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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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Each of the researchers who collected data resolved the ethics assessment of their work at their home university and received ethical approval for data collection.

Comparing news beat structures across 13 countries: From geographic to topical and sub-specialised division of labour

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.

Keywords: 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 & Maurer 2019; Mellado et al., 2024; Reich et al. 2021).

News beat systems regulate which topics and regions inside and outside their country will receive steady or even extra news attention (Magin & Maurer, 2019; McCluskey, 2008), where journalists can develop subject matter expertise (Marchetti, 2005; Reich & 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 (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014; Reese & Shoemaker, 2016) and knowledge work (Westlund & Ekström, 2019). According to Firmstone (2024: 144), beats reflect and sustain organisational “aims, objectives, and values, which in turn, shapes its news production practices and content.”

Despite their momentous impact, most beat studies tends to be either conceptual (Magin & Maurer, 2019; Marchetti, 2005; Reich & Lahav, 2020) or too focused on single beats to allow a holistic understanding of their roles (cf. Mawby, 2010; Reich, 2012; Robbins & Wheatley, 2021; van Dalen et al., 2021). The few comparative studies were conducted 25 years ago, exploring three regional papers in the US (Becker, Lowrey, Claussen, & Anderson, 2000) and the division of labour in German and British newsrooms (Esser, 1998).

The 25 years that passed since these studies took place was replete with transformative changes in news beats (Nikunen, 2014; Van Leuven, Vanhaelewyn & Raeymaeckers, 2021) including several waves of layoffs (Nikunen, 2014; Van Leuven, Vanhaelewyn & Raeymaeckers, 2021), trends of

feminisation (Van Zoonen, 1998), freelancisation (Brumfiel, 2009; Nikunen, 2014; Hayes & Silke 2018), digitisation (Broersma & Graham, 2012; Schaetz et al., 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 & 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 et al., 1989: 34) where information exchanges and the rules for their exchange are negotiated between reporters and sources (Magin & Maurer, 2019; Reich & Lahav, 2021; Tandoc & Duffy, 2019).

From an organizational perspective, beats are means by which media organisations “seek to structure the social environment they cover” (Magin & 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., 2022). Larger organisations develop different tiers of workers (Abbott, 1988; Mansfield, 2013), and newsrooms are no exception (Firmstone, 2024; Reese & Shoemaker, 2016; Shoemaker & Reese, 2014; Westlund & 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 prioritize 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 19th century, the iconic persona of journalism is the news reporter (Nerone & Barnhurst, 2003). Yet commentators have a growing role since the “interpretive turn” of late 20th century, when facts are already known, yet become too complex to speak for themselves (Barnhurst, 2014; Fink & Schudson, 2014; Esser & Umbricht, 2014). Commentators are increasingly needed to go “beyond descriptive, fact-based journalism” (Salgado & 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 & 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 et al., 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 et al., 2020; and Austria: Riedl & Eberl, 2022). Two exceptions appear in Israel, where interpretation is valued somewhat higher than in the other countries (Tsfati, Meyers & Peri, 2006), and in Singapore, where expectations for the analysis of current affairs are relatively strong (Tandoc & Duffy, 2016). Moreover, is commentary still concentrated in traditional beats like politics and economics (Salgado, Strömbäck, & Aalberg et al., 2016; Soontjens, 2018), or did it spread to new domains like science and environment (Brüggemann 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 & Lahav, 2021). In that sense news beats are an “epistemic infrastructure” (Schaetz et al., 2025) that reflects “the ways in which organisations acquire, apply, and routinely coordinate knowledge” (Westlund & 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 & Maurer, 2019; Marchetti, 2005; Van Leuven et al., 2021) of generalists?

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

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

Mid-level knowledge characterizes "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 & Stevens, 2012; Nikunen, 2014; Reich & Godler, 2016; Reich & Lahav, 2020; Van Leuven, Vanhaelewyn, & 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 et al., 2024; Tuchman, 1973; Shoemaker & Cohen, 2006; Widholm & Appelgren, 2020) – 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, 2020). 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 et al., 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 & Hanitzch, 2024).

Even if precarity and freelance work became the “new normal”, it is “not equal for all” (Melin & Wiik, 2024: 216), risking journalists’ professionalism (Örnebring, 2018a), specialisation, and willingness to remain in the field. However, data on precarity is 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 et al., 2021). British

freelancers were found in more central beats like the courts (Jones, 2021), and in highly specialised beats like environment in the US (Schleifstein, 2020).

More comparative data can not 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 & Edström, 2020; Klaas & 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 (Hanitzch 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’ (Lachover, 2022: 2043; Bossio & Carson, 2025). 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 et al., 2024), according to backlash effect theory (Faludi, 1991) they do so to minimize 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 the work precarity (Melin & Wiik, 2024), have greater difficulty reaching higher editorial positions and lucrative beats (Ross Arguedas et al., 2024) and developing close connections with newsroom management (Melin & 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.¹

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 & Maurer, 2019; Tunstall, 1996), and different countries around the world that adapted the news beat paradigm. Yet our data is 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 prioritizes “information-orientation” factual reporting and public interest and tends to have larger and more intricate beat systems (Lefcowitz, 2016); (b) national reach; (c) operates both print and online editions; and (d) has the widest print and online circulation.

[Table 1 about here]

Table 1 presents basic information about the investigated organisations and the sources of data used to explore its newsbeat structure. Ten out of 13 studied outlets aligned perfectly with the research criteria, while in three cases, 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 medium and five 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 mostly news analysis but sometimes also 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 et al. (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 et al., 2024; Shoemaker & Cohen, 2006; Widholm & Appelgren, 2020).
- **Large/medium/small news organisation.** Classified according to the total size of the newsroom detailed in Table 1. Obviously, newsroom size brackets may be operationalized according to the purpose of the study, the character of the organizations and the empirical context. According to Owen et al. (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 mid-range 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 to 200 journalists for smaller newsrooms, 200 to 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 (χ^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 a two times higher proportion of foreign reporters than 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 isn't linear. The larger newspapers have more journalists assigned to geographically based 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 about here]

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 a marginal player, with 5% to 11% of the newsroom workforce. The highest proportion of commentators were 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.

[Table 3 about here]

Specialisation vs. generalism

RQ2 focused on the relations between being specialists vs. 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), that 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 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 wellbeing. 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 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 newsrooms' 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.

[Table 4 about here]

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 staff 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%).

[Table 5 about here]

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/freelance reporters across hard, soft and more general news beats ($\chi^2=230.465$; Cramer's $V=.200$; $p<.001$). Hard news desks tend to have most full-time reporters to ensure coverage. Those include specialist beats such as tech (93%), investigations (92%), 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 ($X^2=27.534$; 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.

[Table 6 about here]

According to the literature, more male journalists are found in prestigious, labour-intensive beats, like business and politics (Magin & Maurer, 2019) and in some 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 are still male-dominated.

Women dominate lifestyle beats but not arts and culture. Obituaries is 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 $V=.180$; $p<.001$).

[Table 7 about here]

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 geographic division of labour, once the leading cluster of news beats (Gans, 1979; see also Becker et al., 2000), to topical division of labour. The apex of this specialisation is marked by the rise of sub-specialised news beats, like 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 a spatial and institutional logic to a 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 to an “epistemic infrastructure”. Greater specialisation, probably in response to the growing specialisation in the domains of coverage around journalism (Patterson, 2013; Reich, 2012; Reich & Lahav, 2021), enhances the cultural capital of the studied newsrooms, having at their disposal more journalists with top-level knowledge and less bottom (general-assignment) and mid-level knowledge that characterizes geographic reporters (Gans, 1979, Magin & 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., 2022), 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 a higher 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 emphasize

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 et al., 2024; Reinemann et al., 2012), and trends of freelancisation (Van Leuven et al. 2021), the iconic figure of 21st century newsrooms continues to be the news reporter (Nerone & 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” (p. 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” (p. 105). Despite numerous pressures for change, “still, there is a distinct stability where the core of professional values and ideals is reinforced and strengthened.” (p. 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 (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014; Reese & Shoemaker, 2016), 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, 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 & 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, trying to obtain exhaustive, accurate, updated (for summer 2023), and comparable data on beat mixes. Our main challenges were the high diversity 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 maximize internal validity, we took a series of measures, starting with a collaborative construction of a detailed research tool and 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 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 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 staffs’ (Mathisen, 2022, p. 110) are concerned. Hence, under lower economic pressures, one might expect more specialised and more intricate networks of reporters, with even lower rate of freelancers and part-timers. Yet, one should bear in mind that the studied organisations are leading elite news organisations that were always 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 Global South, popular and broadcast news outlets. It is also important to explore the extent to which more thematic beats means 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 “tunnel vision” perspective, distorting their capacity to see the bigger picture.

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¹ The research tool that was used for the broader project is available from the corresponding author [Author.], 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.