Journalists' Objectivity via Social Media: Jordan

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ABSTRACT

Journalists play an essential role in society through their daily news practice. The news produced must be correct. Fair and balanced reporting makes an informed public. These elements are part of objectivity in the news. However, social media have challenged many aspects of journalism. With the emergence of social media platforms, journalists have become more prone to deviating from journalistic objectivity. Instantaneity has challenged many journalists to practice their journalistic work objectively via social media. This study aims to identify the challenges Jordanian journalists face in implementing objectivity on social media platforms. In-depth interviews were conducted with 11 journalists working in various Jordanian news organizations. Thematic analysis was used to reach the results. This study expands current knowledge on journalistic practice in Jordan, particularly on social media and objectivity in news reporting. Findings from this study suggest two main challenges faced by Jordanian journalists in their social media use. Firstly, journalists are challenged by the lack of clear guidelines and policies to separate official and personal views. Secondly, complex features embedded within social media settings along with the behavior of its users further add to the challenges faced by journalists in Jordan as they employ objectivity in news reporting.

1. Introduction

Journalism has undergone significant changes in the past decade, many of which are attributable to the explosive growth of social media (Weaver and Willnat, 2016). Journalists working in traditional media institutions are increasingly using social media platforms as a source of news (Ziadi, 2021). The use of social media in journalistic practices is inevitable. Journalists continue to rely on social media for research, sources, ideas, story promotion, audience outreach, feedback, and development as the number of people who obtain their news via social media increases (Pilar *et al.*, 2021).

Social media has revolutionized the sharing and consumption of news (Pulido *et al.*, 2020), and its use extends beyond news consumption to news production for journalists (Hedman, 2016). To become more digitally visible, journalists must constantly balance the norms and practices of their traditional profession with those of social media platforms (Hermida and Mellado, 2020). The increasing professionalization of social media has inspired journalists and news outlets to present an always-on presence and a more personal engagement with audiences (Bossio and Holton, 2021).

Many journalists claim that social media aids them at work, but others criticize its impact on journalism (Atske, 2022). Media practitioners and academics have recently paid close attention to journalists' approach to and utilization of social media (Djerf-Pierre *et al.*, 2016). One of the most challenging aspects of analyzing journalistic roles in social media practice is the blurring of the profession's boundaries. The emergence of social media as a space for audiences to ingest, share, and discuss news and information has created novel opportunities for journalists to intervene on professional, personal, and public levels (Mellado and Hermida, 2020).

Objective news reporting requires that reporters avoid expressing personal feelings, biases, or prejudices. This is achieved by using neutral language and refraining from portraying individuals or institutions positively or negatively (Rogers, 2019). Many news organizations worldwide, such as the BBC, Washington Post, and Al-Jazeera, have set guidelines and instructions for their employees on how to use personal accounts on social media platforms (Guaglione, 2021). These institutions believe that a journalist's expression of their opinion and participation with the public may negatively affect the credibility and objectivity of the institution (Kanter, 2020).

This study is based on the social responsibility theory of media, established by the Hutchins Commission in 1947. According to this theory, journalists have specific responsibilities towards society. They are expected to be truthful, accurate, and objective in their reporting and provide balanced perspectives. Journalism should be free yet subject to regulations based on professional codes of conduct and ethics. Media ownership should be regarded as a public responsibility. Journalists have a moral duty to prioritize society's overall needs when making journalistic decisions to promote the common good (Christians and Fackler, 2014).

The meaning of journalistic objectivity differs among institutions because there is no clear definition of journalistic objectivity among media institutions (Guaglione, 2021). Because conventional and new media platforms differ in their nature of operation, the concept of objectivity must be revisited for clarification. Therefore, this study aims to better understand the challenges Jordanian journalists face when implementing objectivity on social media platforms. It aims to answer the following question:

What challenges do Jordanian journalists face in implementing objectivity on social media platforms?

2. Research Significance

From the perspective of the theory of social responsibility and based on the study's findings and journalists' demands for clear standards of objectivity, it is clear that journalists are aware of the importance of social responsibility towards their followers and their need to apply objectivity through their accounts on social media platforms. Social media is widely used by journalists in Jordan (Al-Zoubi, 2022). Therefore, journalists need to be guided by specific criteria of dos and don'ts in dealing with social media to ensure objectivity in their news

reporting.

It is also vital for journalists to know whether it is acceptable for them to publish their personal views via their personal social media accounts. Therefore, this study aligns with the findings of Bossio and Holton (2021), who stated the necessity for news organizations to provide specific guidelines for their employees regarding the policies of journalists' interactions with social media platforms. As journalistic practices evolve in light of technological evolution, this study provides a foundation for future researchers to expand on journalistic objectivity on social media platforms in the Arab region and beyond.

3. Literature Review

3.1. The Highs and Lows of Social Media Use by Journalists:

Social media has become a gateway for news consumption in many regions of the world and a familiar platform for journalists. Given the commonality of social media in current journalistic practices, some journalists have managed to build a considerable following. Nevertheless, social media platforms are considered a good opportunity for journalists to build their audience and practice journalistic work; however, at the same time, using these platforms can negatively impact their journalistic lives (Brems *et al.*, 2017).

Journalists' use of social media is monitored by the media institutions to which they belong. For example, BBC formally disciplined four employees who violated their social media guidelines prohibiting journalists from supporting campaigns, criticizing colleagues, or retweeting or liking content that could indicate a personal viewpoint (Tobitt, 2022). Meanwhile, The Washington Post terminated a reporter for engaging in multiple disputes with other Washington Post journalists via social media (Jabird, 2022). In March 2023, the BBC suspended its sports broadcaster Gary Lineker for violating the organization's guidelines over his Twitter comments criticizing the British government on its immigration policy (Lawless, 2023). Therefore, the question arising from these examples is whether journalists can express their opinions through social media platforms or keep them to themselves. A study by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism found that 46% of those between the ages of 18 and 24 and 44% of those between the ages of 25 and 34 believe that journalists should be permitted to post personal opinions in addition to reporting the news on social media (Digital News Report, 2022)

Journalists' expression of personal views on social media have advantages and disadvantages. For example, journalists face public attacks on social media when expressing their opinions. In a 2021 survey conducted by UNESCO, approximately 75% of female journalists worldwide encountered some form of online hostility (Posetti *et al.*, 2021). The Press Gazette previously reported that eight BBC Monitoring correspondents resigned because of daily harassment on social media. This shows that even though some have gained popularity in their social media use, others may face backlash because of expressing personal views. According to Carim and Warwick (2013), employers in different industries are increasingly implementing strategies to regulate employees' social media use in the workplace. Media organizations are also developing guidelines for managing journalists' behavior on social media.

3.2. Social Media Policies in News Organizations:

The media landscape changed a few years ago when several news organizations implemented stricter social media content and interaction regulations. Increased social media usage by journalists and news media has raised concerns about the preservation of basic journalistic principles, including transparency, gatekeeping, and objectivity (Safori, 2018). Some news organizations have implemented social media rules or made it mandatory for their

personnel to participate in training sessions (Bossio and Holton, 2018). For example, a study conducted in Canada revealed that journalists rely on social media platforms to gauge public opinion (Dubois *et al.*, 2020), whereas in Brazil, journalists prefer to use social media to find press stories and their sources (Saldaña *et al.*, 2017).

Powers and Vera-Zambranob (2018) examined the use of social media accounts by American and French journalists. They found that in addition to daily tasks such as gathering information, contacting sources, and developing story ideas, they also used these accounts to gain recognition among their peers. Their study demonstrated that while American journalism encourages media professionals to tailor their social media presence to individual audiences, French journalism promotes social media use for organizational purposes. In their study, Lasorsa *et al.* (2012) analyzed 500 tweets from various journalists to investigate how their social media practices, particularly on Twitter, aligned with journalistic principles and standards. These findings suggest that journalists' personal opinions shared on social media platforms contribute to increased transparency in their work, making the gatekeeping process more visible to the public.

News organizations' social media policies generally emphasize posting factual news, avoiding rumors and gossip, being cautious about expressing personal opinions that may display bias, refraining from endorsing political or partisan views, refraining from complaining about customer service, and avoiding any content that could damage one's credibility as an objective journalist (Guaglione, 2021). For example, in 2017, the New York Times announced a new set of rules for how journalists should use social media. The new rules show how much journalists value the vital role social media now plays in their work. Journalists must be careful with their personal social media accounts so that they do not share political views or write editorials about topics that The Times is reporting on, so that they do not negatively affect the organization's objectivity and journalistic credibility (Times, 2020).

Meanwhile, BBC stated that journalists should always act professionally, treat others with respect and kindness, and not do anything to hurt BBC's reputation. According to the organization, journalists should not give their opinions on public policy, politics, or other controversial issues (Kanter, 2020). In the Washington Post's policy on social media, journalists are reminded that their social media accounts "reflect on the reputation and credibility of the newsroom". Thus, journalists must "not write, tweet, or post anything, including photos or videos, that could objectively be seen as showing political, racial, sexist, religious, or other bias or favoritism" (Guaglione, 2021). In addition, Al-Jazeera emphasizes the need for journalists and staff to adhere to its guidelines on using social media as soon as the organization employs them. Any individual who publicly identifies themselves as employed by or otherwise associated with the network must uphold its reputation for fairness and impartiality (Zayani, 2021).

Based on the current literature on social media practices in news organizations worldwide, this study attempts to identify the use of social media among Jordanian journalists, particularly in their concept of objectivity as part of social media usage. This study aims to answer the following question: What challenges do Jordanian journalists face in implementing objectivity on social media platforms?

4. Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative approach. According to Babbie (2016), a descriptive research design aims to systematically collect data to comprehensively describe events, situations, or population groups. The researchers used in-depth interviews to obtain the study's results. The data collection tool (in-depth interviews) helped

focus on the main challenges faced by Jordanian journalists in applying objectivity to their social media posts. The interviews played an important role in giving journalists a space for their independent opinion in describing the challenges they face. In-depth interviews were conducted with 11 journalists identified through purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling is a type of non-probability sampling used in qualitative research that is more effective when one needs to study a specific field with knowledgeable individuals about a certain topic (Rai and Thapa, 2015). In a purposive sample, the researcher can choose research participants based on their knowledge of the study problem. (Foster and Ford, 2003). The researcher selects the sample based on several criteria. In this study, the researchers set some criteria for selecting participants: they should be active journalists on social media platforms with at least five years of experience; hold a bachelor's degree in journalism and media at a minimum; possess strong knowledge of the study subject; and be a member of the Jordanian Journalists syndicate (JJS). The JJS consists of dedicated professional journalists working in media institutions, news agencies, radio, television, and the foreign press in Jordan (Arab.Org, 2019). The researchers compiled a list of journalists who met the inclusion criteria and expressed their willingness to participate in the study. The study informants selected 11 journalists from various journalistic organizations after obtaining approval from their management to participate in the study, with four working in online news websites, five working in printed newspapers, and two in television channels. The researchers conducted personal interviews with eight journalists at their workplaces, and three journalists were interviewed via Zoom. All interviews were conducted for two months, between July and August 2023.

5. Findings and Discussion

Journalists' practices have changed with the emergence of social media platforms; the speed of information transfer and sharing and methods of disseminating information in different formats have become faster (Broersma and Eldridge, 2019). Journalists now interact more interactively with their audience. While social media platforms have opened the door for journalists to become closer to their audience, there are concerns that these new outlets may lead journalists to move away from established rules and values, such as objectivity and accuracy, and harm their professional reputation (Bastos, 2015). The findings suggest two primary challenges journalists face when implementing objectivity on social media platforms.

5.1. The Lack of Social Media Guidelines for Jordanian Journalists:

Global news organizations require employees and journalists to adhere to journalistic ethics when using social media platforms. They rely on issuing regulations and specific guidelines for their journalists to monitor and maintain their journalistic professionalism, accuracy, and credibility in news dissemination. Simultaneously, these news organizations believe that their employees are obligated not to express their opinions through their social media accounts, as followers may perceive them as representing the views of the institution they are employed by.

However, the interviews with Jordanian journalists in this study suggested no specific guidelines for employees and journalists to use social media platforms. Thus, journalists can freely use their social media accounts without the supervision of their employer organizations. Participants emphasized that the absence of defined standards posed a significant challenge to practicing objective journalism on their social platforms. They stressed that there is a significant difference between the objectivity standards of traditional

journalism and journalism in the era of social media and artificial intelligence.

Lee (2016) mentioned that newsrooms in the United States and United Kingdom have developed and expanded a set of guidelines for journalists' use of social media, recognizing the vital role that social media plays in journalism. However, they warn journalists against expressing partisan opinions or editorials regarding the issues they cover. For example, The New York Times emphasizes the value of social media in its updated guidelines. At the same time, it stresses the need to "avoid publishing anything that damages the organization's reputation from the aspects of neutrality and fairness" (Times, 2020).

All the informants in the study confirmed the lack of specific rules or regulations in their news organizations for using social media platforms, making it necessary for journalists to follow specific standards to practice their work professionally and objectively. This leads to increased journalistic errors when publishing biased or non-objective news. According to one participant,

> I work with a colleague in the newsroom. I do not express my opinion on the issues I cover, while my colleague directly expresses his opinion and shows his bias. I do not know if I am doing my job correctly or if he is (Responsible for digital content, newspaper)

Another participant mentioned:

> Since the emergence of social media platforms, we have struggled with avoiding bias in news dissemination or addressing the public. It can be said that each institution has a different approach to how its journalists deal with social media platforms (Social media content producers, TV channels).

Furthermore, the participants mentioned the lack of regulations or instructions for journalists to adhere to objectivity in the news organizations they work for. One participant mentioned:

> Every news organization must publish its own rules or standards for its employees to avoid influencing an institution (Editor, Newspaper).

They further noted the absence of a more considerable journalistic body that monitors the aspect of objectivity and social media use among journalists. According to one participant,

> The International Federation of Journalists and associations concerned with journalistic affairs should issue instructions and guidelines for journalists' objective use of social media. This step could contribute to reducing the mistakes made by journalists and protect them from dismissal or imprisonment (Social media content producer, news website).

The usage guidelines issued by media institutions aim to help their employees to avoid making mistakes that could jeopardize their journalistic objectivity (Bossio and Holton, 2018). However, many media institutions have not yet implemented these guidelines within their work policies, creating a need for them to take responsibility for developing specific standards and guidelines for their journalists to use social media platforms objectively.

5.2. Features of Social Media Platforms and Users' Behavior:

Advancements in communication technology have revolutionized the production and consumption of news (Ahmad, 2017). Various digital platforms, from news websites to social media sites to personal blogs, have allowed users to indicate their preferences for the news they read, share it with others, and leave comments (Lee and Tandoc, 2017). Each social media platform has an algorithmic setting that

caters to its audience. As a result, news consumption has become incidental owing to two factors: the advancement of algorithms on social media platforms and the confirmation bias of social media users who opt for news of their preference. Adeline and Ahmad (2022), in their study on fake news and news consumption in the Southeast Asian region, further argued that behavior within a confirmation bias causes people to follow those who share their opinions, leading to the mass polarization of thoughts and opinions. This can have detrimental effects on society at large, in the long run.

Similarly, this study's findings suggest that audiences prefer to watch news that aligns with their opinions and beliefs. This challenges journalists in implementing objectivity. According to one participant,

> The audience tends to subscribe to and interact with platforms that align with their views. They also tend to accept news and opinions that align with their views. This makes it challenging to practice their journalism and cover events objectively (Social media content monitoring, news websites).

Seven participants confirmed that the interaction system on social media platforms did not serve journalistic objectivity, indicating that these platforms were biased towards specific content at the expense of other content. One participant explained this by saying:

> A lot of neutral news I publish on my Facebook page does not receive much interaction. Still, if I publish news that aligns with the audience's preferences or controversial news, the interaction will be more significant (Responsible for digital content, newspaper).

Social media platforms tend to display news that aligns with users' opinions, making it difficult for journalists to reach all audience segments. Consequently, journalists are pressured to write news that caters to a broader audience. The journalists interviewed faced difficulties in writing news objectively while catering to a broader audience. According to one participant,

> Suppose a journalist wants to manipulate algorithms to expand the reach of the audience. In that case, they need to engage in practices that do not indicate objectivity, such as using exaggerated words or deceiving readers to read the news (Responsible for social media platforms and news websites).

Ndlela (2020) confirmed this in his book about the impact of algorithms on social media, stating that algorithms of social media platforms determine user content. Thus, it can be considered that journalists do not have the sole tool to publish news but are limited by the algorithms' decision to deliver the content they want to the followers or not. One participant in the study with more than 14 years of experience confirmed this.

> When algorithms on social media platforms changed in recent years by prioritizing personal posts over political content, this step affected our posts, weakened them, and made journalists struggle to reach a wider audience (Content publisher, newspaper).

This result is consistent with a study conducted by Canella (2023), which showed that social media platform algorithms affect journalists' professionalism and ability to practice their work objectively.

6. Conclusion

This study aimed to shed light on the practice of journalistic objectivity through social media use among Jordanian journalists. The study participants recognized the importance of journalists maintaining objectivity and neutrality when using their accounts on social media platforms. The participants believed that the nature of

social media users plays a negative role in maintaining objectivity. The nature of social media for quick dissemination and the expectations of users for speedy news consumption have demanded that journalists publish news quickly. This ultimately provides an allowance for errors in produced news reports. The participants also added that the characteristics of social media platforms, such as algorithms that contribute to providing appropriate content to the appropriate audience or audiences with specific orientations and biases, do not serve journalistic objectivity. The absence of specific criteria for journalistic objectivity in media institutions also challenges journalists to practice journalistic objectivity. A study by Tahat *et al.* (2020) suggests that Jordanian journalists demand their media organization establish professional standards such as objectivity, neutrality, balance, and accuracy when publishing content. Findings from this study support the previous, stressing the need for holistic guidelines on the elements mentioned when dealing with social media because of its impact on objectivity in the journalistic work produced.

7. Recommendations

Overall, journalists cannot be solely blamed. Jordanian news institutions should emulate international organizations that have produced guidelines for social media use among their journalists. Therefore, Jordanian news organizations should issue guidelines and standards for their employees' use of social media platforms to serve the institution's professionalism and information accuracy, and help journalists adhere to specific standards to maintain journalistic objectivity. Future studies should analyze the issue of objectivity and social media use among journalists in other regions of the world.

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