national security, business, investigations).

On the opposite end of the spectrum, soft news beats, such as lifestyle, obituaries, and arts and culture, have the lowest number of full-timers. Obituaries desks appear to commission the highest number of freelancers (50%) across all studied desks. In desks including foreign, health, science, climate/environment, arts and culture and lifestyle, the percentage of freelance reporters ranges from 20% to 36%. Foreign reporting has the largest number of freelancers, confirming the observation of Brüggemann et al. (2017) on the rising freelancisation of this costly beat.

The percentage of freelancers is minimal in politics, investigations and national security—high-profile beats that remain a “no freelance zone”. The higher percentage of the “unsure” category reflects the reluctance of the studied organisations to share data on the prevalence of freelancers and part-timers. Hence, one may surmise that many of this “unsure” category are actually part-timers and freelancers.

### Gender Differences

The fifth RQ focused on gender differences across specific news beats. While the strength of the relationship is moderate, Chi-squared tests indicate a statistically significant association between both variables ( $\chi^2 = 27.534$ ; Cramer's  $V = .098$ ;  $p < .001$ ). Table 6 suggests that in small newspapers, there are still more men than women. In large and medium-sized organisations, the split is almost even.

According to the literature, more male journalists are found in prestigious, labour-intensive beats, such as business and politics (Magin and Maurer 2019) and in some

**Table 6.** Journalist gender by newsroom size.

Gender	Newsroom size			Total
	Small (N = 250)	Medium (N = 492)	Large (N = 2122)	
Female	33.6%	45.7%	45.9%	44.8
Male	66.4%	54.3%	54.1%	55.2%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

$\chi^2 = 27.534$ ; Cramer's  $V = .098$ ;  $p < .001$ .

cases foreign news. Conversely, our results show that foreign news is not largely dominated by men. However, as can be seen in [Table 7](#), the majority of traditional hard news beats, such as business/economics, politics, criminal justice, data, investigations, local/regional, national security, tech, and transportation, is still male-dominated.

Women dominate lifestyle beats but not arts and culture. Obituaries are the most male-dominated beat among the studied desks. In desks, such as books, climate/environment, foreign, and science, there is an equal distribution of male and female reporters, and this is similar for general assignment reporters ( $X^2 = 91.357$ ; Cramer's  $V = .180$ ;  $p < .001$ ).

And yet gender balance is a cultural phenomenon, changing from one country to another ( $X^2 = 66.519$ ; Cramer's  $V = .152$ ;  $p < .001$ ) rather than directly related to the newsroom size.

## Discussion

This study opens the underexplored black box of current beat systems, illuminating how news beat mixes look like in 13 large, medium, and small newsrooms of leading quality dailies around the world. The studied organisations show a mix of transformative changes, on the one hand (compared to the quite scarce former research), and trends of relative endurance that perpetuate long-term structural newsroom characteristics.

The most important transformations are the paradigmatic shift in the studied organisations from the geographic division of labour, once the leading cluster of news beats (Gans 1979; see also Becker et al. 2000), to the topical division of labour. The apex of this specialisation is marked by the rise of sub-specialised news beats, such as climate policy and health economics, since sub-specialisation used to be the exclusive domain of expert sources (Patterson 2013). These changes constitute a shift from spatial and

**Table 7.** Journalist gender by beat type.

Beat type	Female	Male
Arts and culture (N = 378)	43.9%	56.1%
Books (N = 39)	48.7%	51.3%
Business/economics (N = 270)	37.8%	62.2%
Climate/environment (N = 89)	47.2%	52.8%
Criminal justice (N = 70)	35.7%	64.3%
Data (N = 28)	35.7%	64.3%
Education (N = 28)	67.9%	32.1%
Foreign (N = 396)	48.5%	51.5%
General assignment (N = 170)	47.1%	52.9%
Health (N = 71)	70.4%	29.6%
Housing (N = 12)	66.7%	33.3%
Investigations (N = 62)	33.9%	66.1%
Lifestyle (N = 103)	69.9%	30.1%
Local/regional (N = 506)	39.3%	60.7%
National security (N = 32)	37.5%	62.5%
Nationally distinctive (N = 19)	52.6%	47.4%
Obituaries (N = 12)	16.7%	83.3%
Politics (N = 356)	40.4%	59.6%
Science (N = 45)	48.9%	51.1%
Social issues (N = 65)	61.5%	38.5%
Tech (N = 56)	37.5%	62.5%
Transportation (N = 26)	38.5%	61.5%
Total (N = 2833)	44.7%	55.3%

$X^2 = 91.357$ ; Cramer's  $V = .180$ ;  $p < .001$ .

institutional logic to topical logic. After decades of oscillation between generalism and specialisation (Gans 1979; Marchetti 2005; Reich 2012; Tuchman 1978), at least the studied organisations are more tilted toward specialism, turning their newsbeat system into an “epistemic infrastructure”. Greater specialisation, probably in response to the growing specialisation in the domains of coverage around journalism (Patterson 2013; Reich 2012; Reich and Lahav 2021), enhances the cultural capital of the studied newsrooms, having at their disposal more journalists with top-level knowledge and less bottom-level (general-assignment) and mid-level knowledge that characterises geographic reporters (Gans 1979; Magin and Maurer 2019; Marchetti 2005).

Newsroom size plays a role in structuring beats across newsrooms, as organisational theory suggests (Abbott 1988; Damanpour 1992; Mansfield 2013; Sen et al. 2023), though the precise impact of that size is not uniform across attributes, as offered by Becker et al. (2000). Larger newsrooms tend to expend their comparatively greater resources not so much on a more specialised array of topical beats as on a wider range of geographically based beats, both foreign and local, and a broader network of freelancers and part-timers. They also employ more commentators, which strengthens their interpretive capacities and increases the proportion of hard news beats. The smallest newsrooms have more specialists and fewer commentators, with more soft news and political news beats and fewer foreign and local/regional beats, while also employing fewer full-timers than medium-sized newsrooms. It may be that a preferred differentiation strategy of smaller newsrooms is to emphasise the “depth” of greater top-level knowledge, while larger newsrooms tend to differentiate themselves by amassing the “breadth” of greater mid-level and bottom-level knowledge.

Despite the “interpretive turn” (Barnhurst 2014), the rise of lifestyle and soft news (Mellado, Márquez-Ramírez, and Van Leuven 2024; Reinemann et al. 2012), and trends of freelancisation (Van Leuven, Vanhaelewyn, and Raeymaeckers 2021), the iconic figure of 21st century newsrooms continues to be the news reporter (Nerone and Barnhurst 2003).

While trends of change become obvious in journalism studies, especially since the emergence of the internet (Örnebring 2018b), trends of perpetuation need further explanation. These trends resonate.

With the isomorphic beat structures noticed by Becker et al. (2000), and the general feeling of *déjà-vu* when one identifies the same old kernel of beats like politics, criminal justice, courts, health, education, and science across newsrooms and across time.

Ryfe (2013) offers that news gathering and reporting practices in (US) journalism remain “stubbornly unchanged” (326) due to the habitual nature of news practices, their embeddedness in rules and resources, and since they constitute what journalism is. According to Mathisen (2022), journalism is like “solid birch trees that bend in the winter storms, but remain resilient” (105). Despite numerous pressures for change, “still, there is a distinct stability where the core of professional values and ideals is reinforced and strengthened.” (114).

Newsroom change-resistance can be explained either by the functional need to maintain a dedicated workforce that is available 24/7, at least at the core of news beat systems; or by the complex and systemic nature of news beats. According to Firmstone (2024), newsroom structures represent a mix of formal organisational priorities (e.g., allocation of editorial and material resources) and informal ones (e.g., unpublished policies,

managerial styles, organisational and professional cultures, communication networks, as well as journalists' expertise, charisma, and personal connections). Changes in beat systems involve, according to "hierarchy of influences" theory (Reese and Shoemaker 2016; Shoemaker and Reese 2014), not only the micro level of the individual journalists and their routines, and not only the meso level of the organisation, but also the macro levels of the social institution and social system levels, and their control over access to information, events, news sites, and news sources that are part and parcel of any news beat. Hence, while news organisations cannot resist ontological, epistemic, economic, cultural and environmental changes (as seen in their increasing specialisation and sub-specialisation and growing feminisation), they are more resistant to changes in the basic logic of newsmaking and their "epistemic infrastructure" of news beats. They manage changes inside restricted peripheral "provinces" dedicated to newer "news creatures" like commentators, freelancers, and soft news reporters.

This study shows that gender segregation across news beats has decreased, compared to decades of studies (Magin and Maurer 2019). Female reporters have a growing presence in formerly men-dominated beats probably because of macro-level factors like the increasing share of women in journalism education in Northern Europe (e.g., Mannila 2017). As we showed in the theoretical part, gender discrimination extends far beyond simple representation; in this study, for example, female journalists were overrepresented across less lucrative roles: in softer news beats (49%, vs. 43% in hard news) and among reporters (47%) vs. commentators (34%), while having almost an identical share as part-timers and freelancers and among generalists and specialists. However, further research is needed to explore possible informal or hidden hierarchies, as pointed out by Melin and Wiik (2024) within and across the different beats.

Beyond external validity limitations, due to the non-representative sample of countries, this study faced a series of internal validity challenges while trying to obtain exhaustive, accurate, updated (for summer 2023), and comparable data on beat mixes. Our main challenges were the high diversity of newsroom structures, beat mixes and the logic behind their employment; the availability and the position of interviewees; the reliability and granularity of their newsroom data and their willingness to share it. Hence, to maximise internal validity, we took a series of measures, starting with a collaborative construction of a detailed research tool, data collection instructions and training researchers. Other measures were the triangulation of newsroom data with different sources, serial coordination meetings, discussing one news department after the other, comparing national peculiarities and constructing uniform criteria for which jobs should be included and excluded in each section. Obviously, one cannot rule out that we missed a few reporters; however, this couldn't have had more than a marginal effect, mainly with regard to precariat part-timers, in marginal and less institutionalised news departments.

Our findings suggest that despite growing economic pressures, the studied newsrooms are doing well enough to sustain this intricate and specialised workforce at least as far as their "core staff" (Mathisen 2022, 110) are concerned. Hence, under lower economic pressures, one might expect more specialised and more intricate networks of reporters, with an even lower rate of freelancers and part-timers. Yet, one should bear in mind that the studied organisations are leading elite news organisations that have always been more specialised than television and popular news organisations (Becker et al. 2000), let

alone in alternative media that avoids pigeonholing their workforce into news beats (Schaffer 2007).

Further studies can test the validity of our findings in a more representative sample of news organisations, focusing on the Global South, popular and broadcast news outlets. It is also important to explore the extent to which more thematic beats mean also more knowledge and expertise, especially among the news breed of sub-specialised reporters, their relations with expert sources and the extent to which the fragmenting of journalists' knowledge fosters a "tunnel vision" perspective, distorting their capacity to see the bigger picture.

## Note

1. The research tool that was used for the broader project is available from the corresponding author [Zvi Reich], upon reasonable request. The participants of this study did not give written consent for their data to be shared publicly, so due to the sensitive nature of the research, supporting data is not available.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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