**Understanding Epistemological Orientations of Journalism Cultures in Transitional Contexts and Developing Societies**

**ABSTRACT**

This study examines the epistemological orientations of journalism cultures in post-conflict, transitional, and developing contexts—areas that remain underexplored in journalism scholarship. Focusing on the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, where both media institutions and political structures are undergoing democratisation, the research investigates how journalists in non-Western societies define and enact their professional responsibilities. These contexts are marked by ongoing tensions between established professional norms and the dominance of partisan ideologies. Challenging traditional understandings of journalism cultures as a universally governed institution rooted in shared norms, values, and identity, the study argues for a more context-sensitive and dynamic interpretation of professionalism. Rather than treating professionalism as a fixed standard, it is approached as a contested discourse shaped by local political, institutional, and cultural conditions. Utilizing Hanitzsch’s (2011) framework—particularly the roles of the Critical Change Agent and Opportunist Facilitator—alongside a neo-Gramscian lens and the Priority Model of journalistic practice, the study draws on survey data from 142 Kurdish journalists to explore these dynamics. Ultimately, the findings of this study suggest that journalistic professionalism in such environments evolves through processes of identity negotiation, adaptation to institutional constraints, and engagement with competing hegemonies. Above and beyond, the research contributes to a deeper, more nuanced understanding of journalism in non-Western, post-conflict societies, and advocates for analytical frameworks that are culturally grounded and responsive to local complexities in democratic transition contexts.

**KEYWORDS**

Epistemological Orientations, Journalism cultures, Neo-Gramscian framework, Transitional Contexts, and non-Western societies

1. **RESEARCH INTRODUCTION**

In developing and post-conflict societies such as Kurdistan Region of Iraq, the role of journalists play in democratic transitions and shaping public discourse is of critical significance. However, the boundaries and interpretations of professional journalistic conduct in such complex environments remain contested. This study examines epistemological orientations of journalists within the dynamic and diverse of Iraqi Kurdish media landscape, aiming to understand how media practitioners perceive and perform their roles amid political transformation and institutional uncertainty. Utilizing Hanitzsch’s (2011) theoretical model of journalistic cultures—namely, the Populist Disseminator, Detached Watchdog, Critical Change Agent, and Opportunist Facilitator—this research explores how Iraqi Kurdish journalists position themselves within evolving media ideologies and power structures. The interplay between professional norms and partisan loyalty is particularly pronounced in post-war societies, where journalism often becomes a battleground for competing hegemonies. Although the profession is traditionally grounded in principles such as objectivity, independence, and public service, these ideals are frequently challenged by the realities of politicised media environments and commercial pressures. This paper argues that journalistic professionalism in such contexts should not be viewed as a static set of standards, but rather as a discursive formation shaped by local political, cultural, and institutional dynamics. Drawing on a content analysis of 142 survey responses from Iraqi Kurdish media professionals, the study adopts a neo-Gramscian perspective to reconceptualise professionalism, emphasising the interdependent relationship between journalistic routines and hegemonic forces in transitional societies.

1. **RESEARCH THEORITICAL FRAMWORK**

Although the concept of *epistemology*—a branch of philosophy concerned with the nature and justification of knowledge—has long been debated, it is broadly defined as the study of knowledge and the grounds for belief (Dancy, 1985). Within journalism cultures, epistemology refers to the basis upon which journalism's claims to truth and knowledge are validated (Ekström, 2002), reflecting the idea that truth is journalism’s foremost obligation (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001). This perspective frames epistemology as a measure of validity, a philosophical inquiry into the essence of knowledge, and a criterion for acceptable evidence—enabling distinctions between truth and falsehood, fact and possibility (Aivas, 2017; Anderson & Baym, 2004). Hearns-Branaman (2016) bridges philosophical debates about truth and human understanding with discussions in journalism on objectivity and bias. He highlights the central tension in journalism: the role of the journalist in relation to truth. Truth serves as a primary motivator in news production and consumption, and the perceived credibility of journalism is closely tied to its ability to deliver ‘factual’ content. This function extends even to non-commercial public service media, where journalistic legitimacy is based on producing accurate and trustworthy reporting. Thus, journalism’s philosophical roots—particularly its epistemological foundations—are vital to understanding professional journalistic culture. Epistemologically, two core orientations are typically distinguished in journalism: objectivism and empiricism. Hanitzsch (2007) explores the connection between journalists’ objectivist roles and the epistemological question of how truth can be achieved. This objectivism is philosophical rather than procedural—based on the idea that a reality exists independently and can be mirrored through accurate reporting. This view aligns with epistemological foundationalism and perceptual realism, asserting that mental representations should correspond to external reality. Accuracy-oriented journalism supports this position, often advocating for a scientific-like pursuit of truth. Objectivity, in this sense, requires the separation of fact from value and assumes an external, discoverable reality that should be observed, not constructed. Conversely, the subjectivist epistemological stance views news as a constructed representation of the world that inherently involves interpretation. Subjectivist journalists believe that truth is not absolute and that the context and individual perspectives are inseparable from how truth is understood or conveyed. Eastern philosophies, for instance, often view objective reality and its representations as interdependent, which helps explain why some Asian journalists resist Western notions of detached objectivity. Even within this subjective framework, journalists are still committed to truth, albeit as a result of the interplay among various subjective accounts, reflecting a pluralistic and contested marketplace of ideas (Hanitzsch, 2007).

These epistemological debates are highly relevant for examining the professional role perceptions of Iraqi Kurdish journalists, particularly in relation to reporting on private information. The question emerges whether journalists adhere to professional standards of objectivity or are influenced by personal or political considerations. Hanitzsch (2007) also introduces a second epistemological dimension: empiricism. Here, journalists justify truth claims based on their perceived validity, relying either on empirical (high) or analytical (low) reasoning. Journalism cultures that prioritize empirical justification emphasize observation, evidence, and experience—consistent with classical foundationalism traditions. Merrill and Odell (1983) note that journalists with strong empiricist leanings prioritize factual accuracy over interpretative analysis. This approach aligns with the principles of precision journalism, which value methodological rigor in practices such as fact-checking and investigative reporting. On the other end of the continuum, analytical justification emphasizes reasoning, values, interpretation, and commentary. In such journalism, truth is understood as independent of empirical verification. Commentary and opinion-based journalism typically fall into this category, where the journalist's credibility relies more on persuasive reasoning than factual neutrality. In these cases, standards like balance or objectivity may be secondary to the effectiveness of argumentation. In practice, few journalistic approaches adhere strictly to either extreme. Most reporting, particularly critical journalism, occupies a middle ground. The dimensions of objectivism and empiricism may intersect—for example, high objectivity can coincide with empirical rigor, while subjectivist orientations may align more with analytical approaches. Nevertheless, the two dimensions are distinct: objectivism concerns how reality is perceived, whereas empiricism pertains to the process of validating knowledge through facts versus analysis. Interestingly, even journalists committed to objectivity may engage in commentary if they believe certain values—like human dignity or peace—can be universally accepted and presented as "facts." Thus, these overlapping epistemological orientations help illuminate journalistic decisions around privacy, particularly in the Kurdish media context. Some journalists may justify privacy invasions involving public figures based on news value or perceived public interest, while others refrain from such practices based on a normative belief in the right to privacy. Ultimately, media ownership and conceptions of privacy influence how facts are gathered and presented, shaping the use of objectivist or empiricist reasoning in journalistic practice. These dimensions are crucial to understanding the epistemological underpinnings of Iraqi Kurdish journalism and its approach to sensitive information (Aivas, et al., 2025).

1. **RESEARCH DATA COLLECTION**

To gather data for this study, a structured quantitative questionnaire was utilized, targeting journalists with editorial responsibilities in the production or dissemination of news content, consistent with the approach outlined by Weaver and Wilhoit (1986:168). In this study, 142 Iraqi Kurdish journalists, including two freelance professionals, representing 29 distinct media outlets, completed the survey. Respondents were drawn from a broad spectrum of media platforms, including print (newspapers and magazines), broadcast (radio and television), and digital formats (news websites and agencies). The survey distribution encompassed a diverse array of media organizations, ranging from officially affiliated and unofficial partisan outlets to media entities identifying as independent within the Iraqi Kurdish media environment. The sampling framework was informed by Berelson’s (1952) three core systematic procedures for media population and sampling: (1) the selection of media outlets or titles, (2) the sampling of specific issues or time periods, and (3) the extraction of relevant content. Within this framework, various probability sampling techniques—such as simple random sampling, systematic sampling, stratified sampling, and multi-stage cluster sampling—are typically employed to minimize selection bias. However, this study adopted a non-probability sampling strategy, acknowledging the limitations regarding the representativeness of the sample. While methods such as convenience sampling, snowball sampling, and quota sampling are commonly applied in similar contexts, the researcher employed a non-probability approach without claiming full statistical representativeness of the wider journalist population (Bryman, 2012). Further details on population size and the sampling procedures are outlined in Table 01.

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| Table 01: Sampling size of a Survey Questionnaire | | | | | |
| Types of  News- organization | | **Provinces of news worker** | **Types of media ownership** | | |
| **State or Government media** | **Partisan media**  **(Official and unofficial)** | **Private media**  **(Non-Government and Non-Partisan)** |
| Daily newspaper | | Slêmanî | - | - | 1(7) |
| Hewlêr (Erbil) | - | 1(6) | - |
| Dhok | - | 1(11) | - |
| General interest weekly (magazine/ newspaper) | | Slêmanî | - | - | 3 (9) |
| Hewlêr (Erbil) | - | 2(10) | - |
| Dhok | - | - | - |
| Television | | Slêmanî | - | 4(37) | 1(19) |
| Hewlêr (Erbil) | - | 1(1) | - |
| Dhok | - | 5(9) | - |
| Radio | | Slêmanî | 3(9) | - | 2(9) |
| Hewlêr (Erbil) | - | - | - |
| Dhok | - | - | - |
| Web journalism networks | News sites | Slêmanî | - | 2(10) | - |
| Hewlêr (Erbil) | - | 1(1) | - |
| Dhok | - | 1(1) | - |
| News agencies | Slêmanî | 1(1) | - | - |
| Hewlêr (Erbil) | - | - | - |
| Dhok | - | - | - |
| Total | | 29 (142) including  2 Freelancers | 4(10) | 18(86) | 7(44) |
| Numbers in parentheses represent the total subsample of working journalists in the respective media category | | | | | |

Despite ongoing debates, there is broad consensus that the terms "journalist" and "journalism" derive from the Latin diurnal—meaning daily or occurring every day—which itself originates from the French word journey, referring to a day’s work, and was first employed by the French publication Journal (Cayne, 1983). Nevertheless, media scholars continue to seek a unified definition of journalistic professionalism, including the roles, identities, and ideological frameworks of journalists within various journalistic cultures. The term "journalist" is commonly used in scholarly discourse to describe individuals engaged in diverse journalistic practices aimed at different audiences. Contemporary journalists utilize a variety of methods for the collection, selection, and dissemination of news and information related to current affairs, societal issues, trends, and lifestyles (Aivas, 2020; Bainbridge et al., 2011). Furthermore, Weaver and Wilhoit (1986) characterize a journalist as a person with editorial responsibility for producing and distributing news and informational content, thereby distinguishing journalists from practitioners involved in creative endeavors such as fiction writing, art, drama, or other forms of media production. This precise characterization was adopted in the present study due to its flexibility and its capacity to differentiate between distinct media types and their functions. Within the context of Iraqi Kurdish media, editorial responsibility is conceptualized across three hierarchical tiers: (a) senior management, including editors-in-chief, managing editors, chief editors, and their deputies, who oversee overall editorial strategy; (b) middle management, consisting of senior editors, department heads, and desk chiefs, who are responsible for operational decision-making; and (c) non-managerial personnel, such as reporters and news writers, who occupy the foundational level of the newsroom structure (Hanitzsch et al., 2014).

1. **RESEARCH DATA ANALYSIS**

In this study, practicing journalists were invited to express their levels of agreement with seven statements designed to measure the epistemological orientations underlying Kurdish journalism culture. Responses were recorded using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 5 ("strongly agree"). As presented in Table No. 02, a significant proportion of respondents (83.7%) strongly agreed with the statement that journalists are capable of portraying reality as it truly is. This was followed by 70.3% who reported maintaining strict impartiality in their professional practice. Additionally, 36.0% of participants somewhat agreed with the notion that "facts speak for themselves," suggesting a moderate endorsement of empiricist principles. Furthermore, 30.2% of the journalists expressed a preference for incorporating analytical perspectives into their reporting, and 26.6% stated that they only assert claims when these are backed by verifiable evidence and credible sources. In contrast, only 17.14% of respondents strongly disagreed with the statement that journalists do not allow personal beliefs to shape their reporting, as well as the assertion that they consistently indicate which side of a conflict holds a stronger position. The data suggest that while a commitment to objectivity is prevalent among Kurdish journalists, the influence of personal convictions—particularly in partisan media outlets—is more evident during politically charged periods, such as election campaigns or times of political crisis. This highlights the tension between professional norms and ideological or institutional pressures within the Kurdish media environment. As outlined by Forsyth (1980), this study assessed the ethical ideologies of journalists using six core items—three measuring idealism and three measuring relativism. To evaluate adherence to professional journalism ethics, a five-point Likert scale was employed, prompting Kurdish journalists to indicate their level of agreement with each statement, ranging from ‘strongly agree’ to ‘strongly disagree’. Within this framework, a response of ‘strongly agree’ signifies a high degree of either idealism or relativism, depending on the item assessed. Within the epistemological orientations of Kurdish journalism cultures, it is evident that a significant proportion of journalists in the Iraqi Kurdish media landscape are relatively young and hold diplomas or university degrees in media and journalism. Despite this educational background, professional advancement is often contingent upon clientelistic ties and allegiance to dominant political parties, which tend to offer greater personal and professional privileges. Due to limited journalistic experience and inadequate financial compensation, nearly half of Kurdish media professionals maintain secondary sources of income. This reflects broader characteristics of emerging democracies, where the distinction between journalism and political communication is frequently blurred, with many identifying as journalists while functioning primarily as public relations agents for partisan entities (Aivas, et. al., 2025, and Hussein, et, el., 2025). The prevalence of “churnalism” and propagandist reporting is symptomatic not only of Kurdistan’s media sphere but also of global media trends, where misinformation and distortion increasingly overshadow objective journalism. Paradoxically, since the 1991 Kurdish uprising and the subsequent establishment of a semi-autonomous government and parliament, Kurdish ruling parties have utilized ideologically driven media to suppress dissent, exert control over journalistic expression, and stifle critical voices. This environment has undermined national public institutions, including the judiciary, intelligence services, and independent media frameworks akin to the BBC. Alarmingly, some media organizations and their personnel have developed financial and political affiliations with the intelligence arms of the two dominant parties. Viewed through Gramsci’s theory of hegemony, this partisan media apparatus has played a central role in maintaining political dominance, particularly during moments of crisis such as the Kurdish civil conflict (1994–1998). Partisan media practices have contributed to political violence and infringements on information privacy, notably during the 2009 elections when opposition parties gained a significant share of parliamentary seats (Aivas, 2020).

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| Table02: Epistemologies orientation of the Kurdish journalism cultures | | | | | |
| Epistemologies orientation of journalism cultures | **Strongly agree**  **N (%)** | **Somewhat agree**  **N (%)** | **Neither agree**  **nor disagree**  **N (%)** | **Somewhat disagree**  **N (%)** | Strongly disagree  N (%) |
| I do not allow my own beliefs and convictions to influence my reporting. | 97 (68.8) | 26 (18.4) | 7 (5.0) | 6 (4.3) | 5 (3.5) |
| I provide analysis of events and issues in my work. | 56 (40.3) | 42 (30.2) | 18 (12.9) | 10 (7.2) | 13 (9.4) |
| I think that facts speak for themselves. | 63 (45.3) | 50 (36.0) | 14 (10.1) | 8 (5.8) | 4 (2.9) |
| I remain strictly impartial in my work. | 97 (70.3) | 29 (21.0) | 7 (5.1) | 3 (2.2) | 2 (1.4) |
| I make claims only if they are substantiated by hard evidence and reliable sources. | 79 (56.8) | 37 (26.6) | 14 (10.1) | 2 (1.4) | 7 (5.0) |
| I think that journalists can depict reality as it is. | 118 (83.7) | 11 (7.8) | 7 (5.0) | 3 (2.1) | 2 (1.4) |
| I always make clear which side in a dispute has the better position. | 57 (40.4) | 26 (18.4) | 24 (17.0) | 13 (9.2) | 21 (14.9) |

1. **RESEARCH CONCLUSION**

This study has examined the epistemological orientations of journalism cultures in transitional contexts and developing society of Iraqi Kurdish journalists within the broader context of political transformation and post-conflict reconstruction. Drawing on Hanitzsch’s (2011) typology of journalistic cultures—comprising the Populist Disseminator, Detached Watchdog, Critical Change Agent, and Opportunist Facilitator—and supported by survey data from 142 participants, the research provides insight into how Kurdish journalists understand and enact their roles in a complex and evolving socio-political environment. Findings highlight the fluid and contested nature of journalistic professionalism in the Kurdish context. Rather than adhering to a fixed set of professional norms or institutional standards, professionalism is shown to function as a discursive construct shaped by political affiliations, structural limitations, and shifting hegemonic influences. The tension between partisan alignment and professional integrity underscores the challenges faced by journalists striving for autonomy and public accountability within a highly polarized media landscape. Moreover, the study critically re-evaluates classical ideals of journalistic professionalism—such as objectivity, neutrality, and commitment to public service—arguing that these concepts may not carry the same normative authority in transitional societies as they do in more stable, Western contexts. Instead, the findings suggest that journalistic professionalism in such settings emerges through processes of identity negotiation, evolving work practices, and context-specific norms. As such, professionalism should be understood as a dynamic and context-dependent phenomenon. Ultimately, this research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of journalism in non-Western, post-conflict societies, and encourages scholars to adopt culturally sensitive and contextually grounded frameworks when analyzing media practices and professional identities in democratizing regions. In such contexts, partisan outlets have routinely violated the personal privacy of candidates and opposition leaders as a strategic means to undermine rivals and consolidate support. Nevertheless, alternative media outlets and independent journalists operating outside the sphere of ruling party control have demonstrated some success in creating nonpartisan platforms. Despite frequent closures and suppression, new outlets often emerge in their place. In response, the KDP, PUK, and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) have occasionally recalibrated their media strategies, fostering informal and covert media structures often referred to as “shadow media.”

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