

The Impacts of Culture on Online Journalistic Practice

Khalid Alhomoud⁺

Griffith University

Al-Imam Muhammad Ibn Saud Islamic University

Abstract. Within the scope of this investigation, the impacts and influences of culture on journalistic practice will be investigated. The primary focus will be to examine online journalism and how varying cultures affect what is reported and how. My assertion is that culture has a strong influence on the structure and output of newsworthy information and that journalists are indirectly or in some cases directly pressured to comply with what are considered ‘traditional’ cultural norms, depending on the regional environment in which they work.

Keywords: Cultures influence, Online journalism practice, Media and societies, Technology and information.

1. Introduction

In this paper, I will be analysing exactly what ‘culture’ is, providing an insight into how social, economic, commercial and religious perspectives apply indirect and direct influences on journalistic practice. Culture, arguably, can be defined as the influences and social conditioning that makes an individual view the world and act within it in a certain way, defining their actions and beliefs and how they relate to others, both from their own or other cultures. How this cultural condition affects journalists and how they report on and present information will be investigated to show if it has any impact on Internet-based journalistic practice.

It is proposed that culture has unique and distinct influence on how an individual, social group, community or society perceives and reacts to the world around them. How cultures influence groups will be investigated, with specific focus on how cultural influences impact on online journalistic practice. Journalism endeavours to analyse, interpret and disseminate the facts about an event around the world, distributing the news through a variety of media. It is how culture affects this process that is worthy of analysis, as it will provide insight into how different cultures present and also receive information from the world around them.

Online journalism is, arguably, a powerful and effective means of disseminating information rapidly. The speed at which it facilitates this dissemination allows information to be distributed globally in ways that can reach into practically every household everywhere. This allows attitudes, values and beliefs from a broad range of different cultures to be exchanged in ways that could potentially manipulate or irrevocably change particular age-old ways of interacting with the world. Subsequently, it could be argued that journalists, because of their influence and responsibility, need to be aware of how cultural perceptions affect how they write, organize and present their work. The media are part of the societies and cultures in which they operate and are not immune from their influences. Journalists are part of the society in which they live and work and the profession of online journalism is subject to the same influences imposed on other more traditional forms of media presentation and dissemination.

Online journalism arguably could be considered as the first true universally free news medium, in that almost anyone anywhere can be reached if they have access to an Internet connected device. Many consider that the internet has enabled users to be exposed to a world of differing attitudes, opinions and beliefs that might have otherwise been restricted, or at least manipulated by various culturally influential entities such as religious or political organizations with a vested interest in controlling or regulating the information a particular population receives (Baird 2010; Cooper 2008, p. 45).

2. Research Problem:

⁺ Corresponding author. Tel.: +61 431523346.
E-mail address: khalid9997@hotmail.com

Culture, it will be argued, has a distinct affect on how online journalism is presented. Based on this assertion, a study of the affects of culture on online journalistic practice will be conducted. Journalistic practice has been criticized for lacking objectivity and for journalists engaging in unethical behaviour that has resulted in the profession losing the respect of the very audience to which it reports (Kelley 2008, p. 92; Feighery 2009, p. 167). The form and function of journalism is gradually being forced to adapt to changing social pressures, economic conditions, the advent of new technology and the need to remain relevant and effective within a world that is becoming increasingly reliant on mass-distributed, largely unedited online content (Hans-Henrik 2002, p. 67). These challenges to journalistic practice need to be investigated if a clear picture is to be established as to how culture in all its forms affects how journalists operate in the traditional news media and more specifically, in the medium of online news production and distribution. Online journalists have a responsibility, ethically and morally, to take into account the potential benefits or problems that sharing information with other cultures might entail. The key issue is the presentation of information and that it should be done in a neutral and unbiased manner. While this is easier said than done, it is an ideal that should be aspired to in that it is arguably one of the core aspects of journalism as a profession (Applegate 2009, p. 5). Journalists, of course, are just people, and despite training in their particular field, cultural influences, ingrained biases or pressures can affect how they present their work. Despite this, it is imperative that journalists aim to aspire to objectivity and to be true to the ideals on which journalistic practice is based (Morris 2007, p. 707; Bettag 2006, p. 37). In recent years, with the advancement of technology in the areas of online communication, journalism has gone from a small additional medium supporting traditional forms of news dissemination to becoming an increasingly dominant form of presenting the news (Sundar 2000, p. 480). Subsequently, it is worth investigating the affects of culture on journalistic practice in that these influences can have a truly global reach.

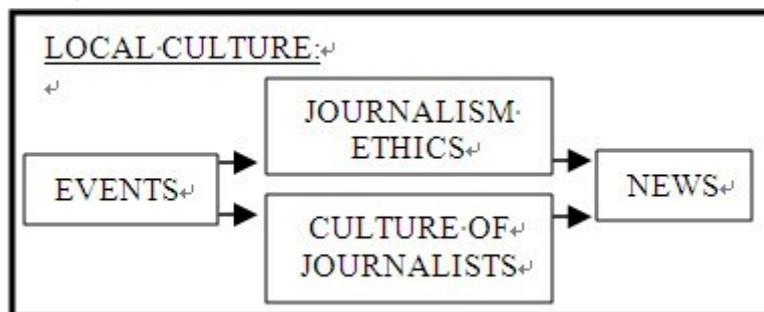


Fig. 1: The interplay of influences on journalism practice.

3. Research Purpose:

The aim of the paper is to identify, understand and study the cultural factors that influence online journalistic practices from the perspective of journalists. The purpose of this paper is to provide insight into the factors that motivate and manipulate journalists to present news stories in specific ways.

4. Paper Significance:

The investigation of the influence culture has over journalistic practice is important because the role of the journalist, especially the online journalist, is determined by a code of practice that is in place to seek objectivity and professionalism regardless of social, political or religious cultural influences. By investigating culture and its influences, this paper will explore some guidelines designed to limit the influence of culture or at least minimize threats to journalistic objectivity, aiming to improve the overall quality of the news content being presented via the Internet.

5. Paper objectives:

This investigation intends to pursue five central ideas about the affects of culture on online journalism and to provide outcomes that will clearly define the issues and possible courses of action that can be taken to safeguard online journalistic practice from influence or manipulation. This will include:

- Analysis of the extent of cultural influence on online journalistic practices. This area is largely unexplored within the available literature and further investigation will help to clarify cultural influence and how online journalism practices might be safeguarded from undue influence.
- Investigation of the modern challenges facing news media, specifically in the area of online journalism.
- Investigation of the impact of culture on online journalistic practice, with specific focus on electronic media and the potential power of the Internet. How cultures influence or hinder journalistic practice, especially in relation to journalistic freedom and freedom of speech will also be reviewed. I will also investigate the development of multimedia corporations that heavily influence content and the way news is disseminated, the validity of such news, and the challenge to journalistic credibility and ethics and regulation.
- Providing guidelines for journalists and news organizations when considering the influence of culture on what is being reported on and how.
- Offering online journalists a clearer understanding of how to limit or eliminate barriers and challenges facing their profession from local cultural influences.

6. Literature Review:

The aim of literature review is to ascertain a broad-based consensus on the issues concerning the impact of culture on online journalism. In order to develop a broad understanding of the issues, a wide range of academic material has been reviewed. Topics ranging from the definition of what culture is, through to the challenges facing online journalism, issues of freedom of speech and the threat to journalistic ethics were sourced and investigated. In order to ensure that the material sourced was suitable, the data gathered had to be, as Kelly and Yin (2007, p. 133) argue, ‘sufficient, credible and accurate. Claims are linked to data by a credible and appropriate warrant’. Subsequently, it was clear that any data gathered had to be presented in a balanced and objective manner. For this to occur, rival opinions and viewpoints were sourced so as to provide an equitable and balanced analysis of the subject material. To ensure that a balanced, fair and logical process was followed, research was conducted using Monstetter, Nave and Miech’s (2004, p. 29) recommendations in order to ensure that the investigation and review process was structured around addressing the relationship and influence between culture and online journalistic practice.

The current literature clearly indicates that there is a link between culture and the influence it has on journalistic practice. There is no doubt that culture affects how journalists see the world around them and how they respond to various stories, however, it must be noted that the media, in turn, have an increasing influence on the cultures on which they are reporting.

The theoretical framework of this study has been shaped to enable exploration of the effects, if any, that culture has on online journalistic practice. Based on the findings, it is proposed that a set of guidelines could be established to encourage journalists to consider the implications of their cultural conditioning and to aim to become more objective, neutral and unbiased in their approaches to reporting the news online. While the literature reviewed has recognized that culture has a significant affect on individuals’ perceptions of the world around them, as professionals, journalists should be able to put aside their conditioning and try to report issues in a way that takes into account other cultural views, attitudes, values and beliefs and raise the overall standard of online journalistic practice. This investigation will explore whether this is possible and the ways in which it might be achieved.

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