

OBSERVATORY ON JOURNALISM

Journalism at the time of the Covid-19
emergency

3rd EDITION

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

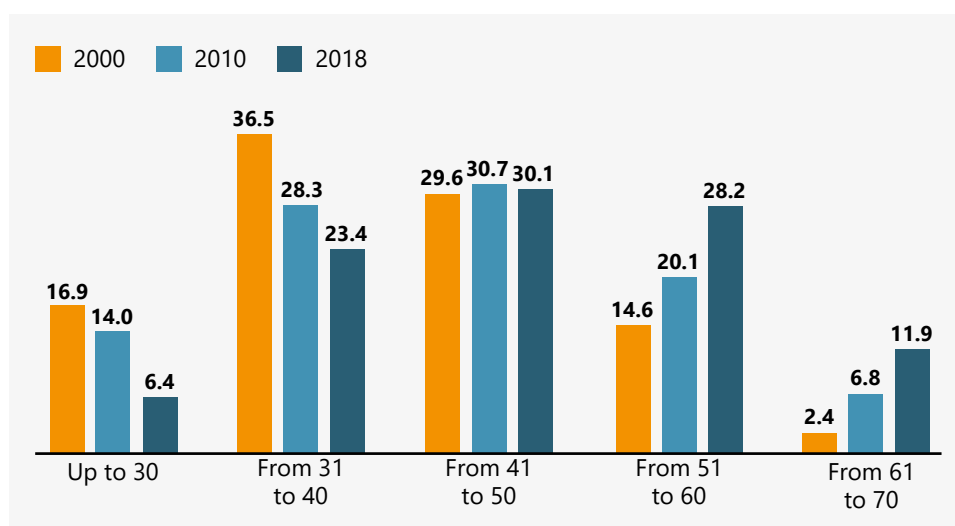
NOVEMBER 2020

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

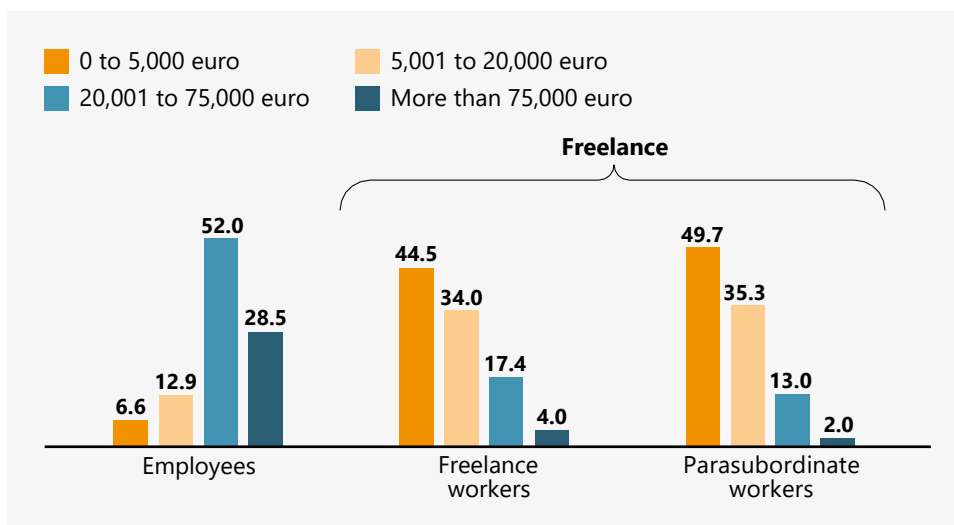
The COVID-19 emergency has been an important test case for the news system, which is once again at the centre of public and political debate as a crucial gateway for the circulation of medical and healthcare-related information (and beyond). Local communities have gathered around the information system which has played the role of a fundamental component for maintaining, ultimately, the delicate balance on which our society and collective life are based. However, the provision of Covid-19 related information has also posed a significant challenge for the professional status of those involved in news production, i.e. journalists, who were already struggling with the rise of online platforms as information intermediaries and with the circulation of disinformation.

In Italy, the last twenty years have been marked by the ageing of the press population, with the gradual disappearance of journalists aged less than 30 and a sharp reduction in the number of journalists aged less than 40 years.

**Distribution
of active
journalists by
age**
(% data,
2000-2018)



Considering that more than four Italian journalists out of ten fall into the freelance category (made up of self-employed individuals and parasubordinate workers), the data of the third edition of the Observatory on Journalism also confirm the deep structural differences in terms of income between these latter and employees, and thus an insider-outsider labour market condition in which employees (insiders) enjoy greater protection, while the remaining categories of journalists (outsiders) are forced to work in precarious and low-income conditions.

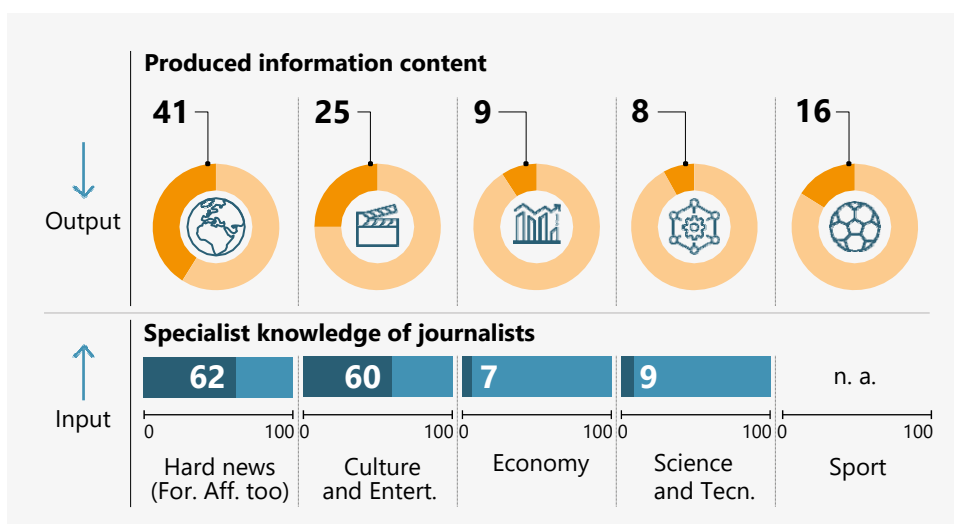


Contractual condition and income of Italian journalists
(% data)

The precariousness of the working conditions is especially evident in new (online-only) news outlets, which make up for the majority of young professionals, characterised by an organisational model based on a streamlined editorial structure (so-called flexible editorial offices) and extensive recourse to occasional collaboration with freelancers.

In the light of these phenomena (i.e. ageing, precariousness and related insider-outsider structure), the profession of journalist tends to increasingly mingle with other professions, and many journalists are starting to work in press offices and public and private bodies, which are characterised by a greater possibility of reaching medium-high income brackets and achieving lower professional (and personal) precariousness. Moreover, this evolution is accompanied by, and is the responsible for, digital skills levels that are not yet fully developed. The propensity of journalists to carry out innovative web journalism activities that go beyond the usual production routines is low. In addition, professional journalists who already cover economic and scientific issues in a lesser way compared to political and cultural ones lack a level of specialist knowledge (particularly in terms of academic training) adequate to cover economic, financial, scientific and technological facts and events.

4 journalists out of **10** FALL INTO THE FREELANCE CATEGORY



Variety and level of specialist knowledge of the topics covered
(% data)

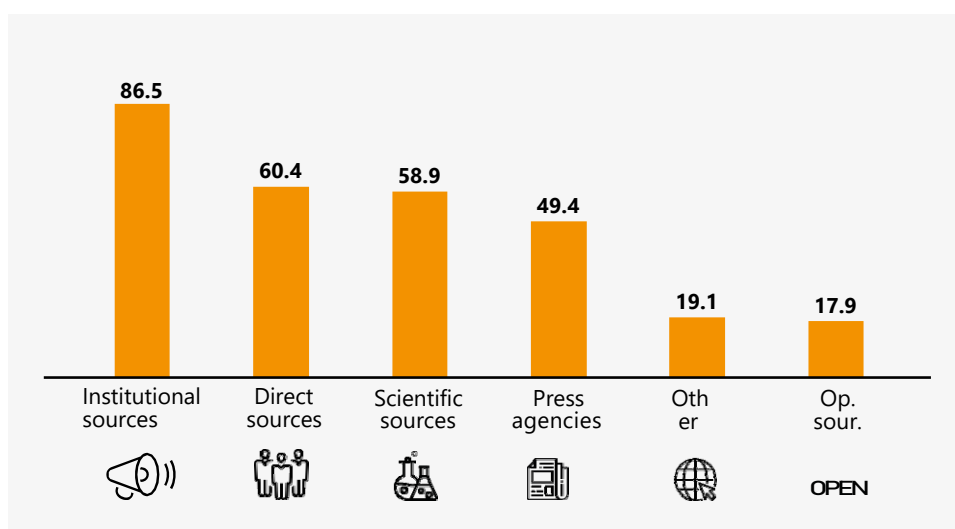
Source: Agcom elaborations on Volocom and company data; Agcom Observatory on Journalism - 3rd edition

Precisely because of their low propensity for activities with a highly innovative content and the low level of specialist knowledge of scientific topics, the COVID-19 health emergency has seen journalists opt for mainly institutional sources and give room, without filters or mediation, to scientists and experts, whom even citizens themselves have been able to freely consult for information on the key aspects of the emergency.

This has been to the detriment of both direct sources and field work, which are usually essential when it comes to news, and digital and open data sources, which have sometimes been used even less by journalists than before the emergency.

Sources used by
journalists
dealing with
the COVID-19
emergency

(% data)



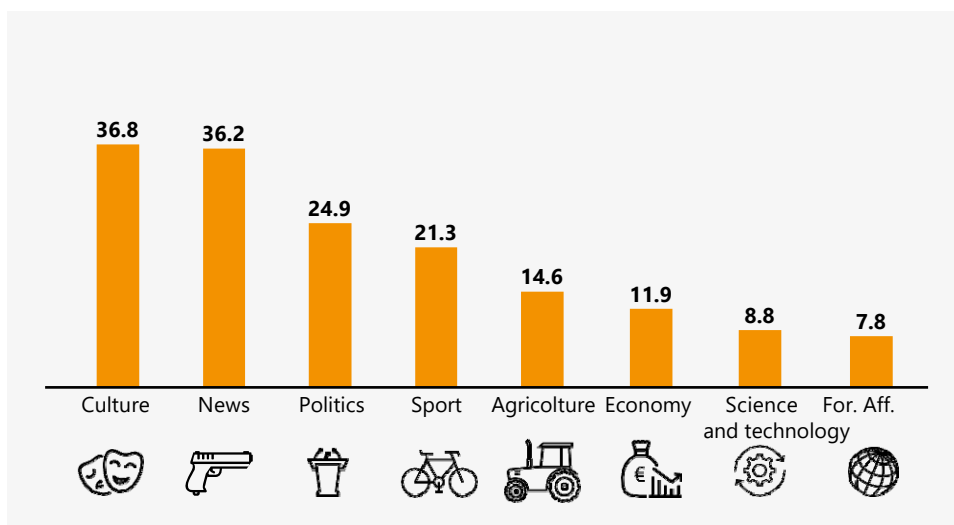
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journalists
out of

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HAVE NOT
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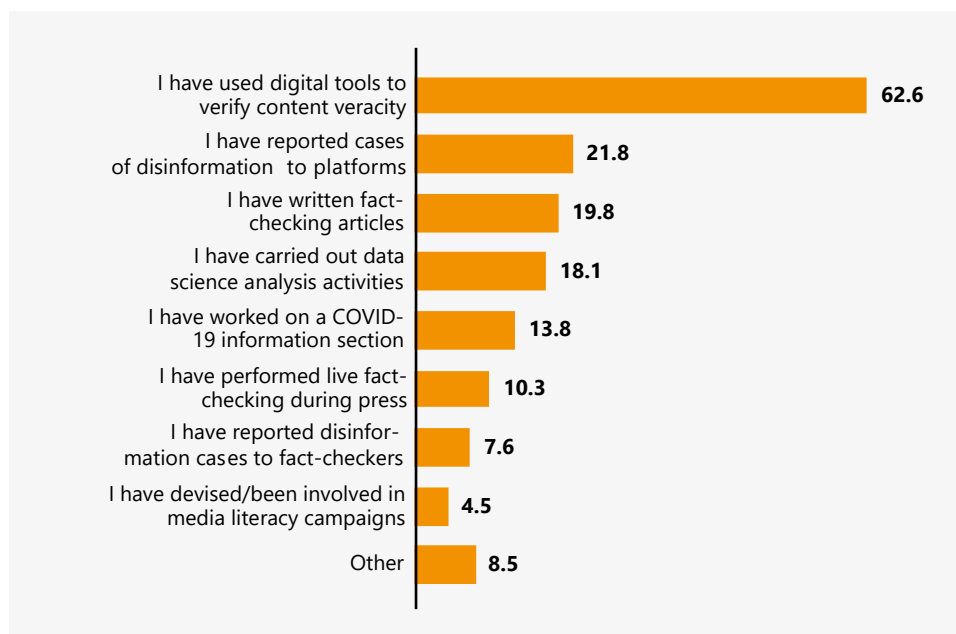
Failure to use innovative sources has also led almost 4 journalists out of 10, even in fields not fully affected by the pandemic (such as culture and sport, for instance), not to deal with topics they usually deal with. While for culture and sport this choice is due to the drastic reduction in events and news, it should also be noted that about one third of journalists have given up dealing with news items, the lack of coverage of which has certainly not been due to a reduced number of events to be covered. In the long run, this could also lead to significant consequences, given the fundamental contribution of quality journalism in monitoring socially relevant phenomena (such as those related, for instance, to organised crime) and thus in ensuring the proper functioning of democratic life in the country.



Topics not dealt with by journalists who have been unable to deal with the topics they usually deal with due to the COVID-19 emergency

(% data)

Moreover, at a delicate time when citizens must be guided by experts, journalists have not been fully successful, except in few significant cases, in taking on the role of debunkers and certifiers of quality news, leaving the complex task of filtering, selecting and decoding correctly knowledge and news of collective interest to public institutions and experts.



Practices adopted by journalists who have spotted and analysed fake news during the COVID-19 emergency

(% data)

If national and regional/local institutions and scientific personalities, which both journalists and citizens can access in the same way, remain the main source of information on a significant number of issues of collective interest even after the pandemic, and if journalists themselves do not manage to equip themselves with the digital and specialist skills needed to exercise greater control over the entire information (and disinformation) circuit, the mediation role historically played by journalists since the birth of the Western public sphere risks being called into question.