

# Social Inequality in Journalism

Social Origin and Role Conceptions of Journalism Trainees and Students in Germany. *By Tanja Köhler, Julia Lönnendonker, and Johanna Mack*

This study examines the social origins of journalism trainees and journalism school students in Germany and explores the extent to which social origin is linked to the aspiring understanding of their professional roles.

There is an increasing demand for greater social representation in German journalism. The demand for diverse content is often linked to the debate over diverse newsrooms. This is based on the idea that a journalist's understanding of their role, particularly their perception of their social mission, is connected to their social origin. These differences can be theoretically explained through socialization and milieu-specific experiences. Against this backdrop, a diverse editorial team is increasingly regarded as an indicator of journalistic quality. While diversity dimensions such as gender or immigrant background have long been the focus of institutional equality strategies and empirical research, the dimension of social origin remained marginalized for a long time. Yet the topic is highly relevant, because equal access to journalism is a precondition for diversity within the profession.

The study starts from the assumption that social inequality may shape journalism in at least two ways: First, it may influence access to the profession. In Germany, traineeships in media organizations and journalism schools are among the most important entry routes into journalism. Whoever is admitted to these pathways has a greater chance of entering the field and shaping future news production. Second, social origin may also be linked to professional role conceptions, that is, to the question of what aspiring journalists understand as the central tasks of journalism. If so, social inequality in recruitment would not only affect who becomes a journalist, but also which social perspectives, priorities, and expectations are more strongly represented in journalism.

Previous studies suggest that journalism in Germany is recruited disproportionately from the middle and upper class

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and therefore does not reflect the social composition of society (cf. Borchardt et al. 2019; Weischenberg et al. 2006). At the same time, the profession has become increasingly academized. Most journalists in Germany in recent times hold a university degree, even if this is not always a formal requirement (cf. von Garmissen et al. 2025). Because educational attainment in Germany is closely tied to parental educational background, this development may function as a mechanism of social selection that benefits applicants from privileged families.

Against this background, the study investigates two research questions: First, from which social origin do journalism trainees and journalism school students in Germany come? Second, to what extent does the understanding of the journalistic role differ among aspiring journalists depending on their social origin? The analysis is based on a standardized online survey of 250 aspiring journalists conducted between 25 September and 28 October 2024. Since no central register of journalism trainees and journalism school students exists in Germany, the population had to be reconstructed by the study team. Public-service and private broadcasters, national and larger regional daily newspapers, and journalism schools that have signed the Charter of German Journalism Schools for Quality Journalism were included according to defined criteria of reach, circulation, and relevance. On this basis, the population was estimated at 549 trainees and 430 journalism school students.

Social origin was operationalized through the educational level of the parents, following established categories used in German higher education research (Deutsches Zentrum für Hochschul- und Wissenschaftsforschung). The study distinguishes between lower and medium non-academic family backgrounds and higher and high academic family backgrounds. Professional role conceptions were measured with established items from the third wave of the World of Journalism Study and interpreted in relation to the model by Hanitzsch and Vos (2018), which differentiates among informational-instructive, analytical-deliberative, critical-monitorial, advocacy-radical, developmental-educative, collaborative-facilitative, and everyday life-oriented journalistic functions.

The findings show a clear socially selective composition of aspiring journalists in Germany. More than half of journalism trainees and nearly two thirds of journalism school students come from academic families. Respondents from lower educational backgrounds account for less than ten percent in both training routes. The results therefore confirm that access to

journalistic training is socially stratified and that aspiring journalists are disproportionately recruited from more privileged educational milieus. The data also reveal a high level of academization: around 95 percent of respondents have started or completed higher education. This share lies well above the corresponding population level and underlines that journalism has become a strongly university-shaped field. In light of the close relationship between educational success and social origin in Germany, this academization can be interpreted as a structural selection mechanism.

At the same time, the study finds both commonalities and differences in professional role conceptions across social origin. Across all groups, respondents strongly endorse classical role orientations: Informational-instructive tasks, such as providing information that enables opinion formation, analytical-deliberative tasks, such as explaining and contextualizing current events and showing future consequences, and critical-monitorial tasks, such as exposing social grievances and countering disinformation, receive consistently high levels of support amongst the aspiring journalists. In this respect, they largely align with core professional ideals long associated with journalism in Germany (cf. Hanitzsch 2025).

However, meaningful differences emerge when social origin is taken into account. Respondents from academic families place greater emphasis on the watchdog role toward political and economic elites. Support for the task of controlling those in power rises markedly from the lowest to the highest background group. This suggests that the understanding of journalism as a democratic check on elites is particularly pronounced among aspiring journalists from more highly educated family backgrounds.

By contrast, respondents from non-academic family backgrounds attach greater importance to participatory, developmental, and advocacy-representational roles. They are more likely to support tasks such as giving ordinary people opportunities to articulate their views, motivating people to participate in political processes, pointing to possible solutions for social problems, contributing to social cohesion, and promoting peace and tolerance. They also more strongly endorse the task of giving a voice to marginalized groups and minorities. More interventionist advocacy-radical roles, such as shaping the political agenda or influencing public opinion, are not strongly supported across any social origin group. The difference therefore does not concern a general willingness to intervene politically, but rather a stronger orientation among non-academic respondents

toward inclusion, participation, social support, and representation of disadvantaged groups.

The findings indicate that social origin in journalism matters not only as a question of access, but is also linked to differing conceptions of journalism's role in society and thereby influencing which social perspectives are more strongly represented in journalism. Thereby the social composition of the aspiring journalists has implications for which visions of journalism gain greater prominence within the profession.

Overall, the findings suggest that social background not only influences entry into the profession but is also linked to differing perceptions of journalism's role in society, thereby shaping which social perspectives are more strongly represented in journalism. Given journalism's central role in shaping public opinion, the question arises as to what extent a socially one-sided composition of the next generation of journalists limits the diversity of journalistic perspectives in the long term. However, the results should be interpreted in light of the limited sample size and the exploratory character of the analysis. Further research is needed to examine whether the patterns observed here can be confirmed in larger samples and across later stages of journalistic careers.

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