# Understanding Different Journalisms

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This chapter will take a closer look at how local journalists from the global south practice journalism and how they view the development of their practice. Specifically, this chapter explores how Arab journalists and investigative reporters have gone about developing a model of practice that strikes a balance between how they are trained on Western methods of reporting and how they practice journalism in their own communities. This chapter looks and discusses the tensions that arise from this and how they are resolved and dealt with by Arab reporters. This final chapter of the book aims to echo what previous chapters have focussed on, that there is no universal method of practicing journalism, thus acknowledging that 'different journalisms' is about how reporters from around the globe take into consideration their contexts when teaching and practicing their trade.

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## Universalism in Journalism

Universalism in journalism is a notion that has been entrenched in the practice and training of journalism across the world. Concepts such as the inverted pyramid, avoidance of emotion and bias, systematic access to data and sources, freedom of information requests, are all staples in journalism taught in the Global North and yet expected to be adhered to and applied in all other parts of the globe. However, and as the chapters in this book have evidenced, this is certainly not the case. To assume that there is a universalism in the way journalism is practiced is not only problematic, but also undermines the nuances and particularities of contexts surrounding journalism in various countries.

One classic model to conceptualise the contextual effects on journalism practice in different cultural settings is that of Pamela J. Shoemaker and Stephen D. Reese's 'hierarchical model' (1996). Starting from the bottom of the 'hierarchical model' is what they position as the 'individual level' which could be understood as the 'influences on content from individual media workers'. At this level, the 'factors that are intrinsic to the communication worker' are considered, such as their education, personal background and professional history (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996: 64). Additionally, other considerations include their value and belief systems, and how they perceive their roles (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996: 64). This is followed by the 'media routines level', thus referring to the 'influence of media routines' which is associated with 'an organizational perspective on the mass media' (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996: 107). Then the 'organization level', meaning the 'organizational influences on content', which look into the nature of 'roles performed, the way they are structured, the policies flowing through that structure, and the methods used to enforce those policies' (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996: 172–173). The 'extramedia level' follows which ties with 'influences on content from outside of media organizations' and that incorporate 'sources of the information', 'revenue sources', the 'economic environment', 'technology', and 'other social institutions' which include governments and businesses (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996: 175). At the top of the 'hierarchical model'—and which includes all the above influences—is the 'ideological level' which refers to as the 'influence of ideology'. This influence is concerned with relations of power since 'media transmission of ideology works as it does by drawing on familiar cultural themes that resonate with audiences' (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996: 222). Overall, these factors play a significant role in the

construction of news discourses, and when considering these factors, it becomes apparent that a universal notion of journalism is not possible.

The complexity of how these factors operate to form diverse journalism practices is argued by Cherian George (2013), who distinguishes between what is referred to as 'paradigmatic differences' and 'contextual differences'. Paradigmatic differences 'refer to dominant world views within a discipline', where 'shared systems of thought that are legitimated and reinforced by professional organizations, educational institutions, and regulators and other government agencies' develop. In this context, '[i]ndividuals operating within the same paradigm may work on different problems, but agree on a shared basis for assessing one another's work, using terms that are mutually understood' (George, 2013: 494). Contextual differences, on the other hand, refer to 'the circumstances in which something occurs, which would include relevant historical, cultural, economic and political factors [and which are] potentially limitless' (George, 2013: 494). What this means, according to George, is that '[t]wo sets of practices may occur within the same context but answer to different paradigms, or share paradigms despite operating in different contexts' (George, 2013: 494). In essence, George's argument can be summarised through the following:

> Journalism around the world is being shaped by both convergent and divergent forces. The resulting landscape, comprising a patchwork of journalistic traditions that are both similar and different, leaves scholars torn between a universalist impulse that risks imposing eurocentric benchmarks outside of their proper context, and a moral relativism that is unable to make any value judgments. (George, 2013: 490).

> With this in mind, I will now consider and discuss how journalism practice is shaped in the Global South outside the context of Western practice, and through the example of Arab journalism.

## ARAB CULTURE OF JOURNALISM

An Arab culture of journalism has slowly been on the rise, especially when Arab journalists reporting from their countries have found it difficult to apply what they are trained in during coaching sessions delivered by trainers from Western backgrounds. One of the overarching challenges facing Arab investigative reporting, for example, are traditional styles of

reporting that have been entrenched in the Arab culture of journalism. William A. Rugh contextualises this:

> Historically, the Arab press has had a strong tie to Arab culture. Arab literature, including poetry, tales, and stories, predated mass media by more than a millennium and had developed a very rich tradition by the time the first newspapers appeared. The publishers of these papers, influenced to some extent by the example of the contemporary French newspapers which were heavily cultural in content, quite naturally regarded the Arab press as a proper vehicle for Arab literature. (Rugh, 2004: 7).

The Arabic language has historically been a vehicle for poetry and literary expression, where tournaments would be held in the Arabian Peninsula for the strongest poetic expressions. The Arabic language can, in turn, be described as an emotive language (Bebawi, 2016), that is still today dominant in Arab reporting. This strongly affects how the reporting is structured and, in turn, conveyed.

Essentially, the effect of this on journalism is that the Arabic language and its cultural usage have a few characteristics that Raphael Patai (2007) pinpoints as exaggeration, overemphasis, overassertion, and repetition. Patai notes that '[i]t is almost inevitable that people who are used to expressing their thoughts in such (and much more complex) ready-made phraseology, to which must be added the frequent use of innumerable proverbs and sayings, should be led by their language into exaggeration and overemphasis' (Patai, 2007: 53). This superlative form of expression is certainly a distortion to facts-based reporting, and one that needs to be addressed. It is important to note that it is not the literary component of reporting, which also exists in other journalism cultures, that is problematic; rather, it is that news content in Arab media is heavily literary in content and is used mainly for emotive persuasion. Yet, the cultural influence on news reporting is reflected not only in content but also in news processes. Examples of this include difficulty in adhering to deadlines, inability to differentiate between fact and opinion while researching a story, and a focus on one side of the story without considering the multiplicity of views on the topic.

A close observation of journalism practice by Arab reporters reveals a distinct Arab culture of journalism stemming from traditional practices, and which, in turn, have had an effect on the development of investigative reporting. One issue that was notable during the observation of the

training and practice of investigative reporting is the lack of accuracy in the investigative process. Rana Sabbagh, who was the Executive Director and Co-Founder of *Arab Reporters for Investigative Journalism* (ARIJ), notes that perfection is not part of the culture (Sabbagh, 16 June 2013), although it is, in fact, crucial when developing a form of journalism that relies on the accuracy of facts. She states: 'I guess whoever works on investigative journalism cannot afford to do one mistake […] you can afford to do mistakes if you're a beat reporter—if you're covering day-to-day stories—but not as an investigative journalist' (Sabbagh, 16 June 2013). There is, therefore, a need for Arab journalists to develop the habit of being meticulous in their reporting, and to realise that investigative reporting is a thorough and lengthy process. Sabbagh notes that journalists tend to get bored, and do not have the resilience to keep working and rewriting a story.

Another characteristic that is dominant in the culture of Arab journalism is that journalists have traditionally tended to play a steering role in the construction of the news message, dictating to audiences how to think and how to react to the events at hand. Jerichow, who is a board member of ARIJ, states: 'You get audiences who cannot think for themselves, they are told what to think, journalists have pre-empted ideas' (Jerichow, 6 December 2014). The reason behind this journalistic role goes back to the news media being used as a political tool and a mouthpiece for the state. Hence, the concept of using a hypothesis-based process of investigating a story can be problematic for Arab journalists, who are trained to report on pre-empted angles that provide a certain narrative to a story. This was noted during the observational analysis of training sessions whereby there was a continuous attempt by coaches to remind journalists that they cannot predict the findings of the investigation before first going through the process.

Accordingly, training investigative journalism in the region is not only focused on teaching investigative reporting skills, but also involves lengthy processes of eradicating previous journalistic habits. The process of training is, therefore, twofold: first, abolishing traditional journalistic practices that are embedded in the Arab culture of journalism; and second, teaching new journalism processes and skills, thus developing a revived culture of journalism. Upon returning to their newsrooms after training, Arab journalists find it difficult to implement what they have learnt. They find themselves dealing with editors who are still operating within traditional frameworks. They feel isolated. They are motivated to continue work on

their investigative stories; however, editors do not always give trained journalists the time to implement what they have learnt.

It is worth noting here that when talking about the culture of journalism as a challenge, it does not mean that there is a need to adjust traditional formats of Arab reporting to adopt a Western standard of journalism. Jerichow argues there is a need for journalists to maintain their reporting practices within local parameters (Jerichow, 6 December 2014), since it is problematic to assume that Western practices and processes of reporting would be suitable for Arab journalism. What the Arab culture of journalism needs, however, is to rid itself of traditional practices that impede the development of investigative reporting specifically, and professional reporting in general. In turn, Arab reporting needs to develop its own practices that suit its operation within the region, thus creating a professional contemporary Arab culture of journalism. One way of developing a revamped Arab culture of journalism is for newly trained journalists to get together and form a network through which trained journalists can apply and maintain what they have learnt. Jerichow believes that by creating a network of young and trained journalists, this could help address the issue and develop a new Arab culture of journalism.

## Different Journalisms

*Different journalisms*, as this book has centred on, is a notion in journalism studies that many scholars have increasingly been acknowledging and focussing on. Interestingly, amongst journalists from the Global South there has been tension, on the one hand, between the need to practice Western forms of journalism that reports from the global south have witnessed and have been trained in as an ideal standard of universal practice; and between the tension of how to apply this adopted Western form of journalism in an environment where journalism functions in another reality all together.

Interestingly, more than often, Arab journalists are not aware of this tension although it is visible in the output and practice. This is because they have learnt to overcome or go around the obstacles that face them at a local level when trying to apply an ideal standard of universal practice. The result? A hybrid way of doing joutnalism that becomes unique to the media environments local journalists are operating within.

One thing many of these global south journalists are realising, however, is that there is no 'wrong' or 'right' way of doing journalism—there is no

*one* way of doing journalism. By removing themselves from the shackles of the concept of a 'universal' journalism practice, they are giving way to a plethora of universal and diverse journalisms to emerge and flourish. More importantly, and as this book strives for, there is a need for journalists from the global north to realise this, acknowledge it, and in turn train their journalists on the different practices that journalism can adopt around the world. Not only does this create global journalism understanding, but it also allows for the emergence of foreign correspondents who can adapt and report to different perspectives, voices, and views when telling a story (Bebawi & Evans, 2019).

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